Hermione Granger and the Intended Vessels

by ShawnaCanon

Summary

[newly edited as of Feb '18]

Sometimes all it takes to change the world is one small, simple choice. On the night the Death Eaters attack Hogwarts, Hermione Granger makes such a choice. Her life—and her world—will never be the same.

By killing Draco, she saves Dumbledore and keeps Voldemort at bay for a little while. But evil never sleeps for long. When a Ministry decree forces her to marry Professor Snape—a cruel, cold man who’s apparently hated her since she was a child—in order to be used as a breeder of superior wizards, Hermione doesn’t think her life can get any worse. She’s wrong.

Soon, Voldemort’s after her and her friends (again), her life is in grave peril, and all her hopes for a future at all, much less a happy one, rest on her own shoulders—and on Snape, her unwanted husband, whose heart still belongs to a woman long dead.

Notes

I originally finished this fic in 2012 under a different pen name and title. Now, six years later, I went back and gave it another pass. I corrected some small things, added in a few scene fragments to hopefully fill in what few holes there were, and--most noticeably--edited down the sexual content considerably. I couldn't cut those scenes out entirely because they're very important in terms of character development, but my goal was to make them
more "teens and up" than "adults only". This fic is still not intended for children, of course. If you preferred the explicit version, I'm sorry, but I think this was the right thing to do at this time. Trigger warning still in effect for child endangerment and/or loss.

If you'd like to download a professionally formatted e-book of this fic (with a cover and everything), you can do so from my website at: https://www.shawnacanon.com/fanfic

While you're there, if you want to get alerted to any other books (original and/or fanfic) that I put out in e-book form in the future, head to the home page and sign up for my newsletter.

Also, please note that I've only put this fic up on AO3, Ashwinder, and my own website. If you see it somewhere else, I haven't approved it to be there.
The corridor was silent as a tomb.

“Are you sure he’s in there?” Luna asked, echoing Hermione’s own thoughts.

Hermione paced in front of the door to Snape’s office, chewing on her lower lip. “He was when we headed down here.”

Luna didn’t ask how she knew that. “What if he left through a different door?”

It certainly was quiet enough. Maybe Snape had slipped out another way. This was all a bit silly. The boys had never liked Snape, and they’d also never been right about Snape working against them. If there was a threat to the school while Dumbledore was gone with Harry, she didn’t honestly think it would come from Snape.

A stray thought crossed her mind. She shouldn’t leave Luna . . . but she couldn’t really believe Snape would hurt Luna, even if he caught her lurking outside his office.

Hermione made a decision.

“I’m going to go check on what’s happening.”

Luna looked up at her curiously. “Do you think it’s safe to split up?”

“I’ll be fine. If you see trouble, knock on the door. I know what Ron and Harry think, but they’re wrong. Professor Snape’s not the threat. Anyway, I’m sure I’ll find that nothing’s happening, and I’ll be back before you know it.”

Drawing her wand just in case, she started back up the hall at a brisk walk. It was nearly midnight, and the corridors were empty. So she heard the quick, light footsteps of Professor Flitwick well before he came into view. She listened, wondering what would put him in such a hurry and knowing the answer in her gut. His muttered ramblings of, “Death Eaters in the castle!” as he passed by without noticing her confirmed it. She broke into a sprint.

She emerged from the dungeons into the middle of a battle. Curses were being thrown on all sides, rock falling as bits of the walls were blasted away, bodies hitting the floor . . .

There were Death Eaters, all right. More than she could count offhand. She saw them dueling with Ron, Ginny, Neville . . . Tonks was there, and Lupin, and McGonagall. Backup had come, at least. Raising her wand, she prepared to throw herself into the fray, but movement in the corner of her eye caught her attention: a flash of green and pale blond. Draco.

This was it. It must have been Draco who’d got the Death Eaters in. And now he was running from the battle—which meant he must have something more important to do. And if Draco was far enough gone that he’d let the Death Eaters into Hogwarts, then whatever was so important to him now needed to be stopped.

With a last glance at the battle, she followed him.

Draco ran to the Astronomy Tower and up the stairs. He didn’t notice her following him, even
when she ducked under the warding spell he sent to the stairway behind them. She raced, panting, up the stairs, wondering what he could be up to. When she reached the top, she knew.

Professor Dumbledore was lying on the ground, weak and pale. Draco loomed over him with his wand pointed at Dumbledore’s heart. She didn’t think.

“Expelliarmus!”

It happened so quickly, yet it seemed to take forever. Draco turned his face to her, his eyes widening when he saw the spell flying toward him. It hit. His wand flew from his hand—but that wasn’t all. Draco himself went flying, back, up, and over the tower’s crenelations. For a split second that stretched into eternity, Draco met Hermione’s gaze, his eyes wide with shock, disbelief, and—she was sure she imagined it—something like betrayal, as if she’d cheated at some casual game between friends.

Then he disappeared behind the stones at the tower’s edge.

Aghast, she ran to the side of the tower and looked down. Draco lay sprawled on the grass below, limbs twisted at odd angles, unmoving and silent. She fell to her knees, not believing what she’d just done, and met Dumbledore’s frantic eyes.

“I think . . . he’s dead.”

“No . . .” Dumbledore said, his voice weak. There was a deep, unrestrained sorrow in the furrows of his face. He appeared to be a man utterly defeated.

Then Harry ran to her. She hadn’t even seen where he’d come from, but he was there beside her, first looking over the wall to confirm what she’d said, then crouching next to her.

“He’s dead,” Harry told her. “He was going to kill Dumbledore. You saved his life.” Harry looked at Dumbledore again, then seemed to remember something. “Snape. I’ll go get Snape.”

Dumbledore looked as if he was going to say something, but didn’t get it out before Harry was already gone.

Hermione was still in shock. “I didn’t know Expelliarmus could do that,” she said, trying to both understand the event and excuse herself from blame for it.

“It can . . .” Dumbledore told her, “at times.”

Then she remembered seeing the same thing happen to Lockhart when Snape hit him with it in the dueling club. She should have known, should have remembered. But . . . would that have stopped her?

“He tried to kill you?” she asked, the words having just registered.

“He would not have,” was Dumbledore’s answer.

“What . . . what happened to you?” she asked him, looking over his body more closely. He didn’t appear to have an ounce of strength left in him.

“Poison,” he told her. “I am dying.”

“No!” she shouted, as if her volume could make it that much more not true. “Whatever it is, there’s got to be an antidote. Professor Snape will—”
“Professor Snape can do nothing for me any longer,” Dumbledore said sadly, wearily, but did not expound on it.

“Why not?” she asked, just as Harry reappeared.

He ran to them, panting. “Snape’s lying in the hallway,” he blurted out. Dumbledore did not seem surprised to hear this news. “I don’t know what’s wrong with him, but he’s... twitching.”

Now Dumbledore looked shocked. “He is not dead?”

“No.” Harry shook his head. “Why would he be?”

“Bring me to him. Quickly!” Dumbledore commanded, attempting to sit up.

Harry didn’t appear to understand what was going on much better than Hermione did, but he Levitated the Headmaster down the stairs.

Hermione followed them as far as Snape, who was indeed lying alone in the corridor, spasming like he was being Crucioed. It frightened her to see him so helpless. But she knew there was nothing here for her to do, and by the sounds coming from the Entrance Hall, she knew the fight was still raging. Pushing the sight of Draco’s broken body from her mind, she ran to meet the battle.
The Only One He Ever Loved

Chapter by Severely Lupine (ShawnaCanon)

The door to number twelve, Grimmauld Place swung open like the maw of some dank, moth-eaten hell. Hermione looked up, but there were no Dementors to be seen. Her despair was entirely her own. Refusing to look at her new husband, she wondered momentarily if he would carry her over the threshold, but he only strode over it alone, the familiar billowing of his black robes beckoning her mockingly to follow. She took a deep breath and, as Dante suggests, abandoned all hope.

#

At the beginning of the summer, Hermione hadn't had the faintest idea of just how much more horrible her life could get. After all, things were already worse than they'd ever been before.

She would learn.

The Death Eater attack on Hogwarts had convinced her that it was simply too dangerous for her parents to remain in Britain. So, she made them forget she ever existed and sent them off to new lives in Australia. Afterward, she wondered if she really had the right to alter their minds like that without their consent, but knowing they would be safe through whatever escalations in the war came to Britain assuaged her guilt. It didn’t do much to help the sudden, gnawing loneliness, though.

Unable to bear living alone in her house and dying to know what was going on with the war (the truth, not just what the Prophet decided to print about it), Hermione took the Weasleys up on their offer to stay with them for the remainder of the summer. It was less crowded than it had been in previous years. All of the older boys were out of the house with flats of their own, so Hermione didn’t even have to share a room with Ginny. Instead, she was given a choice of sleeping in Percy’s old room or the twins’. Making clear that it wasn’t in any way a choice of one over the other on a personal level, she moved her things immediately into Percy’s room.

Hermione spent the following days catching up on war news (strangely, there wasn’t much of it), reading, and trying to convince herself that Ron wasn’t really giving her the sort of covert looks she thought he was giving her when he thought she wasn’t looking.

Though not yet a member of the Order and thus unable to attend the meetings, she gleaned enough from snatches of conversation to know that Voldemort was still active—but not nearly as bold, she guessed, as he would have been had he succeeded in having Dumbledore murdered.

She found a nice little spot in the garden that wasn’t too much bothered by gnomes, where she devoured a series of popular wizarding romance novels (a guilty pleasure she’d borrowed from Molly).

And as for Ron, she was forced to conclude that he was, in fact, giving her those looks, but that the fact he hadn’t acted on them yet meant that he was either as clueless as ever or didn’t feel the way about her that she did about him.

Life at the Burrow was, all in all, unusually peaceful—until the owls came.

On the evening of the sixth of July, Arthur Weasley came home with a very troubled expression on his face and a Daily Prophet tucked under his arm.
“I’m afraid I have some disturbing news,” he announced as dinner was being set on the table. The dining room was more crowded than usual, as they’d managed to get the whole family together for a meal—except for Percy, of course, but his spot at the table was taken by Fleur, Bill’s fiancée.

“More disturbing than the most evil wizard in history being on the loose?” Fred asked.

“More disturbing than the fact that we’re all on his hit list and imminent death lurks around every corner?” asked George.

Arthur nodded. “In a way, yes.”

Molly couldn’t take the suspense. She bustled over and snatched the paper from her husband. Her eyes bulged when she looked at the front page. It was as if all the humor had been instantly sucked from the room. All eyes were on her, every back suddenly straight.

“Well, what is it, Mum?” Ron asked.

“That’s barbaric!” was all she could say.

“Dad, what is it?” asked Bill.

Arthur sighed. “It seems the Ministry has decided that something needs to be done about the declining population. Scrimgeour says that due to the number of people dying in this war and the number sure to die before it is over, steps must be taken now to ensure that the wizarding population of Britain remains . . . sustainable.”

“By the time You-Know-Who is finally defeated,” Molly read aloud, her voice shrill with disbelief, “all our best and brightest will likely be dead. If they have not done so already, they owe it to the community to produce offspring, in case they should die before the war is over.”

“What is this?” scoffed Fred. “More pure-blood nonsense?”

“No,” Arthur replied. “Scrimgeour’s not differentiating based on blood purity. The announcement indicated that only certain witches and wizards would be chosen, based on their individual merits, including test scores, standing in prestigious organizations, various honors, known strength of magical power . . . that sort of thing.”

“Chosen for what?” asked Ron.

“Forced breeding!” Molly seethed, slamming down the paper. “They mean to arrange marriages between people they choose and force them to produce children. For the good of the community indeed.”

“What?” George exclaimed. “That’s rubbish!”

“And zey think zee right time for zis is while we are still at war?” asked Fleur in a tone that made it clear she thought Brits were mad.

“I suspect there’s more at play here than he’s letting on,” Arthur replied. “Scrimgeour’s still fairly new in his office, and after all the attacks that have been happening, especially the one on Hogwarts, he needs to do something just to prove he’s doing something.”

Hermione got a sinking feeling in her stomach. She had, after all, been called ‘the brightest witch of her age’ on more than one occasion. “Is there an age range they’ve chosen?”
Seeming to read her worry, Arthur looked at her sympathetically. “Any unmarried witch or wizard who will be between seventeen and fifty when the law goes into effect at the end of the month is eligible,” he explained, and Hermione’s mouth went dry. She had come of age many months ago. “Though they claim that only a small number of people will be chosen, and of those that are, most will have the opportunity to petition for a specific husband or wife, provided that person is sufficiently, er, impressive.”

“People won’t stand for this,” said Ginny. “Arranged marriages, forced pregnancies . . . surely there’ll be an appeal.”

“Of course there will be,” Arthur confirmed. “Dumbledore will speak to the Wizengamot. But this new law will only affect a relative handful of people. The population as a whole won’t care enough to make a big fuss over it. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if many of them support it.”

Any further discussion was interrupted by a great horned owl swooping through the open kitchen window and dropping a missive in front of Hermione, then flapping back out.

For several seconds, no one moved. Hermione glanced at Ron, then Molly, then back to the letter. Then, with all eyes on her, she opened it.

They soon found out that at roughly the same time Hermione got her letter, Harry had got one, as well.

“What am I, chopped liver?” Ron muttered after reading the letter from Harry.

“What?” Hermione gasped.

“I don’t mean I want to be forced into marriage,” he clarified, “but everything you and Harry have done, I’ve been there too.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Ronald. Your worthiness to procreate isn’t in question. Of course you’re just as talented as me and Harry, and I’m sure you’ve got fine, er, genes. Anyway, it doesn’t matter. No one’s going to have to marry anyone. Dumbledore’s going to get the law repealed.”

“Still . . .” Ron said and fiddled with the cuff of his sleeve. “Don’t you think we ought to . . . prepare? Just in case?”

She stared at him. “What on earth are you on about?”

“I mean, er, if you do have to marry someone. Well, you don’t want to marry a stranger, do you? Maybe you should try for, er, someone you know. Like, a friend, maybe.”

Hermione’s heart sped up. Was he getting at what she thought he was getting at? He couldn’t be. Not like this. “Ron?”

“Maybe, I don’t know . . . me?” He laughed. “That’d be a lark, wouldn’t it?”

She looked at him seriously. “Ronald Weasley, are you asking me to marry you?”

He looked at his hands. “Only if you want. I mean, as backup. In case the law . . .” Then he seemed to change his mind and met her eyes. “Yes. I love you. Reckon I always have. And I can’t . . . Well, you can’t marry someone else. That’s it.”
Hermione couldn’t believe it. She’d hoped he’d say something like that one day, but she wasn’t sure she could trust it. Not now, under these circumstances. Not when it might just be the same juvenile jealousy that caused him to get upset at her going to the Yule Ball with Viktor even though he hadn’t cared enough to ask her himself.

“Oh, Ron. I love you, too.” She hugged him but didn’t kiss him. It didn’t seem the right time for that, somehow. “Yes, all right, send a letter to petition the Ministry. But I’m telling you, it won’t matter. Dumbledore will get it sorted.”

Ron flashed a shy grin, then replaced it with a broader smile that she knew was him trying to pass it off as a lark again. “Sure he will. But, you know, just in case.”

A few days later, three weeks before Harry’s birthday, when he was to come of age and officially leave Privet Drive for good, he visited the Burrow with a secret agenda which was immediately known by everyone present. When he and Ginny returned from a pleasant walk in the garden, Harry looked both more pleased and more awkward than usual, and Ginny was beaming and showing off a ring.

“You’ll need our permission,” Arthur pointed out, “since Ginny’s not yet of age.”

“I know, Mr. Weasley,” Harry said nervously. “And I wouldn’t have, er, chosen to do it this way. I mean, I love Ginny, and I would have wanted to ask her eventually. But I’ll understand if you don’t approve. It won’t be safe, I know, being attached to me like that. But if I have to marry someone—”

“Of course we approve,” Molly said, cutting him off. “We approve of you, anyway, if not the circumstances.”

“Quite right,” agreed Arthur. “If Ginny wants you, we won’t stop you. I know my daughter well enough to not try to stand between her and what she wants. And you’re already as good as family anyway. But for all our sakes, let’s hope Dumbledore can get this law repealed and you two can have a nice, long engagement.”

A week later, the Weasleys, Fleur, Hermione, Harry and most of the Order were packed like sardines into the Burrow’s sitting room. (After Sirius’s death, no one had really wanted to go back to Grimmauld Place, even after they were sure ownership had passed to Harry and not Bellatrix, so the Burrow had become the de facto Order headquarters.)

“What do you mean ‘no luck’?” Molly asked indignantly.

Dumbledore sighed. “It seems even my considerable influence has not managed to sway the Wizengamot. The Minister is quite set on this proposal.”

“There must be more you can do, Albus,” McGonagall said. “Sybill has already been told she’s to marry a Seer from Surrey. She’s on the verge of hysteria.”

“Trelawney’s not the only other one the Minister’s targeted so far,” Tonks blurted out. When she didn’t continue, all eyes looked to where she was standing with Lupin.

Lupin shifted uneasily. “Tonks has had an owl. The Ministry seems keen to propagate Metamorphmagus blood.”

“Have they . . . assigned you to anyone yet?” asked Ginny.

“Not yet,” Tonks said, then looked sidelong at Lupin, who looked even more uncomfortable.
“We have requested that she be allowed to marry me,” Lupin admitted with a shy sort of half-smile, which quickly vanished. “Though I don’t hold out much hope. If the Ministry doesn’t want me teaching children, I can’t imagine they’d want me to have any.”

There was an awkward silence in the room as no one knew quite the proper thing to say, until Dumbledore finally broke it. “I will do everything in my power to ensure your request is granted,” he told them.

“Speaking of requests,” Ron said, “we still haven’t heard about—”

Just then, with a truly magical sense of timing, two Ministry owls flew into the room, dropped letters in front of Harry and Hermione, and flew out.

Harry ripped his open right away and a wide smile plastered itself across his face. “They’ve approved,” he announced. He turned to Ginny, who was beside him on the sofa, and threw his arms around her.

“Well done,” said Fred.

“Crisis averted,” said George.

The much-relieved crowd was now looking at Hermione, clearly expecting the same news from her. She was still staring at her letter, trying to absorb the fact that, with Dumbledore’s failure, it seemed she would be forced to marry someone. Even if it was Ron, that didn’t make it any more right or lessen the righteous indignation she felt. But if Dumbledore couldn’t fix this, what could she do? She’d do something, she decided. Either way, she’d do something. Even if she was allowed to marry the man she wanted, surely others wouldn’t be so lucky.

“Well, come on,” said Fred. “Don’t keep us in suspense.”

“Fred!” chastised Molly. “Don’t rush her.”

Slowly, Hermione opened the letter.

Miss Granger,

We regret to inform you that your petition to marry Ronald Bilius Weasley has been denied.

We appreciate your enthusiasm for P.E.W.S (Program for the Enrichment of Wizarding Society), but your spouse has already been chosen for you from among the most powerful, talented and intelligent wizards in Britain. You will be informed of his identity shortly.

Sincerely,

Tabitha Tabernacle
Secretary
Committee on Magical Propagation

Hermione felt light-headed. They were going to try to force her to marry some stranger. Though she knew she’d fight it, she also knew that the possibility existed that she’d fail, that somehow
they’d force her into a marriage she didn’t want. Terror at being trapped like that overwhelmed her, stole her breath, her words, made her numb.

She laid the letter on the coffee table, got up, and pushed her way past the others until she was out the front door. As she marched across the lawn, she could hear the confused questions and voices calling her back, but then she heard Ron yell, “What?!” and everyone else quieted down.

She knew they’d come after her any moment, trying to comfort her, to get her to talk about it, so she broke into a sprint, wanting to get as far away from the pressing though well-meaning throng as possible.

She reached a cluster of trees and ducked behind one, leaning against it for support. Her tears were flowing freely now, and she gasped for breath. The Ministry was going to force her to marry a complete stranger, and she couldn’t think of any way to stop it. Not when Dumbledore himself couldn’t. Not unless she wanted to leave Britain forever or give up the magical world, neither exile being anything she’d want to undertake if the alternative were anything short of a Dementor’s Kiss . . . and even then, she’d still likely have found a way to hide out as Sirius had. Her head spun as she tried to get a grasp of what this would mean for the rest of her life.

Hermione was not even aware of the approach of another owl until it landed on a branch directly next to her head, holding out a letter in its beak. Startled, she took it and ripped it open as the bird flew off. She was so worked up already that it took her skimming the letter several times before her eyes and mind focused on what it said.

Miss Granger,

We are pleased to inform you of the match we have made on your behalf, as part of Minister Scrimgeour’s proactive new P.E.W.S. initiative. After much careful deliberation of your own incredibly impressive abilities and prospective future contributions to wizarding Britain, in concordance with an evaluation of all those wizards who are at the very top of their respective fields, being acknowledged as also very powerful magically and being of appropriate age for siring children, we have determined that your most profitable match (for you, and for the wizarding community, present and future), is Severus Tobias Snape.

Mr. Snape has been contacted concerning this decision, as well. It is expected that the two of you will work out the details of any formal ceremony that you may wish, but you must be confirmed as married to each other on or before 31 July, 1997 by a designated Ministry official.

Good day and congratulations,

Hammond Haverson

Chairman

Committee on Magical Propagation

Hermione found the name again, just to make sure she had, in fact, read it correctly. Severus . . . Snape.

She screamed.
Being an incredibly studious, academic young witch, Hermione liked to think that she didn’t let her emotions get the better of her. But she was still a witch, and still a Gryffindor, and therefore was fooling herself to think she could control such strong emotions as she was feeling after reading that news.

_Snape? It couldn’t be. Just . . . no._

“News of your intended suitor, I suspect?”

Hermione looked over to see Dumbledore standing near a tree not seven feet away. His eyes were kind, understanding. Hope surged through her. Surely Dumbledore wouldn’t allow this! He’d try again, find some way to stop this match. She was still a student, after all, and Snape was her teacher. Surely that simply wouldn’t be allowed.

“They want me to marry Pr-Professor Snape,” she said, her throat contracting at the name, as if her body couldn’t contemplate the notion well enough to speak it.

She expected shock, outrage, utter disbelief from Dumbledore. Instead, he sighed and bowed his head to look at the grass.

“You knew?” she asked.

“I did,” he answered softly.

“When you were trying to convince them,” she guessed, “they told you about me? You tried to stop it, right? You can’t possibly let this happen. He’s . . . he’s my teacher! He’s twenty years older than me! And he hates me! He’s always been awful to Harry and Ron and me. Why on earth would I want to . . . ? This can’t be allowed. Right?”

After a long pause in which Dumbledore considered her with great sympathy in his eyes, he said, “As I mentioned before, the Ministry was quite adamant. And they have managed to sway the Board of Governors. I am afraid there is nothing more I can do.”

Hermione looked at him aghast. She couldn’t remember Dumbledore ever admitting defeat so quickly before. “I’ll appeal it. There must be some law that says they can’t do things like this.”

“I assure you, I’ve examined all possible avenues. There is, I’m very sorry to say, no way out of this situation.”

“But surely Professor Snape won’t stand for it,” she insisted. “He’ll . . . he’ll . . .”

“Give up his wand?” Dumbledore offered. “Abandon the Order? Risk being killed by Voldemort for leaving Britain or the wizarding world when his supposed master needs him most?”

This gave her pause. She thought for a moment, then said, “What if I do? What if I leave?”

Dumbledore sighed. “You would abandon your friends? You would risk death or capture by Death Eaters who would see you as simply an easier, more defenseless victim, a weapon to use against Harry and the Order? You would leave Severus to be forced to marry whoever the Ministry’s second choice might be: an innocent bystander at best, a Voldemort sympathizer at worst? And have you forgotten that Mrs. Malfoy is still at large?”

Hermione sank to the ground and covered her face with her hands as the truth of his words sank in, and she fought back her tears. Dumbledore walked to her and placed his good hand on her shoulder.
“Marriage is not a death sentence,” he said soothingly, “and you are a very strong, very brave witch. You will survive this. You might even become stronger for it.”

She looked up at him, her eyes red, her face wet, and hoped with all her heart that he was right.

“Hermione! Are you in there?”

She heard voices growing closer. The others would find her within moments. She stood, grabbed the letter, wadded it up, and shoved it into her pocket.

“Please don’t tell them,” she pleaded. “I couldn’t bear it if they knew who I had to . . . I don’t think they could bear it, either.”

Dumbledore nodded. “I believe discretion is the wisest course for the time being. I will help you and Severus keep this as quiet as possible. There is no need to trouble the others with the . . . particulars.”

“Professor Snape wouldn’t tell anyone, would he?” Hermione asked. “I mean, if Voldemort found out he was being forced to marry a Muggle-born, he’d be in trouble, right? What if Voldemort finds out from one of his Ministry spies?”

“I will do what I can, Miss Granger,” he said, then she was surprised to see him smile slightly in amusement. “And no, I do not believe Severus will speak of this any more than absolutely necessary.”

#

Hermione did try to find a way out of the Ministry’s edict. She researched for days on end, sent letter after letter of petition, sent a scathing letter of condemnation to the Daily Prophet . . . but to no avail. Nothing she did made so much as a dent in the Ministry’s resolve that she and the others must marry as directed. With her wedding date looming ever closer, she was forced to consider that she might not find a way out of this until long after she’s been bound to Snape. Not unless she wanted to leave the jurisdiction of the Ministry, but that would mean leaving magic and all of her friends behind her. To her, even life with Snape would be a lesser sentence.

On July twenty-seventh, she had an appointment at St. Mungo’s.

Grateful that she hadn’t seen anyone she knew on the way in, she sat in the exam room, going over her latest idea for appeal as she waited. After only a few minutes, there was a knock at the door, and a tall, blond wizard strode in. He was in his mid-thirties, good-looking in an obvious sort of way, with a broad, white smile. In truth, he reminded her a bit of Gilderoy Lockhart, and, despite her dread, the thought of that pompous pansy in such a messy profession made her chuckle inwardly.

“Hello, Miss Granger.” He held out his hand to her as he closed the door. “I’m Healer Partridge.” He had a strange, mostly American accent. “How are you?”

She shook his hand reluctantly. “I’m fine. Would you please clarify why I’m here? The letter I got only told me in no uncertain terms that I was to come. I don’t like being threatened, Mr. Partridge.”

“Well, no, who does?” he said, taking out a quill and looking at the chart in his hands. “This is your preliminary checkup. Don’t worry, nothing invasive. I’ll just do a few scanning spells to verify your health. The mediwitch already took your medical history?” Hermione nodded. “Good. Then you’ll be on your way shortly.”
Hermione sat stiffly on the hard bed in the exam room while Partridge waved his wand around and it emitted lights and sounds she couldn’t interpret. After a couple of minutes, he returned his wand to his pocket. “Everything looks good, Hermione.” He looked up from the chart he’d started writing on. “May I call you that?”

“I suppose.”

“Good. You’ll be happy to know you’re perfectly healthy. Now, I’m also to explain to you a few of the details regarding the P.E.W.S. program that weren’t in your initial letter. They’re of a certain delicate nature, so it was thought best that they be explained in person.”

“I don’t expect I’ll need the information,” she stated. “I intend to appeal until I get the law repealed.”

He chuckled as he made notes, then looked at her. “Oh. You’re serious? Um, yes, I guess you could keep trying. I don’t think there’s much hope, though. I’ve spoken to the Ministry agent in charge of the program. Apparently he and the Minister are dead set on it. I really don’t think there will be any changing their minds. So, if I could just talk over these requirements with you.”

Hermione huffed. “Fine.”

Partridge cleared his throat. “First requirement: you and your husband are to have sexual intercourse daily until you become pregnant.”

“Daily!” Hermione gasped. She had been avoiding thinking about doing anything like that with Snape altogether. Now hearing that she was meant to do it daily sent her reeling.

“To give the best chance for conception. That is the idea of this program, after all. Now, second requirement: you are to have regular check-ups with your Healer—that’s me—as ordered by the Ministry. You’ll be alerted to these appointments by owl. Except for your first appointment after this one, which will occur on the day after your wedding to verify that the marriage has been consummated.”

“To what?” Hermione screeched.

“I’m sorry,” he said, looking confused. “They do want to make sure that the marriage was made entirely legal and binding as soon as possible.”

“How dare they?”

“I’m not . . . quite sure what you mean. Anyway, hold out your hand, please.”

“Why?”

“I need you to hold this.” He proffered a palm-sized clear crystal.

“What is it?”

“A monitoring crystal. Once I bind it to you, it will keep track of your pregnancy status. When you become pregnant, the crystal will turn pink, telling me that you’ve successfully become pregnant, at which point we’ll proceed with scheduling your appointment and so on.”

Once he explained, Hermione remembered reading about monitoring crystals once. “There are normally two, aren’t there? One for the Healer and one for the mother.”
Partridge frowned faintly. “Yes, there are. I’ll keep this one. I’m afraid I don’t know where the other one is. I assume the Ministry kept it, as I was given explicit instructions to use this crystal. Don’t worry, they’re bound to each other. I only need to bind one to you and the other will also monitor you.”

“So you and the Ministry will know if I’m pregnant before I do?” she asked, her irritation rising further.

“I’ll make sure you’re alerted as soon as possible,” he reassured her.

“Fine.” She held out her hand, and he placed the crystal in her palm. “It doesn’t matter. Like I said, I’m going to get the law rescinded, so this will all be a waste of your time.”

Partridge hummed noncommittally and waved his wand over her hand. The crystal flashed orange then went back to being clear.

“Is that all?”

“One more thing. You’re also to take whatever potions I give you.” He went to a cupboard and took out three small bottles.

She drank the first one he gave her without thinking—her standard, instinctive response to authority (particularly medical authority) she supposed, a result of having dentists for parents. The vile taste brought her to her senses. “That’s disgusting!”

“Yes, I’m sorry,” he said and looked like he meant it. “Ministry-prescribed fertility potion. It’s to increase the number of days you are fertile each month. You will experience more frequent periods, possibly every week or two, but it won’t last more than a day at most. It basically kicks your cycle into hyper-speed, but elongates the period of fertility.”

“Great,” she said bitterly. Now the Ministry was tampering with her body’s natural processes to squeeze as many kids out of her as possible before she inevitably died in battle. Her hatred for Scrimgeour went up a notch. “And this?” She held up the next bottle.

Partridge looked uneasy. Not a good sign. “That one is to counteract any contraceptive potions you may take in the next year or so.” She glared at him. “If it helps, that one doesn’t taste nearly so bad.”

“How would you know?” she muttered before drinking it. Then she looked at the third bottle, filled with yellow liquid. She sniffed, but didn’t recognize it. “What is it?”

Partridge’s stance eased. “Just a standard Quick-Conception potion. It’s completely harmless, and it stays in your system for nearly a year. You shouldn’t need another dose until then, even after your first child.”

“But what does it do exactly?”

“Ordinarily, you know, it takes several days after intercourse for a sperm to implant into an egg and the fertilized egg to attach itself to the uterine wall. This potion speeds that process up so that it all happens in a matter of hours—sometimes even minutes.”

“The Ministry can’t even wait a few days?” Hermione asked snidely.

“Actually,” Partridge said in a softer voice, “that one isn’t on the Ministry’s order. Given your look of horror when I told you that you’d have to have intercourse with your husband every day, I
thought you might want to know as soon as possible when you’re successful, so as to avoid unnecessary, um, interactions.”

“Oh,” she said, wrong-footed by his thoughtfulness. “Thank you.” She drank it.

#

“My house?” Harry repeated, looking confused. “Oh, you mean Sirius’s house. Er, sure you can use it, I guess. What for?”

Hermione wrapped her arms around herself uncomfortably. She kept her voice quiet, not wanting anyone else to hear. That was also why she’d dragged him into a closet on the Burrow’s third floor while everyone else was downstairs cleaning up the last of the cake and presents. They’d fetched Harry from Privet Drive without incident, and his birthday celebration was nearly enough to let her forget what was happening later. “That ridiculous forced wedding is tonight.”

“Oh,” he said. “I’d forgotten. Are you really going through with it, then?”

“I don’t have much choice, do I? I’ve tried all the legal means I could think of, but it didn’t do any good. I could run away, but where would that leave you—or me—or—” She stopped herself before she gave it away. “It’s either go along with it or leave wizarding Britain, and I can’t do that.”

“But Hermione, you and Ron—”

“It doesn’t matter.” She didn’t want to think about Ron. It hurt too much, especially since he’d barely spoken to her since reading the letter that said he wasn’t good enough for her. “Maybe . . . I don’t know. Maybe later we’ll have another chance. But this is happening, Harry, whether we like it or not. That’s why I need Grimmauld Place. My—my husband and I will need a place to stay for the night. I can’t bear the thought of taking him to my home, nor would I care to go to his. And a hotel just seems vulgar.”

“Of course, whatever you need.” He fished the key from his pocket and handed it to her. “But can’t you at least tell me who—”

She shook her head. “No. And please stop asking.”

“But what if it’s some kind of setup? What if he hurts you? What if he’s a spy for Vol—”

“He’s someone that Dumbledore trusts.” She had to give Harry something, or he knew he’d never give up. “Is that enough for you?”

Harry frowned at her, then nodded. After several seconds where neither of them quite knew what to say, Harry moved to her and scooped her into a hug. “I hope this turns out all right for you, Hermione. I really do.”

“Me too, Harry.”

#

At nine o’clock, Dumbledore arrived at the Burrow to pick her up. He had arranged all the details, including where the wedding was to take place, so she’d need to Side-Along with him to the mystery location. He was welcomed inside with cheers and offers of food.

“Perhaps one small slice of cake,” he allowed, and while Molly rushed off to get it, he pulled a small package from his robes. “I’m afraid the real present I have for you will have to wait a bit
longer, Harry.”

“What real present? Why?”

“You’ll know before too long, my boy. For now, on the occasion of your birthday and coming of age, a small token.”

Harry opened the package to reveal a small, heart-shaped pendant dangling from a silver chain. He held it up between his thumb and forefinger, looking like he’d never held such a dainty piece of jewelry in his life. “Er . . . thanks, Professor. This is . . . swell.”

Dumbledore chuckled. “It was my sister’s, given to her by our father.” His eyes held something deep and sorrowful and hidden. “It is a reminder to never neglect those who most depend on you.”

“Your sister’s?” Hermione asked, surprised that she’d never even considered Dumbledore’s family and wondering why, if it had belonged to his sister, it wasn’t still with her—or at least her descendants. But she held her tongue and said, “That’s lovely.”

Harry thrust it back at Dumbledore. “I can’t—I can’t take this. It’s a family heirloom.”

Dumbledore’s hands remained hidden by his sleeves and hanging at his sides. “I have no children, Harry, nor nieces or nephews, but I’ve always looked on you almost as my own grandson. Please. Keep it.”

So that was it, then. Maybe Dumbledore’s family ended with him. Hermione thought that was rather sad. And then a bitter, resentful thought came from somewhere deep inside her, a thought so fleeting that it didn’t even coalesce into words in her mind: if Dumbledore, the most powerful wizard alive, had no offspring, why wasn’t he forced into this marriage law? Surely he could manage it even given his advanced years, not that she’d wish a centenarian on any woman of childbearing age.

Before she could properly berate herself for this uncharitable thought or ponder the answer, Harry put the necklace in his pocket and said, “Thank you.”

Molly came back and shoved a small plate bearing a piece of cake toward Dumbledore. He took the napkins she also handed him, wrapped the cake in it, and slipped it into his pocket. “I’m afraid I shall have to savor this at a later hour,” he said. “It’s really time that Miss Granger and I be on our way.”

Dread settled like a hot lump of coal in Hermione’s chest, but she tried not to show it. Several of the Weasleys made final protests about her marriage, Harry gave her another hug, and Ron turned and walked up the stairs, refusing even to look at her.

“He’ll come around,” Harry told her.

“I don’t know, Harry,” she answered, watching Ron’s feet disappear up the stairs. “I’m not sure I could, if it were him.” Nor was she entirely sure that she wanted him to.

Hermione and Dumbledore arrived with a pop outside a small chapel on an otherwise empty hillside. She released his arm immediately to wrap her cloak more tightly around herself against the brisk wind.

“Where are we?”

“Wales,” he answered and strode toward the chapel. As they got closer, Hermione could see broken
windows, missing roof tiles, and cracked paint. It looked like it hadn’t been used in years. “As both you and Severus have expressed a desire to keep this as secret as possible, I thought it best to do it somewhere out of the way.”

It was certainly that, but it was also rather dreary. Which seemed entirely appropriate.

The inside of the chapel was lit by a dozen or so magical torches floating around the perimeter, their light bouncing and refracting off the sparse surfaces in the single room. There was a round, official-looking man standing near the front, but no one else.

“Is that the priest?” Hermione asked.

The man heard her and stepped forward with his hand out. “Not quite, Miss Granger. I’m Hammond Haversham, chairman of the Committee on Magical Propagation.”

Hermione, whose hand had been stretching out to shake the man’s, yanked it back. “You! You’re responsible for this!”

Haversham smiled, oblivious to the meaning of her words. “Well, I can’t take all the credit. It’s really the Minister’s doing, you know.”

“Why are you here?”

“Don’t worry, I won’t interfere. I’m to be your witness, you see. There are certain legalities which I must ensure are being adhered to. It’s all got to be on the up-and-up, you know.”

Hermione scowled at him and tried to pretend she didn’t see him. This would be hard enough without some Ministry stooge leaning over her shoulder.

“Where’s the priest?” she asked Dumbledore.

“There isn’t one,” he replied, then explained. “Severus has requested that I do that honor.”

“Is that allowed?”

“Quite. Isn’t that right, Mr. Haversham?”

“Indeed,” said the Ministry man. “As Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, Professor Dumbledore is fully vested to perform marriages.”

“Is that all right?” Dumbledore asked softly.

Hermione nodded. It was more than all right. It was almost comforting. “Where’s—”

The chapel door burst open, and Snape strode toward them in a flurry of black robes. Haversham tried to greet him, but Snape didn’t even acknowledge the man. He cast his eyes only briefly at Hermione, taking in her appearance with what she could almost believe was reluctant approval. Rather than pleasing her, though, his look annoyed her. Had he really expected her to wear some ridiculous white gown, as if this were the wedding she’d dreamed of since she was a little girl? She hadn’t expected him to wear anything but his everyday clothes, so she’d only worn a simple skirt and jumper under her cloak. She had no delusions that this was a happy occasion.

Snape turned his attention to Dumbledore, his face set in the sort of dispassionate glare that was not entirely foreign to Hermione. It was the way he looked whenever he loathed doing something, but was resolved to do it anyway. “Get on with it, Albus.”
The ceremony was short and to the point. There was no “Dearly beloved.” No “Speak now or forever hold your peace.” It was the bare minimum exchange of vows, with nothing more than, “I do,” required from either bride or groom.

It took Hermione several seconds to work up the resolve to say those two small words. She looked at Snape (she didn’t know why; perhaps for some hint of compassion, some sign that things would be okay), but he didn’t return her gaze, though he must have seen it from the corner of his eye.

Taking Hermione by surprise, Snape said the words without hesitating, as if he wanted to get to the end as quickly as possible. Which, Hermione was sure, was the truth. They would have foregone the ceremony altogether and simply signed the papers, except that the verbal exchange of vows was a mandatory part of a legal magical wedding.

For an instant after Dumbledore said, “I now declare you bonded for life,” Hermione was terrified that she would be required to kiss Snape. She’d read up on wizarding weddings, but at the moment, the details were so muddled in her head that she couldn’t remember if a kiss to seal the union was traditional, as it was in Muggle ceremonies. When Snape stepped away from her immediately, she allowed herself a brief moment of relief. Then Haversham handed her the document, she signed it, and that was that.

She was married to Snape.

“Did you get the key?” Snape asked, not looking at her. Apparently Dumbledore had told him of her plan to spend the night at the old Order headquarters.

“Yes.”

“You remember the location,” he said, partially as a statement, partially as if he thought she might be stupid enough not to.

“Yes,” she snapped, already annoyed with him, her heart pounding in terror of what was about to happen.

Without another word, Snape Disapparated. A moment later, Hermione followed.

#

Hermione was careful to follow Snape’s lead in treading softly through the hallway. The last thing they needed was for Mrs. Black to start screaming her head off at them while they got on to such already unpleasant business. Pulling her cloak tighter around her to break the chill, she felt the cold staleness of the air around her bare ankles and wafting up under her skirt.

She wasn’t sure at all where Snape was going, but she followed him as he passed doorway after doorway. She remembered most of them from the summer she had spent here two years ago. Library, office, some kind of storage area for useless family trinkets . . . The house had fallen into even further disrepair since she’d last seen it. There was dust and mold everywhere, not to mention the assortment of creepy crawlies and, she could only imagine, magical pests, as well. They passed the room where she and Ginny had stayed, past the one Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had used . . . Suddenly Hermione realized what Snape was looking for: a room that no one had slept in when the Order met here. Admittedly, Hermione was glad that she and Snape wouldn’t be consummating their marriage in the same bed that Harry or Lupin or George had slept in (and she imagined they’d be glad, too . . . not that they’d ever find out), but she wondered how Snape knew which had been used. Was he using some kind of nonverbal spell, had he memorized the room assignments during his brief visits, or was it just some kind of sixth sense that told him which rooms had been
tarnished by people he disliked?

There were many rooms in the house, but few with a bed big enough to comfortably accommodate two people. Hermione snorted inwardly. *Comfort. I doubt that’s going to be the word of the night.* In fact, she questioned why they were bothering to find a bed at all. Consummation was all that was required, and as she understood it, that could be done anywhere. She wondered if having a doorknob or the edge of a kitchen counter poking her in the back would distract her from the other thing poking her—she cut off that train of thought. She did not want to think about it until absolutely necessary.

Finally, Snape stopped before a door at the end of a corridor on the third floor. She looked past him as he gripped the handle and pushed it open. It was dirty and musty, like the rest of the house. Hermione remembered being in here once during their cleaning spree. There were chains attached to the wall near the bed, as well as other strange devices that Hermione could only imagine the kinky uses of.

“This room appears sufficient,” Snape said briskly, but did not enter.

Hermione’s nose crinkled. “I don’t think so. Sirius told us this was his parents’ second bedroom, the one they used for their more . . . *creative* . . . passions.”

Snape sneered and closed the door, turning around to continue the search without another comment. Hermione was briefly surprised that he would be averse to such things, then recognized that he’d only appeared turned off when she mentioned the room was used by Mr. and Mrs. Black. She suspected he didn’t fancy the idea of copulating in the bed where one of his archnemeses may very well have been conceived. That thought gave her a sort of dark amusement, for which she could not find an explanation in herself.

They searched the house for a few more minutes before finding a door on the fourth floor which looked as if it hadn’t been opened in decades. Snape turned the handle and gave it a good shove, breaking loose the layer of grime and dirt that caked the doorframe.

The smell of mold and must was almost overwhelming. Before even looking into the room, Hermione cast a quick but powerful Scourgify, so that when she stepped inside, it may not have been five-star, but at least it was livable. Snape followed her in and closed the door behind him.

There were no lights on in the room and only a few shafts of moonlight coming through the windows. It was enough to land heavily on Snape’s brow, nose and cheekbones, but his eyes were completely obscured in shadows.

Hermione stepped a few paces into the room and spotted a row of lamps along the wall. She pointed her wand at them. “*Illum*—”

“No.”

She looked at Snape with a raised eyebrow. “But there’s barely any light in here.”

“How much do you wish to see?” he asked darkly.

Realizing he had a point, she returned her wand to her pocket.

“This room is acceptable, then?” he asked, the words laced with spite, as if it had been her idea to go tromping all over the house looking for the perfect honeymoon suite.

She looked back at him and nodded.
“Very well.”

Hermione swallowed hard as Snape began removing his heavy robes, and was momentarily relieved that he was unexpectedly an early adopter of the new robe style that had been growing in popularity the past few years. Rather than being a single, gown-like garment, the robes could be opened in the front to act as a sort of draping or loose coat—and under which it was typical to wear an additional full set of more Muggle-style clothing rather than the more traditional nothing or only underthings that wizards usually wore under their robes. She wondered if he always wore trousers and a button-up shirt under his robes, and if so, what was a strong enough reason to face Voldemort’s wrath in wearing such a Muggle-inspired fashion?

But she could consider Snape’s style choices later. They had a job to do, and the sooner it was over with, the better. She turned from him, her hands shaking, removed her cloak, and draped it over a chair. Next she took off her shoes and carefully placed them on the floor. When her hands went to the bottom of her jumper, meaning to pull it off, she heard a sharp command.

“No.”

She turned back to look at him and saw that he hadn’t undressed any further. “I thought—”

“The completion of this binding does not require the removal of your jumper,” he said in that clipped voice that made her feel he might take five points for her stupidity. “Simply remove your knickers and get in bed.”

Feeling very foolish, she did as he instructed. Only once she pulled the sheets up to her chin did she realize that it was he who was acting strangely. She was no expert, but she was pretty sure people were usually naked in this situation. Not that she wanted to be, of course. As she watched him remove his own shoes and stride to the bed, she couldn’t help but feel both relieved and terribly confused.

“Does this mean you don’t want to?” she asked as he slid into bed beside her.

“Of course I don’t want to, you ignorant twit,” he snapped as his head landed on the pillow, “But that doesn’t change the fact that we’re going to.”

“Then why are we still . . . oh.” Before she even finished the question, she realized what the answer was. He wanted to touch her as little as possible. Again she felt the strange mixture of relief and confusion, but this time there was a fair amount of hurt, as well, which only added to the confusion. Why did that hurt her feelings? She should be grateful Snape’s hands and—she shuddered—mouth . . . wouldn’t be groping all over her exposed flesh, that she wouldn’t have to feel whatever body hair he may have scratching her softest skin . . . Yes, she was definitely grateful for that. Still, a woman didn’t like to know she was repulsive to anyone, even if the feeling was mutual.

He let her statement fall without response and silence reigned for several minutes. She lay there, staring up at the ceiling, imagining all the various horrors about to befall her, each one more vomit-inducing than the last. Finally, she couldn’t take it anymore. “Oh, just get on with it, will you?” she said, her hand slapping the mattress impatiently, “Just get it over with!”

He partially sat up and turned, leaning on his elbow so he could glare down at her. “While I appreciate the sentiment, Miss Granger,” he sneered, “I must insist that you calm yourself. I will not share a room, let alone a bed, with a temper-tantrum-throwing little chit.”

She raised herself up on both elbows so she could look at him on a more even level. “Well, pardon
me, sir,” she said, her mood not at all abated by his reprimand, “but I’d just like to get this whole bloody mess over with as quickly as possible. When I left school for the summer, I hardly thought I’d be ravished by one of my teachers before the start of the next term. I know you may not take this situation very seriously, but it’s something I would like to put firmly in my past.” It infuriated her, the way he was treating the entire scenario like an especially bothersome end-of-term exam, which only made her feel as nervous as if she was taking one she hadn’t studied for. She had studied for this, of course . . . which probably didn’t help make it not feel like a test.

His countenance darkened, and his head inclined so that his eyes were again obscured by the shadows of his brow and his lank hair swished in front of his face, forming the familiar curtain.

“Let me remind you, Miss Granger, that it was hardly my wish for the holiday to defile myself with an insufferable Gryffindor know-it-all!”

“You could at least try to not make this as difficult as possible!” she snapped back.

“And how would you suggest I do that?” he hissed, leaning closer. She felt his eyes boring into her, even though she couldn’t quite see them.

“Well, for one, we’re not in class or detention.” She felt his anger, but refused to back down from it. “Though I admit I’d trade this for all of Harry’s detentions with Umbridge and her bloody flesh-cutting pen. We’re not at Hogwarts at all. So you could try not calling me Miss Granger!”

“Well, what should I call—” He bit back the end of the sentence, but she didn’t let it go.

“Oh, I don’t know, how about Hermione? It is my name, after all.”

He just hissed at her as he shoved himself off the bed and began pacing. “This is ridiculous. What else would you like? Flowers? Chocolates? Shall I conjure a violin to play you a serenade? We came here to do a job. We don’t have time for pandering to your silly emotions.”

“Then,” she said tersely, “I repeat: get on with it.”

“Surely you’re aware, as I’ve no doubt you’ve read several books on the subject by now”—some part of her cringed at how well he knew her nature—“that I cannot simply be ready at your command. Some form of”—he sneered again—“stimulation is required.”

“Then why didn’t you think of that before?” she barked.

He stopped pacing and quieted somewhat. “I had hoped I could simply command my body to do what it must. I had hoped that additional assistance would not be required. It appears I expected to much of myself.”

“Well, if you knew it wouldn’t work, why did you even bother trying?”

“I did not think you would care for . . . the traditional methods.”

She paled at his last words, fully understanding their meaning, and even through his own obvious discomfort, he smirked. When she next spoke, much of the certainty had left her voice, though she tried to pretend it hadn’t. “Well, what do you want me to do, then? You told me not to get naked.”

Her words, far from helping, seemed to incense him once again. “Whatever you may think of me, Miss Granger,” he barked, “the thought of—as you so delicately put it—ravishing a seventeen-year-old Gryffindor does little to put me in the mood.”

She bristled at his words, interpreting them as a slight on herself, and responded to him with equal
“I’m sure you had enough women in your Death Eater days. I can’t possibly be more hideous than all of them. Or is it that I’m not bound and gagged?”

“I NEVER—” he thundered, eyes suddenly ablaze with furious indignation. The anger seemed to overtake him, and he looked like he wanted to strangle her, but instead he turned from her and slammed his palm against the wall. He stood in the corner for a long while, his breath being exhaled quickly through his nose. He was fuming. After his breathing slowed, he managed to tell her through gritted teeth, “I’ve never taken a woman against her will.”

“I’m sure,” Hermione said. “You probably put a nice Imperius on them first so they liked it. Coward.”

He spun on her, a move somewhat less terrifying without the robes, but not by much. Unconsciously, she pulled the covers up to her nose, trying to hide herself under them like a child afraid of the bogeyman. She’d gone too far. He was going to kill her, she was sure of it. And for a moment, it looked as if he really might.

“Don’t call me—” he spat, then stopped himself. With another quick spin, he aimed for the door. A moment later it slammed shut, and she was alone.

His footsteps echoed down the hall before disappearing downstairs. Hermione didn’t move for several minutes, listening carefully for him to come storming back up, probably with some violent curse on his lips. But he never came. Eventually, she allowed herself to relax and snuggled under the covers. Glad to be alone, she drifted into sleep.

#

“Is that truly what you think of me?”

The soft voice slowly tugged her out of sleep, and she opened her eyes. It was still quite dark out. She couldn’t have been asleep for very long. Sitting up a bit, she looked to the open doorway where Snape loomed in the shadows.

“Is that really what you think I am?” he asked, an alien softness in his quiet voice.

It took her a brief moment to recall their words prior to his departure, and her previous mood returned. “You mean a cruel bastard?” she responded, but there was less bite in her tone.

He nodded. “I am that, and many other things.”

“A liar.”

“Yes.”

“A murderer.”

A pause, then, “Yes.”

She considered him for a moment, then dared, “But not a coward.” It was somewhere between a statement and a question.

“I do not think that only Slytherins have ambition,” he answered, seeming to hold back whatever anger rose in him at the word coward. “Do not presume that all but Gryffindors lack courage.”

She lowered her eyes from him. “I’m sorry I called you a—” She almost said it again but thought
better of it. “... that.”

He nodded slightly, accepting her apology. “I’m not a rapist, either,” he said. “You should know that.”

She returned his nod, indicating her belief. With that, a very slight amount of the tension hanging over them dissipated. After another long moment, she looked back at him. “So, you returned.” It was a silly thing to say, she knew, stating the obvious like that, but she couldn’t think of anything else that she could actually stand to say at the moment. *Now who’s the coward?*

“I have no choice in the matter,” he said, his voice hardening once again. “Neither do you. We are both well aware of that fact.” There. The bitterness was back.

“Not that I’m looking forward to this,” she said tentatively, “but will it really be that bad for you? I would have thought, given your age and ... experience ...”

“It may surprise you to learn, Miss Granger,” he said, his voice thick with resentment, “that I do not relish the thought of deflowering a child under my tutelage.”

“I’m not a child,” she said defensively, “I’ve been of age for almost a year.”

He let out a scoffing breath. “Perhaps, but when I look at you, all I see is Potter’s sycophantic little friend who always has her hand in the air and her nose where it doesn’t belong.”

She snorted in indignation. “And all I see when I look at you is a greasy bat with an abnormally large nose who gets a sadistic thrill from tormenting children.”

“Good.” He turned to look out the window. “We’re agreed. We both detest each other.”

Wanting to get another gibe at him, as that seemed to be the natural course of this conversation, her thoughts went to his previous comment. “Besides, I never said I was a virgin.”

She nodded dumbly, taken off guard by his strange expression. She honestly didn’t think he’d have cared. She was even more perplexed when she saw something like relief cross his features.

Knowing he wouldn’t elaborate on this, she plucked up as much of that Gryffindor courage as she could and asked the question she was suddenly dying to ask.

“Are you?”

She expected him to turn on her furiously as he had before, to deny her outrageous assumption and proceed to outline in fabulous detail all of his past trysts and sexcapades, even if many of them were made up. That’s what any other man would have done, right? But then, Snape wasn’t any other man.

Instead, he gave a derisive huff. “I have far better things to concern myself with than engaging in such a futile cat-and-mouse game as seduction. Do you think I would have achieved even a fraction that I have in my life if I had been preoccupied with such”—he sneered again—“*base* activities? No, Miss Granger, sex is a game for the young and the immature, and I have never been either.”

Hermione stifled a laugh at his assertion that he’d never been young and focused instead on the rest of what he’d said. “Not even as a Death Eater?” she asked, the disbelief clear in her voice. “Surely such morally corrupt—”
“You’ve been reading the gossip pages, haven’t you? While there are Death Eaters who take what they can get when they can get it, it’s not the norm. Many of them are married to witches who, if not Death Eaters themselves, are nonetheless not to be trifled with. Besides, most of them find sufficient pleasure in . . . other things. As I once did.” There was no smirk on his face as he said it, for which Hermione was grateful. Perhaps he really had changed, if the thoughts of whatever tortures he had done to people no longer amused him.

She didn’t know what made her so bold, perhaps the fact that he was actually answering her questions, but she asked, “So, you’ve never loved anyone, then?”

“You have an astonishingly loose grasp on reality,” he snapped, “if you have not lifted your head out of a book long enough to notice that I am not a people person.” He accentuated the p’s of the last two words, staccato-like.

“That wasn’t an answer.”

“No, it wasn’t.”

Which was, Hermione thought, an answer in itself. She fought to hide her shock and clenched her jaw so she didn’t blurt out the most daring question yet (With whom?) and ruin his mood even more thoroughly.

“That’s enough wasting time,” he said, and the window that had begun to crack open slammed firmly shut once again.

Hermione was sorry that he wouldn’t tell her more, but grateful that he had opened up this much. Somehow the knowledge that he could at least feel love, even once, even if he wouldn’t admit it to her, gave her hope for the future of their marriage.

Snape strode over to sit on the side of the bed opposite her and withdrew two vials from his pocket.

“What’s that?” she asked.

For once, he didn’t assume her ignorance and actually gave her the benefit of the doubt in recognizing potion when she saw it. “It is evident we will need some sort of assistance to complete this task.”

“Assistance?”

He looked at her pointedly, knowing she knew what he meant and was simply uneasy with facing its implications. “It will produce the necessary reaction in my body, inducing an artificial state of arousal.” His tone was matter-of-fact, as if he was explaining the potion’s purpose to an entire class.

“A lust potion?” she asked, a bit more disquieted.

He shook his head. “I do not enjoy artificially altering my state of mind any more than absolutely necessary. I assumed you would feel the same.”

She confirmed his assumption with a nod.

He opened one vial and paused, staring at it for a moment, then drank the contents and handed the other vial to Hermione.

“Drink this.”
“What does it do?”

“Effectively the same thing.”

“Why would that matter?”

“It . . . makes it easier.”

She was about to ask how when she remembered something she’d read in her studies on the subject. Heat came to her cheeks as she realized what he must mean. “Oh.” She took the vial and downed it in one gulp.

Taking the vial from her, he set them both aside and slid under the covers beside her. Now they just had to wait until their bodies were ready. Maybe in that time she could prepare her mind.

She had hoped to be doing this with a man she loved, in some terribly romantic hotel overlooking a beach somewhere, on their honeymoon, with candles and the scent of salty air surrounding them. Not stuck in some godforsaken, dilapidated monument to bigotry with a man over twice her age, for whom she didn’t have even the slightest warm feeling. Then her mind played back their recent conversation, and she felt grateful that at least her husband had saved himself for her.

No, you stupid girl, she quickly chastised herself. He saved himself for her. He’s only settling for you. Because he has to. She had been so concerned with what he was taking from her, whether he wanted to or not, she just now realized that she would be taking something equally precious from him. For a split second, she felt like a rapist. And then she realized that neither she nor Snape was to blame for this fiasco; it was that bastard Scrimgeour. Oh, he would pay for this one day. Dearly.

“If it helps,” she murmured into the darkness, “you can think about someone else.” Her eyes flicked to Snape, but were unable to read his expression.

In the moments that followed, she tried to give herself a pep talk like she’d heard of coaches doing before sport games. This isn’t all that bad. People do it every day. This is nothing compared to some of the things you’ve been through.

Defying her direct order, her eyes flicked from the ceiling to the blanket on Snape’s side of the bed. Her mind instantly recognized the proof of the effectiveness of his potion and forced her gaze back to the ceiling. She squeezed her eyelids shut for good measure.

She heard movement on Snape’s pillow and felt his eyes on her. She only wished that was the only part of him she’d have to feel on her tonight.

“Are you ready?” He had seen her looking. Damn.

Shifting her thighs and cringing, she forced herself to speak. “As ever,” was all she managed.

As the mattress shifted beneath her and the dark form beside her rose, her heart raced. She hadn’t been this panicked since being chased by a mindless werewolf that was normally a man she trusted. At that time, attack had been a distinct possibility. Now it was a cruel certainty. He moved over her, finding a position without so much as brushing against her skin. His scent was strong. A strange, musky smell, like death and dungeons. It wasn’t bad, but not particularly pleasant. In fact, the smell itself, coupled with the fact that she’d never before been close enough to him to detect it, frightened her terribly.

He took great care not to touch her. Not more than absolutely, positively necessary. When he did touch her in that only, necessary way, she gasped in surprise.
Pain lanced through her so suddenly and intensely that she cried out, nearly screaming. Tears sprang to her eyes, and her breath quickened. It’s not really that bad, she told herself. It only seems worse than it is because of the situation. She repeated that thought a few times but was far from able to convince herself.

Snape stopped and looked toward the door, his head twisted around over his right shoulder. Hermione wondered if he’d heard something. Is someone in the house? Maybe he was checking to see if she’d woken Mrs. Black. She looked toward the door and listened a moment herself, hearing nothing but her own gasping breaths as she tried to subdue the pain. Only when she looked back at him did she notice the slight hunch of his shoulders. He wasn’t looking at something. He was looking away from something. Her.

Does he really care that much? she asked herself as she realized he had averted his gaze from her pain. The pain he’d caused. The compassionate part of her checked in. I doubt grimaces and screams were quite what he was expecting from his partner on his first time. She forced her breathing into silence. She shouldn’t let him know how much pain she was really in, psychological or otherwise. It was just making it harder for both of them.

She closed her eyes, and when she calmed herself down enough, Snape proceeded. The pain went away before long, though the discomfort and awkwardness did not. She tried to keep her mind off what was happening by working out a difficult potion in her head, but that just brought her thoughts straight back to Professor Snape. Maybe charms, then. Swish and flick. No use. As soon as she pictured a wand, she became acutely aware of its suggestive shape, something she’d never noticed before. Any thought of her friends or the other Order members, whom this act was helping by keeping both her and Snape useful, resulted in her picturing them in Snape’s place, and her mind leapt back from the thought as if she had touched fire. She didn’t dare go near thoughts of her family.

Instead, she found herself counting. Eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen . . . How many does it take? she thought. Glad that all she could feel of him was what was between her thighs, even though she could sense him over and around her, she found that a certain clinical detachment was actually possible. Aside from counting, she began taking note of speed and distance, making a mental line graph. Suddenly, the line on the graph began to spike.

A rush of panic filled her as she opened her eyes and looked at his face, contorted in a strange way she’d never seen. He’s enjoying this! she realized with horror.

“Professor Snape!” she gasped, but he didn’t seem to hear her. There was no stopping him now, not until he got his fill of her. Or rather, her of him. The Teacher was gone, leaving only the Man . . . He was utterly transformed, like Jekyll to Hyde, like some kind of . . . were-man. Don’t be daft, her reason chided. That’s redundant.

She felt as if caught up in a tornado, completely disconnected from her surroundings, lost in a maelstrom, unable to control even her own emotions. This change in Snape loosed a terror in her far greater than any he’d managed to produce in his classroom, even on his most misanthropic days. He may be cruel and vengeful, but at least she knew what to expect from him, how to treat him. The Teacher was logical, rational if not fair. Always in control of himself and often everyone around him. True, she had seen him lose his temper on many occasions, but never had she witnessed an outburst of any other emotion from him. But this . . . creature . . . on top of her was another matter altogether. She couldn’t fathom what it wanted, how she could satiate it, except to let it take its desire without protest. What sent shocks of panic through her was that it seemed what the Man desired was to utterly consume her. There was no reasoning with it, no getting through to it. Like a furious tempest, she just had to ride it out, hoping it didn’t break her to pieces.
“Professor!” She was nearly shouting now, fearing that he might really hurt her, even if unintentionally. “SEVERUS!”

She hadn’t expected to say that, much less scream it. His reaction was just about the opposite she had hoped for, but it led to the same result.

Her use of his name made his body spasm strangely, and his loud grunt formed one word. “Lily . . .”

Hermione gaped. He’d really done it! She’d given him permission, but she didn’t think he’d really . . . He was thinking about someone else!

Then it was over. He looked down into her eyes and slowly the expression of bliss turned into a grimace of self-loathing. The Teacher was back. As if fleeing the scene of a crime, he extricated himself from her, flew off the bed, grabbed his robes and shoes, and was out the door, slamming it behind him.

Hermione let a sigh of relief escape her lips, then curled into a fetal position, clutching the pillow. Her mind roiled as adrenaline and hormones churned within her. *It’s over,* she kept telling herself, trying to get her pulse to a more normal pace. She fought the fear and panic and focused on the fact that the marriage was now complete. They had ensured their continued places in the wizarding world. They could continue contributing to the work of the Order, to the downfall of Voldemort. What had happened was all for the best.

*Still . . .* For the first time, she had seen Snape not as her teacher, but as a man. Her mind knew he was always a man, of course, but there’s a tendency for children to view their teachers as somehow inhuman or genderless, and with Snape, it was even easier to view him as such. He was a bogey-man, a monster, at times a robot, unfeeling and sarcastic. All he cared about was potions and punishing children who disobeyed or acted stupid. But what she had just seen . . . Not only was he actually human, he was actually male. He was a man. When all the snide comments and billowing robes were stripped away, he was only a man.

Maybe not only a man. Maybe some kind of animal, too. Never had she seen, much less been party to, such raging passion. Not from Krum, certainly not from Ron, who hadn’t even got up the courage to ask her out in six years. Maybe it was just the situation. Perhaps all men were rampant hormonal beasts in bed. How should she know?

But it wasn’t really him, was it? It’s the mind that’s the person, not the body, and she knew his mind rejected her just as much as hers did him. That look on his face before he stormed off proved it. He hated himself as much as she’d hated him moments before, when . . . *Wait . . .*

*Who’s Lily?* she wondered, brushing aside the tingle of jealousy which that thought inexplicably produced. The only Lily she knew of was . . . *Merlin’s bloody beard! Snape was in love with Harry’s mum?!!*

And she hadn’t thought things could get any more awkward or complicated.
The Nightmare
Chapter by Severely Lupine (ShawnaCanon)

The sounds of battle filled the halls. Screams. Explosions. Debris and walls and bodies falling to the ground.

Hermione looked around herself in bemusement. She’d already been here, seen this. It was only a rerun.

In front of her, Bill Weasley fell with a cry under Greyback, who was already tearing into Bill’s face with his teeth. Hermione watched, waiting, but no one came to his rescue. No curses flew at the human monster from Bill’s friends or family or fiancée. So Hermione watched as Bill’s body stopped moving and, eventually, Greyback got his fill and moved on, leaving a mangled mass of red behind.

Well, then. Maybe not quite a rerun.

Time and space seemed to contract like an accordion. She watched as, one by one, the Order members and her school friends fell to the Death Eaters. Ginny was hit in the back with a Killing Curse. Tonks was crushed by a falling piece of the staircase. McGonagall was forced into her Animagus form by a spell and then ripped in two by a large Death Eater’s bare hands. Hermione watched it all with the strange, impassive curiosity that one sometimes has in dreams.

Beside her, Snape ran by only to drop like a stone and writhe on the floor in agony before finally going still, his eyes bulging from his sockets.

Dumbledore was dead too, though she hadn’t seen who’d killed him.

She realized suddenly that they were all dead—even the Death Eaters—and the hall had gone quiet.

As she looked from one corpse to the other, she wondered why she felt nothing, knew in the part of her mind that almost realized she was dreaming that she should have been feeling something, seeing her friends all dead.

“You know what the difference is between you and me?”

She looked up to see a person standing before her, not five feet away. He was battered and misshapen, his limbs bent impossibly, a wide gash in his forehead. His eyes already seemed hollow and lifeless, even as they glared at her.

“You’re dead and I’m not?” she heard herself say, even as she knew it was cold and heartless.

Draco sneered. “I may have been devious and arrogant, and maybe I talked a good game, but when it came down to it, I couldn’t kill even when my mother’s life depended on it. You act all noble and goody-goody, pretend to care for the weak and defenseless, but when given the chance, you murdered me without a second thought.”

Hermione knew she should have explained, told him that it was an accident, that she’d never meant for him to die, however much she disliked him. Instead, for no reason she understood, all she said was, “Who’ll protect your mother now?”
Hermione awoke with a start. Looking around, it took her a moment to remember where she was. The horror and disgust she’d known in her dream she should have been feeling flooded her now at the memory of it, so clear in her mind’s eye. She wanted to tell herself it was only a dream, that it wasn’t real. But it had been real, at least in part. That night had really happened. The night she had become a killer. With everything that had been going on the past several weeks, she’d almost been able to forget about it. She took several deep breaths, calming her pulse and trying to banish the horrible images from her mind.

Aside from her, the room was devoid of life, though she hadn’t expected to find it any other way. Crawling from the bed, she found her knickers and slid them back on. Yes, her skin and muscles were still sore from last night’s unpleasantness. She would have to find a potion to relieve the discomfort. Perhaps she would request something once she got to St. Mungo’s.

Gathering her remaining belongings, she strode to the door and hesitantly opened it. She knew Snape wouldn’t be lurking on the other side of it, but she didn’t want to risk waking him if he was sleeping in one of the other bedrooms. After the reminder of a time when he’d only been her teacher and a member of the Order, waking up in a world where Snape was her husband, where Snape had shagged her, was too jarring. She didn’t want to have to face him immediately. She had no idea what she’d say to him if she had to. Maybe it would be better to just stay in her room and try to collect herself. Don’t be a coward, she chided herself. She’d have to face him sooner or later, and she had an appointment to get to soon.

She made it all the way to the ground floor without seeing any signs of her husband. As she descended the final staircase, she heard a soft clattering coming from the kitchen, as of someone stirring tea. She set her cloak near the front door and braced herself to confront the man she was now bound to for the rest of their lives. Her jaw firmly set, she marched toward the kitchen, ready to face whatever may come.

Upon entering, she stopped dead in her tracks.

“Professor?” she asked, befuddled.

“Good morning, Miss Granger,” said Dumbledore with a smile. “If you had slept in much later, I should have to say ‘Good afternoon.’ Tea?”

She walked forward and took a seat near him at the table. “Thank you,” she said as he poured her a cup. “Sir, where’s Professor Snape?”

Some of the cheerfulness dropped from Dumbledore’s face, only to reappear an instant later. “I am uncertain of his precise location at the moment.”

“When did you get here?”

“Severus flooed me at eleven o’clock last night. He had to go out and, I think, did not wish to leave you here alone.”

Hermione took a sip of her tea. “Eleven o’clock? Did he not sleep at all?”

The Headmaster sighed. “I believe he had more pressing concerns to attend to.”

“What concerns?” Hermione’s eyes narrowed, a touch afraid of what the answer might be.

Instead of giving her a proper response, Dumbledore rose from the table and went to the cupboard. Hermione realized it had probably been charmed, since when he opened it, he found it full of various foodstuffs. “Would you like some breakfast? Perhaps a muffin?”
“That would be fine, thank you,” Hermione answered, but barely another second passed before she added, “Professor Dumbledore, what was Professor Snape doing that he had to leave so early?” Abruptly, she knew the answer. “He just wanted to get away from me, didn’t he?”

Dumbledore returned with a tray of muffins and reclaimed his seat before answering. “I do not know the full extent of what transpired between the two of you after you left the ceremony yesterday, but I cannot pretend to be completely ignorant, neither for your sake nor mine.” Hermione shifted in her seat. “Despite popular opinion, Severus is a good man and a fine teacher. I know the prospect of bedding a student—any student—is utterly repulsive to him. Ever since finding out he would be required to marry you, he had been dreading last night like a visit from Voldemort.” Hermione flinched, but not from hearing the name, as might have been the case a few years ago. It stung a bit to be compared with Voldemort in that way, though she told herself that she should probably take it as a good thing.

“I had thought that . . .” she began, needing to confirm something, but unsure just how much needed to be said. She couldn’t relate everything Snape had told her last night (and didn’t tell her) for the sake of his privacy. “That is . . . Well, he was a Death Eater, and . . . and they do so many other terrible things . . .”

“Ah,” Dumbledore said with a gentle nod. “A common misconception. Miss Granger, what is the primary goal of Voldemort and the Death Eaters?”

“To rid the world of Muggles and Muggle-borns.”

“To ‘purify’ wizarding bloodlines,” he supplied. Hermione nodded. “And what is one likely outcome of intercourse, even forced intercourse?”

“I see,” she mused. “So they aren’t allowed to . . . to rape any women, on the chance that they might inadvertently produce a half-blood offspring, thus contributing to the very problem they’re trying to solve. But surely there are ways around that.”

“And certainly some of the Death Eaters did and do make use of those ways,” he conceded. “However, even were it not for Voldemort’s command, I sincerely doubt Severus would have ever taken a woman against her will. Even in his Death Eater days, he was not so deeply horrible a person as to stoop to such levels of depravity. Besides that, in all the years I’ve known Severus, he has never been one much driven by his—what is the term Muggles use?—libido.”

Hermione couldn’t stop herself from blushing and looking down. She remembered quite well just how much Snape had been driven by his libido, even if only for a short time, and it wasn’t something she cared to think on, especially in the presence of Dumbledore.

The old wizard noticed her reaction and smoothly shifted gears to match her own thoughts. “He could not prevent your marriage from happening,” he said, “but now that it has, I believe he is attempting to find a way to lighten the long-term burden on both of you if he can.”

“Meaning?”

Dumbledore slid a scrap of parchment across the table to her. “He left this for you.”

Hermione unfolded the parchment.

Miss Granger,
Hermione looked back to Dumbledore. “What sort of arrangements?

“Can he really do that? You and I both tried so hard to get them to see reason about this marriage.”

“Your wedding night was yesterday. If he is unsuccessful, according to my understanding of the situation, he’ll have to get in touch with you today to arrange a meeting.” At least he put it delicately, even if it was embarrassing that he knew of that particular requirement. “If he is successful, I imagine he will contact you when necessary regarding your next . . . meeting.”

Hermione nodded, already halfway to convincing herself Snape would succeed, and found that her eyes had settled on the tray of muffins before her. Suddenly feeling starved, she chose a bran one and started eating. “Do you think he’ll do it?” she asked between bites.

Dumbledore took a chocolate chip muffin and joined her in breakfast. “Severus can be quite convincing when he puts his mind to something.”

“At least they’re not making us live together anyway. I never thought I would be happy to be living with Lavender and Parvati again,” she quipped, and Dumbledore smiled.

“I am sorry I cannot provide you with a room of your own,” he said, his tone more serious. “You are aware that you deserve the Head Girl position, as it had been my intent for some years now to give it to you, but after what happened on the tower . . .”

“I know,” she interrupted him, the details returning with full force to the forefront of her mind. “I killed a fellow student, and inside the school no less. The parents would never allow it.”

Dumbledore nodded, smiling ruefully.

The prompt reminded her of something she was surprised she had not thought to ask before now. “Sir? I was so caught up in rejoining the battle after . . . You had said you were dying, and Professor Snape looked to be in bad shape himself, yet by the Leaving Feast, you both appeared as well as before the battle. What happened?”

Dumbledore scrutinized her for a long moment, as if deciding whether or not to answer her question. Finally, he decided in favor of it. “Professor Snape was suffering the effects of breaking an Unbreakable Vow.”

Hermione gasped. “But . . . that’s supposed to be instant death!”
“Indeed it is,” Dumbledore confirmed, “which is why I was so surprised by Harry’s news that he had merely collapsed. But Severus, it seems, is an even more accomplished potioneer than I knew. He had, in secret, been developing a potion to minimize the effect, to reduce it to something resembling the Cruciatus curse, should it happen that he might fail to fulfill the Vow.” He paused, then added thoughtfully, more to himself than to her, “Perhaps he was more serious in his threats to not grant my request than I thought.”

“But, what Vow did he make?” Hermione asked. “And to whom?”

“To Narcissa Malfoy,” Dumbledore answered, and Hermione put a hand over her mouth in shock. “At the beginning of the year, she begged Severus to protect Draco, knowing that Voldemort had set him a task that he did not expect him to survive.”

“You mean . . . killing you,” she ventured, and he nodded. She thought again of what Draco had said in her dream. Maybe her subconscious had noticed something that night, some hesitation on Draco’s part which she’d never really registered. “Do you think he would have done it? Killed you?”

Dumbledore took a long, slow breath. “We’ll never know what might have happened, Miss Granger. But no, I don’t believe he would have.”

Hermione’s remaining appetite disappeared. “Then I really did murder him.”

“No. You did what you felt necessary at the time to protect me. For all you knew, he might have already had the Killing Curse on his lips.”

“But when I killed Draco, Professor Snape had failed, had broken the Vow. He would have died!”

Dumbledore nodded again. “We are fortunate that he has even more skill with potions than he lets on.”

Hermione barely heard him, reeling from the revelation that she had almost inadvertently killed two men that night. And knowing that, indirectly, she had been the cause of the torture she’d witnessed him going through . . .

“But what about you?” she asked, trying to get her mind off her memory of Snape writhing in pain.

“As I said,” he responded knowingly, “we are fortunate. Severus identified the potion that had poisoned me as something of Voldemort’s invention. He happened to know how to create the antidote.”

Hermione fell silent, absorbing and processing all this new information. There was a long lull as they both nibbled their muffins. Finally, he said softly, “I am truly sorry for the situation you are both in. I wish I could have saved you from it.”

“It’s not your fault, Professor,” she said, but her heart wasn’t in it. “You did your best.”

Dumbledore looked at her gravely. “Though you may not have been brought together under the most ideal of circumstances, I’m afraid you are stuck with each other, my dear. I think it is a wise choice to keep your marriage as secret as possible for the time being, but one day Voldemort will be defeated, and if you both survive . . .” He placed his left hand on Hermione’s right and she looked at him. “It need not be as nightmarish as you both believe it to be.”

Hermione removed her hand from his and stood up. “Thank you for breakfast, Professor,” she said softly. “If you’ll excuse me, I have an appointment at St. Mungo’s, and I’m afraid I may already be
When she arrived at the check-in desk at St. Mungo’s, she discovered that she was indeed almost half an hour late for her appointment. She made a weak apology to the Welcome Witch and sat down to wait.

It wasn’t too long before an older witch called her name and led her to a small exam room, then gave her a hospital robe and instructed her to put it on. When the witch left, she looked around, gulping hard at the sight of a table with stirrups. She was too young to have ever had a routine female checkup, and now it was under these conditions. Not ideal, indeed. She stood straighter, mentally bracing herself for what was sure to be a continuation of last night’s humiliation.

She had just finished donning the hospital robe when there was a knock and, before she could answer, Healer Partridge strode in, as handsome as she remembered from a few days ago.

“Hello again, Mrs. Snape.” He smiled warmly and motioned to the exam table.

She slid onto it, her legs hanging off the side. “It’s still Miss Granger. Or Hermione.” In truth, the thought of changing her name hadn’t even crossed her mind. “We’re trying to keep it a secret. You won’t tell anyone about this, will you?”

He shook his head. “Strict Healer–patient confidentiality. Your records are accessible only to myself, my staff, and the Ministry employees in the P.E.W.S. program, and my staff sees only the records without the names attached.”

She nodded again, desperately hoping Tonks or Kingsley or Arthur wouldn’t get wind of this from some blabbermouth in the Ministry halls.

“So,” Partridge continued, all business now, “I’m going to need to do a quick examination. Don’t worry. It won’t take long, and I’ll try to make it as painless as possible.” He winked, apparently thinking it would make her more comfortable, but it had the opposite effect. She couldn’t help being aware of how much more handsome than her husband he was, and at least a few years closer to her own age.

He indicated for her to lean back and put her feet in the stirrups, which she did. Before he took his position, he handed her a potion. “Drink this.” At her suspicious look, he added, “Only a gentle healing potion. I understand women can be rather, um, sore after the first time.”

Blushing, she drank the potion. When he handed her a second potion, she drank it without challenging him.

Then Partridge took a seat between her legs and pushed the end of her hospital robe up over her knees and let it fall at her hips. Looking between her own wantonly spread thighs at this strange man staring intently at her genitals, Hermione’s face grew so hot that she was sure she must be bright red. It was humiliating and reminded her unpleasantly of the vulnerability she’d felt last night when it had been Snape between her legs.

This isn’t like last night at all, she told herself. He’s a Healer, doing a check-up. And he’s a nice man. Just relax. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes so she wouldn’t have to watch the Healer’s eyes on her.

As he began his investigation, she was suddenly glad this wasn’t a Muggle hospital. She knew if it were, she’d be being poked and prodded with all sorts of cold, metal instruments, most likely. As it
was, all she felt was the gentle touch of Partridge’s gloved hand for a few moments before he pulled out his wand. He waved it around a bit, muttering spells. After a minute or two, he scooted the stool back, removed his gloves, and smiled broadly.

“All done,” he pronounced. “You can sit back up now.”

She quickly did so, quite glad to be covered once again. “I trust everything’s in order,” she said, with just a touch of bitterness creeping into her voice, which he chose to ignore.

“Oh, yes, quite,” he said. “Good work.”

Hermione blinked. Good work doing what?

Partridge tossed the gloves in a disposal bin, stood, and smoothed his robes. “I’ll need to see you again soon,” he said as he handed her another potion, which she drank on reflex. “Someone will owl you with the appointment time when everything gets sorted out. It may be a few weeks.”

She sat up and smoothed down her robe. “Are we done?”

“Yes, you’re free to go,” he said, flashing her another white smile. “Congratulations.”

He was out the door before she could retort that it was hardly appropriate to congratulate someone on a marriage they were forced into against their will, but she suspected he meant well.

#

After leaving St. Mungo’s, she took a trip to Diagon Alley to get some things she knew she’d need for school while she thought about what to do next. The Weasleys had sort of assumed that she would be living with her new husband now, but that clearly wasn’t going to happen, even if Snape was unsuccessful in his attempts to persuade the Minister for a bit of leeway. She was certain she’d be welcome there for the remainder of the summer. But what if they had to continue with their daily . . . liaisons? Living at the Burrow might make it difficult. But what was the alternative? She could hardly go home. It would be so lonely there with her parents gone. She could hardly even bear it for the time it took to gather some of her things.

Who was she kidding? She knew where she was going to go, and she knew why she was really hesitating. But Ron would just have to suck it up. He wouldn’t be able to avoid her forever.

“You’re late,” Molly said, opening the door and embracing Hermione. “We expected you hours ago.”

“You expected me?” Hermione asked, perplexed, and then remembered. “Dumbledore.”

“He told us new arrangements had been made and that you had the rest of the summer to yourself,” Molly told her, ushering her inside and closing the door behind her. “We’ve just started supper. Drop your bag by the stairs, and we’ll get you set up after we eat.”

“I’m not actually sure yet that those new arrangements have been made,” Hermione tried to explain. It wasn’t midnight yet, and she couldn’t be certain until midnight. Although maybe Snape had told Dumbledore and not her.

“Really?” Molly asked with little interest. “Dumbledore seemed certain. Take your cloak off, dear.”

Molly hurried into the kitchen. Hermione left her bag by the stairs, took off her cloak, and draped it
over a chair (for lack of any available hangers). Looking down at herself, she realized she was still wearing the same Muggle outfit she’d worn the day before . . . the same one she’d been wearing when she shagged Snape (or, she supposed, when Snape shagged her, as there hadn’t been much action taken on her part). Hoping her delay wouldn’t be so long it was rude, but unable to bear the idea of not even bothering to change clothes before she was faced with Ron and the rest, she pulled a change of clothes from her bag and ducked into the bathroom.

“It’s about time,” joked Fred as Hermione tentatively approached the table. “We thought you’d got lost on the way from the living room.”

“Sorry,” she said. “I had to use the loo.”

“Ignore him,” Ginny told her, getting up to give her a hug. “He’s a git. We’re just glad you’re back.”

“Yeah,” said Harry, also rising to hug Hermione. She hadn’t realized how much genuine physical affection meant before Snape had shown her that even traditionally affectionate acts could be so unaffectionate. She didn’t want to take that for granted ever again. “That means you won’t miss the wedding,” Harry added.

She looked at him, not understanding, and thought for an instant Harry was referring to hers.

“Our wedding,” Ginny clarified, seeing the confusion on Hermione’s face. She took Harry’s hand happily. “And Bill and Fleur’s. We’ve decided to have a double wedding. Most of the guests will be the same, anyway.”

Hermione smiled. “Of course,” she told them. “I’m so happy things worked out for you two.” And she was.

They sat back down and Hermione joined them at the table. She was greeted with warmth by the rest of the group . . . except for Ron, who didn’t even meet her eyes through the whole meal.

After dinner, when everyone started running off to do their own things, Harry touched Hermione’s elbow and nodded toward a room. She followed him and found Ginny and Ron already there.

She almost wished Ron was still refusing to look her in the eye. The look of helplessness and repressed longing, combined with what she guessed was irrational teenage anger at her, was almost more than she could bear.

“What’s he like?” Ron asked, his voice sullen. “He’s not some dirty old man or slimy bastard, is he?”

She winced.

“Ron!” Ginny reprimanded. “She doesn’t want to talk about it!”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “I didn’t ask you all in here so you could grill her.”

But when Harry and Ginny looked at Hermione, she could see curiosity and concern in their eyes, as well.

“No, it’s all right,” she said. “If it was one of you, I’d want to know, too. But I can’t say much.” Harry and Ginny smiled in appreciation, not speaking in order to let her continue. Ron just kept looking at her. “He’s a . . . a good man. Very talented at what he does.” It helped to know she didn’t lie when she said that. She could never hope to love Snape, and she wasn’t even sure how
far she trusted him, but at least she had the great fortune of respecting her husband. Some women weren’t so lucky.

“We know he must be good at his job,” said Ginny. “That’s why he got picked for this whole fiasco in the first place, right?”

“Yes, but what does he do?” added Ron. “You’ve got to at least tell us that much.”

“Does that really matter, Ron?” she asked him. She knew Ron didn’t really care about the particulars. The important thing was that it wasn’t Ron himself. “He’s a good man. And like I told Harry, he’s someone that Dumbledore trusts. That’s really all I can say. And it’s all you should need to know. Please don’t ask me anymore. I don’t want this to affect my life any more than necessary. I’ll be able to live in the dorm as usual. I’ll need to see him some, but maybe even not that much. And no, I don’t love him, Ron. How could I?”

“I didn’t ask—” he protested.

“No, but you were thinking it.” She put a hand on his shoulder as a comfort and request for peace. He just looked at her feet, neither returning nor denying the gesture.

Harry stepped up. Hermione broke her contact with Ron as Harry looked at her intently. “But you are okay?” he asked. She nodded. “Then we won’t ask anymore.” He looked to Ron at that, as if telling him as much as her. “But if you’re ever . . . not okay . . . let us know.”

“I will,” she said, smiling. “Thanks, Harry.”

“Now,” Harry said, his demeanor suddenly changing. “I’ve got something to tell you about.”

And so Hermione learned the truth of where Harry and Dumbledore had been the night of the attack on Hogwarts and what they had been after. Harry told them all he knew about the Horcruxes, then informed them that there were still several more to be found. But that wasn’t the most shocking news.

“What do you mean you’re not coming back to school?” Hermione cried and was quickly shushed by Ginny. “You’d just throw away your future like that?” she added in a softer but no less urgent tone.

“If we don’t find and kill Voldemort’s Horcruxes, none of us will have a future. Besides . . .” Harry put his arm around Ginny. “Ginny’s my future now. I reckon, if we survive this, the rest will take care of itself.”

Hermione looked exasperatedly to Ron, but he just shrugged. “It makes sense, Hermione. I just wish they’d let me join them. Hunting Horcruxes sounds a lot more fun than going back to school.”

“Oh, you’re welcome to join us,” said Ginny, pulling her arm tight around Harry’s waist. “As long as you wouldn’t be bothered all the noise or the possibility of walking in on us in any room in the house. For that matter, we might just go around naked. I’ve always wanted to try that, you know, and I’ve never been able—”

“Ah! Ginny! Enough!” Ron yelped, his hands over his ears. “That is not something I need in my head, thank you very much.”

Harry was blushing but shrugged and didn’t offer any help. “What can I say, Ron? She’s got a
point. Your sister and I are going to be having an awful lot of sex.”

“Harry!” Ron squealed.

Even though he’d made his own blush deepen, Harry laughed with Ginny at Ron’s discomfort. Hermione had to agree that Ron’s expression was pretty hilarious.

She sighed. It didn’t sound like Harry and Ginny were going to reconsider this. What would school be like without Harry, her best friend? She’d hoped she’d never have to find out.

“I’m not trying to replace you, you know, Hermione,” Ginny told her.

Hermione looked at her. She hadn’t thought of it that way at all, but now that she did . . . “That’s exactly what you’re doing. But . . . but that’s all right. That’s how it should be, husband and wife, partners, helping each other. That’s good.” She suddenly felt even more depressed about her own marriage. She couldn’t envision any scenario in which she and Snape would have that kind of relationship. “But you know we’re still available to help you, Harry. Just owl if you need anything.”

“I know,” Harry said, smiling. “Really, it’s going to be mostly research, I imagine. Dumbledore said he’d help, but we’ve got to figure out what the Horcruxes are before we can find and destroy them.” He thought for a second, then said, “Actually, I’ll definitely be taking you up on that. Books are really your department, Hermione.”

“Good,” she said, then smiled back at him. “I’ll miss you, Harry. It won’t be the same at Hogwarts without you.”

One week after her wedding to Snape, she attended the wedding of her best friend. Harry was dashing in his fine dress robes (and made a prettier picture than Bill only because his facial scarring was less extensive). Ginny was beautiful and radiant in her own brand new dress robes (though, objectively speaking, not nearly as resplendent as Fleur, not that Ginny minded).

The wedding was everything Hermione’s wasn’t: happy, bright, full of love and loved ones. When the wizard minister said, “You may now kiss the brides,” Hermione cried: an indulgence she allowed herself only because she knew people would mistake them for tears of joy.

After the dual ceremony, the assembled friends, distant relations, classmates, Order members, and neighbors spread out over the Weasley yard and under the great tent that had been raised. Hermione found she was able to enjoy herself in catching up with people she hadn’t seen in a year or more. Even Viktor had been invited. She talked politely with him, and he was as courteous as ever, up until Luna and her father walked by and Viktor saw something about the other man that made him quite cross, but he excused himself before Hermione could fully understand what the problem had been. She hadn’t told him about her marriage, but something about the way he kept a discreet distance from her made her wonder if he knew.

Only the sight of Mr. Haversham instructing the new Mr. and Mrs. Potter to sign a scroll marred the occasion.

After the reception, Harry and Ginny gathered the first of their things to make the official move into Grimmauld Place, and Bill and Fleur took off for their new home (a place called Shell Cottage, which Hermione thought sounded like something out of a lovely fairy tale).

Which left Hermione with Molly, Arthur and Ron in the Burrow, and three more weeks to fill before school started.
Ron really seemed to make an effort to get back to the friendship they’d had before everything happened. In fact, he seemed to be trying to pretend it hadn’t happened at all, which was just as well as far as Hermione was concerned. There was no point in talking it out, because what else was there to say? She couldn’t believe this was the end of the matter between them, but it was nice, just for a while, to let Ron joke and scold him for it and pretend they were just a couple of teenagers on summer holiday.

Two Sundays after Harry’s wedding, Molly invited Tonks and Lupin over for lunch. Tonks was barely in the door before she flashed a modest golden band on her left ring finger.

Hermione squealed despite herself and looked from the friend she viewed as an older sister to her former teacher, grinning. “You’re married? When?”

“Just a few days after Harry,” Lupin admitted. Hermione’s smile faltered. Lupin didn’t seem as happy about it as he should have been. “Sorry we didn’t invite you. With Bellatrix still on the loose, it seemed too dangerous to flaunt her niece’s marriage to a werewolf by having a big wedding. Not that I could have given her one anyway.”

Hermione frowned. It seemed Lupin had fallen into one of his self-flagellating moods again. Part of her wanted to cheer him up, but part of her wanted to tell him to get over it. At least he’d been allowed to marry the person he wanted.

Tonks rolled her eyes. “Sorry about him. I think he’s just been a bit tired lately.” She winked at Hermione, and Lupin said, “Dora” in a low voice that managed to convey warning, reprimand and embarrassment at once.

“But the full moon was almost a week ago—Oh,” Hermione said and was saved from further awkwardness by Molly announcing that lunch was ready.

#

“Are you sure I can’t convince you to come back with us?” Hermione asked, standing on platform nine and three-quarters with Ron, Harry and Ginny.

“I think vanquishing Voldemort is a little more important than my marks, Hermione,” Harry answered.

“And there’s no way I’d let him do it alone,” Ginny added. “Especially now. ’Til death and all that.”

Hermione lowered her voice and leaned in to Ginny. “What if you, you know, get pregnant? Didn’t you have to take the fertility potions, too?”

Ginny shrugged. “If that happens, we’ll deal with it. But we’re going to try to time things to avoid the days when that’ll be a risk.”

Hermione cocked an eyebrow, knowing how unlikely such a thing was.

Ron cleared his throat, the conversation having obviously taken a turn not to his liking. “We should probably get on the train now,” he said.

Hermione acquiesced; they said their goodbyes (with promises to keep each other apprised of any news), then Ron and Hermione boarded the Hogwarts Express. They found an empty compartment, stowed their belongings, and settled in.
“Not a word about my marriage to anyone,” Hermione warned him one last time for good measure. “Not even a hint.”

“Of course I wouldn’t!” he protested and looked genuinely insulted that she thought he might rat on her.

Luna and Neville joined them after a few minutes. “We saw Harry on the platform,” Neville informed them as he took a seat across from Ron. “I can’t believe he won’t be at school. Actually, I can’t believe he went along with the marriage law. Not that I didn’t think he and Ginny’d get married eventually, mind, but now? How can anyone think this is a good idea?”

Hermione shook her head. “I wish I knew, Neville.”
If Hermione’d had any illusions that things wouldn’t really be all that different, they wouldn’t have lasted past the platform at Hogsmeade station.

She might have been able to ignore the sidelong glances and distrustful looks the other students were giving her, not to mention the wide berth they allowed, but she simply could not pretend she didn’t see the deathly, winged, horse-like creatures hitched to the Hogwarts wagons.

Her startled cry frightened Ron and even made Neville jump, but Luna just patted her shoulder, knowing right away what she was reacting to.

“What is it, Hermione?” Ron asked, looking around for any threat.

“Thestrals,” she whispered. “I knew they were there, but . . .”

“Now you see them,” Neville supplied, and Hermione nodded.

“Well, what did you expect?” asked Luna as she led them toward one. “You killed Draco. You not only saw death, you caused it. Or did you forget?” From the look on her face, she actually wanted to know.

“No!” Hermione protested. “Of . . . of course not. How could I?”

“It’s all right, Hermione,” Neville said as they neared the carriage. “They’re nice, remember?” When they reached it, Ron obligingly loaded her trunk onto the wagon as Neville patted the Thestral’s neck. “See?”

Tentatively, Hermione reached out to stroke the creature, which twitched at her touch. She remembered the feel of it well, from the time she’d ridden one. “Yes . . .”

“Ready to go, you two?” Ron asked. “The other carriages are moving.”

“Yes,” she said again, then left the Thestral to join the others in the carriage.

#

As everyone filed into the Great Hall for the start of term feast, Hermione felt a great many eyes on her and heard whispers that sounded like, “murderer,” “mad” and “dangerous,” especially when Slytherins passed by. She ducked her head, trying to become as small as possible, while Ron and Neville gave the more obvious of the offenders nasty glares. Now I know how Harry felt, she thought, recalling the time everyone blamed Harry for Cedric’s death. Of course, the difference there was that Harry didn’t do it. In her case, the accusations were not misplaced.

Hermione kept her head down until they found their seats, not even saying goodbye to Luna when she went to join her fellow Ravenclaws. Ron and Neville took seats on either side of her to provide some buffer from the harsh remarks and looks. The seats directly across from them remained empty for a while, but finally Colin and Dennis Creevey sat down, positively beaming at her.

“Welcome back, Hermione,” said Colin, flashing her a smile that could not possibly get any bigger.
“Hi, Colin,” she said warily and wearily. She wasn’t sure why he was acting this way toward her, but she knew it always got annoying when he did it to Harry.

“How was your summer?” he inquired.

“Fine,” she lied and almost laughed at how big of a lie it was.

“What are you on about?” Ron demanded of the brothers.

“What do you mean?” asked Dennis.

“We just wanted to say hello to the hero of Hogwarts,” Colin added.

This got raised eyebrows from all three of the others. “Come again?” Ron asked.

“Hermione saved Dumbledore’s life,” Colin enthused. “Without her, the whole school might have been taken by Death Eaters. We might all have been killed.”

Hermione wasn’t so sure about that. If Dumbledore was right, that Draco wouldn’t have killed him, then it had probably all been for nothing and all she’d accomplished was cutting short the life of a misguided young man before he could come to his senses.

“You’re not scared of her?” asked Neville.

“Of course not,” Colin answered, still smiling. “She’s one of us. A Gryffindor. The Slytherins, they’re scared of her.”

Hermione dared a look around the room. Admittedly, most of the murderous looks were coming from the Slytherin table. There was still a sizable amount of distrust directed her way from the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw tables, but very few from the other Gryffindors. She got a few uncertain glances, but nothing too bad.

“Can I take your picture?” Colin asked, lifting his infamous camera above the table.

“I’d really rather you—” she started, but didn’t bother finishing as he’d already taken it.

Just then, Dumbledore called for attention from the High Table, and all the students quieted to listen. Hermione couldn’t help looking over and seeing Snape sitting at his usual place, scowling. He didn’t look at her or acknowledge her in any way, but was watching Dumbledore. This seemed so normal, seeing him sitting up there, looking as unhappy as ever. It was almost hard to believe that just a month ago . . .

Yes, very hard to believe.

The Headmaster quickly made his various welcoming remarks, and everyone cheered as the new first years came in and were Sorted. There seemed fewer this year for some reason.

As she looked around, she realized that there were fewer students from every class this year. That sort of made sense. After the battle with the Death Eaters last year, it was certain that many parents wouldn’t allow their children to return. They thought they could keep them safer at home, or they just took the whole family out of the country. As if Voldemort will stop with just Britain. The Slytherin table had more empty seats than the others. She noted that all the ones missing were children of known Death Eaters. And likely Death Eaters in training themselves.

During the Sorting, she happened to catch Snape’s eye. She held the look for a moment, then, to
her immense surprise, she saw one of his eyes blink, but not the other. Her own eyes popped open as he looked away. *What the . . . ? Did he just wink at me?*

She was so wrapped up in trying to decipher the meaning of that (finally deciding that it was probably just a nervous twitch or some such), she almost missed it when Dumbledore resumed speaking.

“There have been some changes to the teaching staff again this year,” he said, growing somber. “It is my sad duty to inform you all that Professor Slughorn will not be returning. I’m afraid he has shifted his allegiance to one he believes will provide him greater influence in the future.”

There were whispers and soft gasps as students figured out what he meant, along with some barely-stifled laughs from the Slytherin table. Finally, someone shouted out, “You mean he’s a Death Eater?”

Dumbledore inclined his head slightly. “He has made his choice.”

“That figures,” Neville whispered to Hermione. “With all that Slug Club business, it was only a matter of time.”

At nearly the same moment, Ron muttered, “Since when has being a Death Eater ever stopped anyone from teaching here before?”

Hermione only half listened to them. She was looking over to see Snape’s reaction to this news. Unsurprisingly, he had none. *Probably already knew*, she reasoned.

Dumbledore continued as the whispers died down. “Therefore, as no other qualified Potions master could be found on short notice, Professor Snape has agreed to reassume that post for this year.”

Neville muttered something about being glad he wasn’t still taking Potions, and Ron whispered, “He can’t be happy about that. Oh, he’s going to be hell now, isn’t he?”

To everyone’s surprise, Snape did not glare at Dumbledore or in some other way express his loathing for this development. Instead, he stood and prepared to make a speech.

“Thank you, Headmaster,” he said, his voice almost genteel. “It was kind of you to allow me my previous position. I must admit, I found teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts just a shade beyond my abilities. I am certain your new appointment will do a far better job at it than I.”

Stunned silence met this proclamation, and even Dumbledore’s brow furrowed.

“That is not Snape,” said Ron, his eyes as wide as just about everyone else’s in the room. “What do you think? Polyjuice?”

A smile tugged at the corners of Hermione’s mouth. “Nothing so insidious, I think,” she answered. She recognized that mischievous glint she saw in Snape, even if she was used to it coming from different eyes.

Just then the doors burst open and in marched . . . Snape, all billowy and irate. All eyes were on him, then going back and forth from Snape to Snape, so few noticed Remus Lupin taking a more casual stroll in behind him.

“I’ve fetched your werewolf as requested, Headmaster,” Snape barked, “though I fail to see why it was necessary to—”
He stopped short in the middle of the room (very near where Hermione happened to be sitting) as his eyes caught sight of the other Snape standing at the High Table. As fury filled his eyes and he looked around as if for some explanation, the other Snape descended toward him, then brushed briskly past him. With an utterly un-Snape-ish smile, he walked right up to a very startled and confused Lupin, grabbed him by the robes, and kissed him full on the mouth.

The room erupted. Laughter, gasps, sounds of utter disgust, and assorted other reactions emanated from every student and most of the teachers. A couple of daring Ravenclaw girls let out a salacious, “Woo!” Lupin had gone stiff as a board, too stunned to react or attempt escape. As every eye was on them, the Snape kissing Lupin slowly shifted form—first growing a tad shorter, the facial features changing, then the body slimming in some places and filling out in others, and finally the hair shortened dramatically and changed from black to bubblegum pink.

This development prompted even more gasps and a few catcalls, but soon cast the room into a shocked silence. Every student was on the edge of their seat, eager to see what happened next.

The young woman finally broke the kiss, and Lupin blushed furiously and said, “Now, that was uncalled for.”

She grinned at him, took his hand, and led him back toward the High Table. As she passed Snape, she said to him in a low voice, “That was for the Patronus remark last year.”

The students and even some of the staff laughed as the couple took seats at the table and the real Snape was left standing in the room, too furious to form words. He looked like he very deeply desired to Avada Kedavra every person in the room. The laughter stopped abruptly as he met as many pairs of eyes as he could, glaring each one into submission.

Hermione didn’t require his icy black scowl to stop laughing. She had laughed at first, of course, but once she saw the humiliation this was shoveling upon him, her smile faded. Everyone loved to see him in pain, and the students (even many of the Slytherins) were simply eating up the chance to see their teacher served what he so often, and so willfully, dished out. But most of them didn’t know what she did, and as she looked to the staff table, she understood why Dumbledore and McGonagall were watching with disapproval. She had learned from Lupin himself about the way Sirius and James had treated Snape, which was probably the reason Lupin was only mildly grinning at the joke (well, that and the fact that it had been a bit on him, as well, if even in good humor).

When Snape’s eyes finally met hers, she was glad that if that piercing, burning gaze was looking for enjoyment at seeing him humiliated, all it found was concern and empathy. But who knew how he would interpret even that.

Very soon, the room was silent again. At last, Snape leveled his homicidal glare at Dumbledore, betrayal etched in the harsh lines of his face.

“Sev—” Dumbledore began, but before he could even finish the word, Snape turned and stalked out of the Great Hall as quickly as his long legs would take him, slamming the doors behind him.

There was a final moment of silence as the weight of Snape’s fury lingered. Then everyone collectively decided to forget about it for the time being and continue with the meal.

Dumbledore cast a we’ll talk about this later look to Tonks before he regained the room’s attention and declared, “I would like to introduce to you your new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Nymphadora Tonks.”
The cheering that greeted this announcement was unprecedented in Hogwarts history (or at least as far as any of the students could remember). If there was one way to ingratiate herself to the students before the first class even began, Tonks had certainly found it. Of course, being the youngest teacher in a while, she still knew enough about how teenagers thought—and about being Snape’s student—to anticipate such a reaction.

She stood and took a cheerful, exaggerated bow and waited until the noise died down a bit before speaking. “Thank you all, and thank you, Headmaster. I’m happy to be back. Of course, technically, my name’s Lupin now, but everyone calls me Tonks anyway. Besides, going by Professor Lupin might be confusing.” There was some laughter and more cheering from the older students at that, and Tonks looked at her husband and said, “You were right. They did like you,” to which there were a few hearty hear hears from the Gryffindors and a smattering of boos from the Slytherins.

Tonks made a few more brief statements, explaining how she was taking a break from being an Auror and assuring everyone that, though his duties wouldn’t allow him to be around all the time, Lupin would not be a stranger to the school.

The excitement died down and all the announcements were finished. The feast was wonderful, as usual, and there was a lively buzz about the crowd as the students filed from the Great Hall toward their common rooms. More than one student (including Ron) could be heard making comments to the tune of, “Best start-of-term banquet ever!”

#

As the term began and classes resumed, Hermione took comfort in looking forward to the rhythm of everyday life at Hogwarts. She scheduled her classes, her homework time, meals, free time, and anything else she could reasonably plan for. There was a sort of sanctuary in knowing just what to expect every day. Unfortunately, something unexpected always came up. But even that she had learned to plan for, having spent six years around The Boy Who Lived.

Even so, she found it difficult at first to adapt to the new attention she was getting from most of the students. They feared her, clearly, and the Slytherins hated her, for what she had done to Draco. Few thought she’d had it in her. She could only hope they would forgive her at some point—not that it was something she thought she needed forgiveness for. As Dumbledore had told her, it’s not like she could have known what Draco would or wouldn’t have done, and it had been an accident.

At least when she went back to Gryffindor Tower she could find some solace. Her fellow House members, on the whole, believed the story about how she had killed Draco to save a severely weakened Dumbledore.

Her roommates, Lavender and Parvati, had innumerable questions about what had happened, of course. She regurgitated the party line about Dumbledore having been poisoned by Draco (which did somewhat harm Dumbledore’s image, but it was better than explaining about the Horcrux-protecting potion—and Draco had tried to poison him earlier last year anyway) and Hermione saving him at the last moment, and the truth about Draco’s death being an accident. They didn’t seem entirely satisfied, but once they knew she wasn’t going to say any more, they moved on to newer, more interesting topics.

But Hermione was dreading the first Potions class even more than everyone else.

It came on the first Monday back. The class had been cut in half since last year. Before, there had been a scant dozen of them; now, only six. Harry had left school, of course. Two of the Ravenclaws were among those whose parents hadn’t allowed to return. Nott had not come back, either—the
general assumption was that he’d taken a place among the Death Eaters with his father. Ernie Macmillan’s family had decided to take a long holiday to South America (which they’d insisted had nothing at all to do with the battle or Voldemort’s return, not that anyone believed them). And then there was Draco . . .

Only herself, Ron, Pansy Parkinson, Blaise Zabini, Michael Corner, and Terry Boot were left.

She sat next to Ron at the table they now had all to themselves. The pairs of Slytherins and Ravenclaws also had a table each.

There were audible hisses and growls coming from Pansy and Blaise, and Hermione could practically feel the heat of their hatred. She glanced at them uncertainly.

“Shove off, you two,” Ron barked at them. “Or would you like a little of what Malfoy got?”

“Ron!” Hermione whispered as Pansy and Blaise quieted down.

“Sorry, Hermione,” he mumbled. “But the only reason they’re not outright hexing you is because they think you might do it.”

“I wouldn’t—” she protested.

“Of course not,” he said, “but they’re Slytherins.” Hermione got his meaning. They would, so they figure why wouldn’t anyone else?

Feeling they both needed to change the subject, Ron suddenly said, “I overheard Dumbledore talking to Tonks. Sounded like she was in it deep for what she did to Snape.”

“Professor Snape, Ron,” Hermione corrected without thinking. Only once it was out of her mouth did it suddenly feel so odd. She didn’t know why, or what, but there was something else in her motivation for saying it this time. Paradoxically, there was also a strange new feeling of hesitation in the correction. It was the first since last term.

Ron didn’t notice any evidence of her thoughts on her face, and let the comment pass with just an eye roll. “Anyway, Dumbledore wasn’t happy. Said something about how cruel a joke it was. Sometimes I wonder if Dumbledore even notices how the git treats everyone else.”

Just then, the doors burst open and Snape marched in and strode to the front of the room in all his scowling glory. The students were immediately silent, and a few of them sunk lower in their seats.

When he turned to face them, he looked even crueler than normal. The scowl was set deeper, the lips pursed tighter, the back even straighter (if that was possible). No one had any doubt he had not even begun to forget the incident in the Great Hall. His eyes met each of theirs and, one by one, they cowed. Some took longer than others, but none wished to face his wrath if they gave him cause to so much as think they were going to cause problems. His eyes, when they met Hermione’s, were no softer than they had been for anyone else. Nor were they any harder.

Without preamble, he ordered, “Turn to page four-hundred-and-seventy-six.” It sounded like a threat.

The students did so quickly and with as little page shuffling as possible.

“You will brew this potion,” he stated. “You will not talk amongst yourselves. You will not be disruptive. You will work quickly, quietly, and with the utmost care.” He took a seat behind his desk at the front before looking up to realize none of them had moved. “Begin,” he commanded,
then took a quill and bent his head to write.

There was a moment’s pause before Hermione, deciding it best to do as he said, made her way to the ingredients cupboard. Michael Corner followed her after a few seconds, then the other students joined them. Once they all had returned to their seats with the required ingredients, Hermione started working right away. All the other students, however, simply looked around, puzzled. They looked up at Snape with fearful expectancy. When it became clear he was finished with them for the time being, some tried to begin chopping the lotus root into the required strips.

Pansy, however, just couldn’t help herself. Emboldened by virtue of being one of Snape’s own, she said, “But we can’t make this.”

Snape’s eyes rose to her slowly. “Ten points from Slytherin, Miss Parkinson.”

The room froze. All eyes went wide with fear. Snape taking points from his own House for such a minor offense as speaking out of turn meant only one thing: Snape was in a royally bad mood. Of course, that’s nothing they hadn’t already expected.

Surprisingly, it was a Ravenclaw that finally broke the silence. “She’s right,” said Terry Boot. “It’s almost the last potion in the book. We shouldn’t be studying this potion until the end of the year.”

“Twenty points from Ravenclaw, Mr. Boot,” Snape responded, and no one was surprised that he took more points from a non-Slytherin for the same offense. He looked around the room before continuing. “Am I to understand that the entire seventh year believes this potion to be beyond their capabilities?” Everyone but Hermione nodded tentatively. He quirked an eyebrow at her. “It seems only one of you came to class prepared today.”

No one dared challenge him on that, but the fact was that the potion really was far beyond them at the moment. Hermione, however, felt a small rush of satisfaction at his comment. It had almost been, to her, approval.

After a moment’s deliberation, Snape continued. “Perhaps that idiot Slughorn was even lazier than his name implies. Very well. You may turn to page two-hundred-and-seventeen and begin with that potion.” There was disdain in his voice, as if they had deeply disappointed him. They quickly turned to the page and moved to exchange their ingredients for the new ones.

“Miss Granger,” Snape said as she began to get off her stool. “Since you have insisted on insinuating yourself above your classmates, you may continue with the original assignment.”

“But, sir,” Hermione said, as calmly as she could, “I didn’t try to—”

“Thirty points from Gryffindor, Miss Granger,” he snapped. “I do not recall asking for a rebuttal.”

Hermione flushed with resentment. “I only did what you told us to.”

Snape stood, the irritation in his eyes quickly turning to anger. “Silence! You will do the assignment, Miss Granger, and you will do it perfectly. In addition, you will write a three-foot essay on the use and dangers of said potion, due at the next class.” He sat, then, as if as an afterthought, he added, “That little outburst just earned you a detention. Be here tonight at six o’clock. There are still some cauldrons from last year that did not get a proper scrubbing.”

Hermione tried not to notice the muffled giggling coming from Pansy. She forced herself to remain quiet and even had to put a hand on Ron’s arm to stop him from coming to her defense. For the rest of the period, she sat, fuming, as she brewed the potion. At the end of class, she handed it in along with the others. It was, she knew, perfect. Perhaps if he found it to be so as well, he wouldn’t keep
her too long in detention.
Hermione opened the door to the Potions classroom at six o’clock exactly.

“You’re late,” came Snape’s voice from his desk at the front of the room.

She fought back a retort and closed the door.

“You may begin with the cauldrons on that table, and do not disturb me,” he said loudly as she put her bag down. She barely registered the flick of his wand aimed at the door as she looked around.

“Sir, there are no cauldrons,” she said, confused.

“Of course not,” he said in a quieter tone, looking up at her from his desk.

Her eyebrows shot up. “You mean this isn’t a real detention? You just staged it so you could get me here without anyone wondering why?”

Snape looked back down at whatever he had been working on and continued. If Hermione didn’t know better, she’d have thought he was avoiding her eyes. “I trust the Headmaster relayed the purpose of my disappearance,” he said.

Hermione sat at a stool in the front row. She had wondered if they would discuss their arrangement any further. Now that it seemed they were, she wasn’t sure she really wanted to. “Yes.” When a few seconds passed without a response, she added, “Thank you.”

He looked up at her. “It was for my benefit more than yours,” he sneered.

Her stomach turned in anger and resentment at the look. It was as if he really was trying to make the whole situation as unbearable as possible. Forcing herself to retain a respectful tone, she asked, “Professor Snape, why, specifically, have you asked me here tonight?”

“Only to ensure you understand that while we may have been granted a temporary reprieve from our . . .” his voice caught, but after a moment, he ground out, “marriage . . . there are still certain obligations we must attend to if we wish to keep our wands.”

Hermione shifted in her seat and immediately regretted it. The friction against her lower regions combined with the meaning behind Snape’s words to make her awkwardly aware of what had happened the last time they’d been in a room alone together.

“I know, sir,” she finally managed.

He gazed at her intently, reading her face. Hermione wondered if he was using Legilimency on her, so she looked down at the table before her.

A thought crossed her mind, one which caused a rush of adrenaline to course through her. Does he mean now? Her head whipped around to look at the closed door and she wondered just what sorts of wards he’d put up. She looked back at Snape with an expression not unlike a deer caught in headlights.

Snape sneered again. “Not now, Miss Granger.”
She allowed her pulse to ease and released a breath. “When?” she asked in almost a whisper.

“I will inform you,” was his terse reply.

“How—” she began again, and stopped. “That is, am I to understand that you’ve talked them down from . . . every da—”

“I’ve convinced the—Minister Scrimgeour,” the name dripped from his mouth like venom, “that once a week will be sufficient.”

Hermione felt another wave of relief. Once a week was certainly an improvement over every day.

There was another moment of silence before Hermione asked, “Is that all, then, Professor?”

“If I have impressed upon you the reality of this situation,” he said, “then yes. However, I cannot allow you to leave.”

“Sir?”

“You are expected to be scrubbing cauldrons,” he reminded her. “Either I could go find some for you to scrub, or, if you wish, you may use the time to study. So long as you do not disturb me.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, obediently getting a book from her bag and letting out another relieved breath. Not only would she not have to . . . well, she didn’t care to think about what she was glad she wasn’t doing, but she wouldn’t have to serve a detention, either. Not really. And if she kept her eyes in her book, she could almost pretend Snape wasn’t in the room.

After a few hours, she put down the last of her books and looked at Snape. He was still marking papers. He was so intent; his greasy nose almost touched the papers. A sudden image flashed through her mind of herself as a small child, just learning to write, concentrating so hard on getting the letters just right that the ends of her pigtails spilled across the page. One corner of her mouth quirked up at the memory and the comparison forced an involuntary sound from her throat. She was afraid it had sounded too much like a laugh when he glared at her from under his dark eyebrows, so she tried to cover.

“Have I been here long enough, sir?”

He merely grunted, waved his wand toward the door, and went back to work.

She took that as a dismissal, quickly gathered her things and left.

#

The next day, during her free period, Hermione went to the library to research the paper Snape had assigned her. The name of the potion wasn’t much help: Wentworth’s Brew, after its (evidently rather egocentric) creator, Percival Wentworth. The entry in her textbook said only that it was used to treat brain tumors.

After spending a good half-hour in the library, Hermione found what she was looking for in a text called Modern Medical Potions.

Well, Hermione thought, I suppose for wizards, the 1700s is modern.

The potion was indeed used to treat brain tumors, and quite successfully. She felt a surge of anger at the wizarding world in general that it had a cure for such a thing that it just didn’t feel like
Wentworth’s Brew has a number of potential side effects. Phantom voices, nightmares, and other ailments of the mind have been reported, though in no cases have these been deemed dangerous or life-threatening, and most sufferers have considered it well worth the cost of these annoyances to be saved from a slow, painful death by tumor. However, Wentworth’s Brew must never be taken by anyone who does not have at least one confirmed brain tumor, as in such cases the potion will reverse itself and cause a tumor, which will then be untreatable by the same potion. As there are no other potions known to cure this affliction, the person in question will likely die.

Some healthy people have still taken the potion, despite the fatal consequences, because of a unique and as yet not understood side effect of the potion which occurs when a person either sires a child (in the case of men) or becomes pregnant (in the case of women) within three days of taking the potion. The child, should it survive (and assuming, if the mother was the one to take the potion, that she lives long enough to carry it to term), will be born with all the knowledge that whichever parent who imbibed the potion possessed at the time of conception.

There have been three known instances of this occurring. The first was the famed arithmancer Seamus McDuffie, whose mother barely survived long enough to give birth to him. The second was the great astronomer Selma Frederickson, whose father died three months before her birth. The last was Malcolm Morris, who was known for precise attention to technical detail in his romance novels about a potioneer and his apprentice. In all cases, the offspring never married nor had children, so the effect on subsequent generations is unknown.

Hermione made her notes and put the book back on the shelf. As she wrote out the essay, a thought crept into her mind. I wonder why he assigned that potion in particular. Could it have any significance, or was it just as random as any other potion he’d ever assigned them? The more she let the thought stew in her mind, the more she felt she had to know. Was he planning something? Did he know something she didn’t? He couldn’t possibly be thinking anything along the lines of what she was, given the extreme effects of using the potion incorrectly. Yet her mind wouldn’t let it go.

She reached the Potions classroom a few minutes early on Friday. Snape was, as she had hoped, sitting hunched at his desk at the front of the room, going over some scrolls. She set her bag by her stool and quietly walked to the front, parchment in hand.

“Professor,” she said softly, her tone utterly respectful. He looked at her, and she held out the scroll.

He took it, tossed it on one side of the desk, and continued what he was doing. When she didn’t move, he looked at her again, impatient. “Was there something else, Miss Granger?”

“I was just wondering, sir,” she said, not quite looking him in the eyes, “if there was a particular reason you assigned me that potion to research.”

His eyes narrowed, went to the scroll, then back to hers. His lip curled in amusement. It was not a pleasant sight, and she immediately felt foolish for asking. “You forget, Miss Granger. I am not a
“Mortified at the condescension in his voice and at her own ridiculousness in even approaching him about it, she slunk to her seat. He had understood her perfectly, as she had understood him. If any of the other students that were now making their way in had overheard any of the interchange, they would have no idea that Snape had just made it perfectly clear to his wife that no, he was not about to even consider giving up his life to give any potential child of theirs an overwhelming advantage, and that she was a silly little girl for thinking he might. And, for that matter, for thinking that he made any consideration for their potential offspring at all.

She kept her head down and did what she was told for the rest of the class, and so managed to avoid any scathing remarks, for the most part. While they were all quietly working on the day’s potion, she stole a few peeks over at Snape, just enough to see that he seemed to be reading her paper. His face was unreadable, as usual, but she hoped his reaction to her question would not color his view of the essay.

The class was packing up to leave when Snape swept across the room and dropped Hermione’s scroll on the table in front of her. “Did someone steal your brain over the summer, Miss Granger?” he asked in what could be mistaken as a conversational tone.

She stared up at him in confusion. When she saw the superior look he was giving her, her eyes flashed. “No, sir,” she said softly but not even trying to keep the bitterness from her voice. “Not my brain.”

Snape’s eyes widened for the briefest moment, then narrowed and hardened. “This essay is pitiful, Miss Granger. You will come to my office at seven o’clock tonight to explain to me why I should allow you to remain in this class if you cannot manage such a simple task without bungling it so atrociously.”

Red from anger and shame, Hermione shoved the scroll into her bag, keeping her head low as she left lest anyone notice the tears forming in her eyes.

Ron tried to stop her, to calm her, but she wouldn’t speak to him. Instead, she hurried to her room and dropped on her bed. Thankful that her roommates were not present, she let out a howl of frustration.

#

It wasn’t until after her other classes that she finally pulled the scroll from her bag. Meaning only to set it aside for the time being, she couldn’t help but look to find out what horrible remarks he must have made on it.

It was with great shock that she discovered the E scrawled in red ink at the top. The way he’d talked, she’d expected a P or even a D. Yet there it was. Exceeds Expectations. She scanned the scroll. He had made a few minor corrections, but nothing to indicate he thought her an imbecile. Then why did he . . .

_I will inform you_, he had said.

Her stomach lurched.

#

She went to dinner with very little appetite. Ron and Neville tried to console her, thinking she was still upset about what Snape had said regarding her academic abilities, and she tried to act as if
what they said made her feel better, but she knew that nothing would.

As the owls swooped down with the evening mail, one that looked like the school’s own flew past and dropped a small package onto her plate. After first ensuring that no one was looking, she put the package into her lap to open it. Within the simple brown paper she found a small vial of potion. She grimaced with recognition, then read the note that came with it. Written in an all-too-familiar spidery scrawl were the words, *Do not be late.*

She glanced subtly up at the High Table and caught her Potions master looking at her out of the corner of his eye. As their eyes met, he immediately looked back at his plate.

She stuffed the package in her robes, her insides fluttering unpleasantly with grim anticipation. On the heels of that, however, came irritation. *How dare he talk to me like that? ‘Don’t be late’ indeed. Does he think I’m some sort of slave or prostitute or . . .*

But perhaps it wasn’t just his schedule he was worried about. Assuming he would take the potion in preparation, as well . . . She had heard that once a man was aroused, going too long without doing something about it could become quite uncomfortable. *Oh, dear. That was not* something she wanted to think about.

#

Hermione hesitated before knocking on the door, but, after a moment of self-indulgent fear, did it anyway. After his sharp command—“Enter!”—she pushed the door open and went in.

The office was just as it always was: dim, cluttered and slightly foreboding. Snape was sitting at his desk, marking papers. He didn’t even bother to look up at her.

“Shut the door.”

She did so as quietly as she could, afraid of drawing any outside attention to the room.

He waved his wand at the door: more wards, Hermione assumed. “Did you receive the potion?” he asked as he marked a scroll with red ink.

“Yes, sir.”

“And?”

When she didn’t answer immediately, he glanced up at her with cold eyes. She dropped her gaze to the floor in embarrassment and nodded once.

“Sir?” she asked, once he had resumed marking the scroll. “Where will we be going?”

He waited until he had finished with the current scroll and scribbled a *P* at the top.

“Bend over,” he said simply as he added the scroll to a pile.

Hermione gaped at him. “Excuse me?”

He glared at her, and her mouth snapped shut. “Bend over and put your hands on the desk,” he snarled.

“Professor!” she gasped, scandalized. “You mean you want to do it here?”

He stood so quickly that his chair fell back. He planted his hands on his desk and leaned heavily
across it, glowering fiercely. “Never insinuate that I want to do this at all,” he hissed. “The sooner we get this reprehensible business over with, the sooner both of us can pretend it never happened.”

“Yes, but—”

“How would it look for anyone to see you leaving my private quarters? Or would you rather we do it in your dormitory, where we’d have, I’m certain, a very attentive audience?”

She gulped, realizing he was right. She still hated it, though, and evidently hesitated too long, because she heard his low growl creep over the desk to her.

“Do not make me tell you again.”

She slid her bag from her shoulder to the floor and walked up until she was standing before his desk. She briefly entertained the notion of asking him to clear it so they could at least have a firm surface to . . . But no. It was far too cluttered.

“Remove your knickers,” he commanded as he straightened.

Once he was standing upright, Hermione couldn’t help but notice through the trouser-revealing gap in the front of his robes that he had obviously already taken his potion. Her eyes widened, and she looked down at the desk. He’d apparently noticed her look, because a disapproving growl escaped his throat. Though it could also have been because she was taking so long to comply.

“I’m not wearing any,” she muttered.

Snape arched an eyebrow and nodded, and Hermione felt a trace amount of his anger ebb away. Yes, she had come prepared.

Her heart leapt into her throat as he moved around the desk, and she felt her pulse racing as adrenaline coursed through her. She kept her eyes on the desk as he moved behind her, feeling suddenly very claustrophobic. Her head swam as she caught a whiff of that scent she remembered all too well from the last time. Just relax, she told herself. It’ll be over soon.

Snape was standing behind her now. No, she corrected. Not standing. Looming. He cleared his throat. She took a deep breath and leaned over to rest her hands on his desk, hating every moment of it, and suddenly quite aware of the humiliating vulnerability of this position. She couldn’t even see him, couldn’t see it coming. But that also meant she wouldn’t have to look into his eyes, wouldn’t have to see the strange contortions his face made as he found himself enjoying what he didn’t even want to do, wouldn’t have to see the revulsion he felt after he’d finished. And suddenly she understood the real reason they were doing it here, like this . . . and she was actually a bit glad for it.

She took her position, and he adjusted her clothes without touching her. Not even a brush of his fingers against her thighs. Thank God, she thought. She was sure if she’d felt such a touch, she would shiver, flinch, do something to enrage him by making it very clear how her skin reacted to his. But now the cool dungeon air was against her backside, and she bit her lower lip in terrified expectation.

Relax. Relax, she chanted in her head. It’s all right. Nothing you haven’t—

A strong hand seized her around the waist, through the layers of bunched fabric. She bit back a cry and her whole body tensed.

Snape made a sound of disgust behind her and muttered, “Purely for leverage, I assure you.”
Well, of course, she realized. If he’d actually wanted to touch her, he would have grabbed onto the exposed skin of her hips. So, he still found her revolting. Was that comforting?

What a strange sensation, though, his hand on her body. Not that a man had never put a hand to her waist before, but always in a gentle way, and never from that particular angle.

She felt something that made her jump, unable to control herself.

Snape’s grip on her waist tightened. “Damn it, girl! Hold still!” he hissed, and she tried to comply. 

Calm down, she told herself. This has to happen. You knew it when you came here, and long before that.

His other hand grasped her waist, trapping her in a firm, inescapable hold.

He went faster this time. No pausing, no waiting for her to adapt. He seemed to be in a hurry about it, sticking to his word about getting it over with as soon as possible. Once a rhythm was established, Hermione tried to zone out as she had last time. She forced her body to relax, but all that tension settled in her clenching jaw, and in the fingers that dug their nails into the desk before her.

Snape’s speed increased, and she could hear his breathing get ragged. His fingers gripped her more tightly, nearly digging into her sides. She winced at the pain, but said nothing so as not to distract him from his purpose. If he was getting like this, that probably meant he’d be done soon. She felt the semi-familiar panic spread through her as she recognized his loss of control. Yes, here he was again. The Man. As cruel and unlikable as the Teacher was, she’d take him any day over this unpredictable, insatiable creature that currently had her in its grasp. He was more vocal than before. He sounded like an animal, though she doubted he was aware of it.

Suddenly, as his movements grew erratic, she had a thought. No one else has ever seen this side of him. And strangely, inexplicably, she smiled. As much as she didn’t want to be here, she had to admit that it did afford her the opportunity to witness something that no other person ever had. For someone who loved knowledge as much as Hermione did, the certainty that she knew something no one else in the world did was exhilarating. Sure, it may not have been something especially important or useful, like a rare spell or charm, but it was something. It was knowledge in the biblical sense, but it was still knowledge. And she had it all to herself. As much as it terrified her to witness, she knew something of Professor Snape that not even Voldemort or Dumbledore knew, and she found some power in that.

He finished, and she remained still as his breathing slowed, his hands still resting on her waist, waiting for the moment when he came back to his senses. It didn’t take long.

His hands released her like she was red-hot. She heard him take a step back and she stood, brushing her skirt and robe back down, waiting to turn until she was satisfied he’d sorted his own clothes. Not a word was spoken between them. He went back to his desk, righted his chair, sat, and picked up his quill. Aside from the light sweat on his flushed face, he looked exactly as he had when she’d entered. Quickly, quietly, she picked up her bag and left.

Hermione stared at the stones in the floor all the way back to the Gryffindor common room, immensely glad she didn’t pass anyone who wanted to chat.

She felt dirty, as if everyone she passed could see what she’d just done. She knew she shouldn’t
feel that way. She told herself they were married, so it was all right, and besides, she hadn’t wanted to. A Muggle term floated, undesired, into her consciousness.

Booty call.

She stopped mid-stride. *I just gave Professor Snape a booty call.* She shook her head and continued on, idly wondering if that was the correct grammatical use of the phrase.

Thankful that the Fat Lady didn’t give her any trouble or quip at her, Hermione stepped into the common room, hoping to find it empty. Unfortunately for her, it was still too early for that.

She strode quickly through, avoiding eye contact, hoping to get to her room unnoticed.

“Hermione,” Ron called from a seat by the fire. “Over here.”

She stopped and turned to him but didn’t approach.

Ron frowned. “How was he?”

Her heart jumped. “What?”

“He’s just talking about the paper. Now stop gawking at him before you give yourself away.”

Hermione opened her mouth once, then closed it, trying to think of something to say. Did he know? *That’s ridiculous,* she told herself. *He’s just talking about the paper. Now stop gawking at him before you give yourself away.*

She schooled her face into nonchalance. “Nothing unexpected,” she answered. *Well, that’s mostly true.* Ron opened his mouth to speak again, so she quickly added, “I really just need to get some studying done, then go to bed. Goodnight, Ron.”

She hurried up the stairs before Ron could reply.

Parvati and Lavender were already getting ready for bed when she entered the room they all shared. They stopped their chattering and Parvati gave her a concerned look.

“You all right?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Hermione answered, dropping her bag by her bed. “Just a bit . . .” *Sore,* she was going to say, but instead went with, “. . . tired.”

“What a git,” Lavender added as she put away some of her laundry. “Riding you like that. He’ll probably be doing it all year.”

Hermione’s head snapped toward her, panic evident in her eyes. “What?”

“We heard about the paper,” Lavender explained, not noticing Hermione’s strange reaction. “Everyone knows you’re the best student in the class. But he’ll be doubly hard on you now. He’ll be looking for any excuse to give you grief.”

“Why do you say that?” Hermione asked, recovering from her surprise and trying to disguise her reactions.

Parvati looked at her like she was daft. “You did kill his favorite student. And Snape’s not exactly the type of person to let that slide, accident or no.” Hermione relaxed as she continued. “Even if the little ferret did deserve it.”
Hermione just nodded dumbly, grateful that her secret hadn’t got out and wondering if there had always been such obvious innuendo in everyday speech and she just never noticed it before. Several minutes later, she stood in the shower, trying to wipe all trace of the disgusting encounter from her body. Parvati’s words came back to her as she washed her hair. What if that was the real reason he’d been treating her so poorly? He had always favored Draco. Of course he wouldn’t look kindly on his killer, no matter what the circumstances of the death had been. As she thought on it, she wondered that she had never considered that explanation before.
Hermione woke up once again feeling sore in places she didn’t think a person should feel sore. She moaned as the light coming through her bed curtains contracted her irises and threw her arm in front of her eyes to stop the intrusion.

“Better hurry, Hermione,” Lavender informed her. “You don’t want to be late for our first Hogsmeade weekend, right? If you don’t get up soon, you’ll miss breakfast.” Light flooded the bed as the curtain was thrown back, replaced by Lavender’s concerned face. “You sure you’re all right?”

“Fine, fine,” Hermione mumbled, sitting up. As much as she didn’t want to admit it, she couldn’t hide in bed all day. Her pajama bottoms and tank top rode up as she slid out of bed.

“Merlin’s balls, Hermione! You don’t look fine,” Lavender said after the split second it took Hermione to push her shirt back down once she’d stood up. Lavender was staring at her waist, and as she smoothed her tank top down, Hermione noticed her sides were incredibly tender.

“I’ll be fine,” she hurried to say. “I just ran into a low bookcase in the library.”

Lavender gave her a too-knowing look. “Frisky bookcase,” she said. Before Hermione could stammer some better excuse, Lavender added, “There’s a fine line between passion and abuse, Hermione.” Lavender seemed to run out of give-a-crap then, because she tossed her hair and strode out, leaving Hermione alone.

Hermione gaped after her, trying to think of something to say. Would Lavender spread it around that Hermione was having sex with someone? She was already the school killer; she didn’t much fancy adding ‘school whore’ to her reputation. Then again, Lavender was hardly a bastion of purity herself. Maybe she didn’t really even care about Hermione’s sex life (such as it was). With a sigh, Hermione decided to deal with that issue when it became an issue. She had enough problems on her hands already.

Hermione locked the door and went to the full-length mirror she shared with the other girls. Tentatively, she lifted her shirt to just under her breasts. She couldn’t stifle the gasp that escaped her at the sight of deep purple and green bruises covering both sides of her waist. As lightly as possible, she traced the bruises on her right side with her fingertips. They weren’t quite clear handprints, but they were close enough that anyone who got a good look would be able to tell—like Lavender had. There were four long, thin marks wrapping around her stomach from either side. She turned to see two smaller, corresponding bruises marring her back, as well as less distinct spots where Snape’s palms had been.

Turning from the mirror, Hermione pulled off her sleepwear and hastened to get dressed. She made a mental note to be especially careful about not dressing in front of anyone or in any way risking anyone seeing those marks before they could heal.

#

On her way to breakfast, she tried to cheer herself that this was not only a lovely Saturday, but, as Lavender had said, the first Hogsmeade weekend of the year. It had come significantly earlier than usual this year. Dumbledore had decided it might be best instead of waiting until the days got
shorter and the students would either have less time or be out after dark. In a world with Death Eaters at seemingly every turn, sending a large group of children out at night was hardly advisable.

When she reached the Great Hall, she saw Ron already tucking into his breakfast. As she approached, Lavender noticed her, gave Ron a disapproving frown and shook her head as Hermione sat beside him. Ron remained oblivious, but Hermione started loading her plate with French toast and peaches, embarrassed at Lavender’s assumption but relieved that she’d apparently satisfied herself with the obvious conclusion.

“How are you feeling, Hermione?” Ron asked once she’d got her mouth full. “Better than last night?”

Hermione couldn’t help glancing at Lavender, who just rolled her eyes, then shrugged and finished chewing. “I was just tired. I’m all right now.” She gave him a reassuring smile, and he looked a bit more at ease. It was not to last long.

Only a few minutes later, the owls began arriving with the morning mail. A large barn owl alighted in front of her with a copy of the Daily Prophet. She dug around for a Knut and handed it to the owl, but before she could open the paper, another owl dropped a small scroll on her plate. She frowned and wiped syrup off the parchment before opening it.

_Miss Granger,_

_We apologise for the short notice, but we would like to inform you that we have set your next appointment with Healer Partridge today at eleven a.m. Please inform us by return owl immediately if this time will not work for you._

_L. Watson_

_Scheduling_

_St. Mungo’s_

_So much for Hogsmeade, _she thought ruefully. She stuffed the scroll in her robe and reached for the Prophet. Her hand stopped when she heard a small crash come from the High Table. She looked up to see Snape hastily righting his goblet with one hand while his eyes never left his own copy of the paper held in the other. Just as she registered what must have happened, he looked directly at her. A sudden panic rose in her at the look in his eyes. It was subtle, and he looked back at the paper so quickly she wasn’t certain she’d even seen it, but it seemed as if Snape had seen something in the paper that caused him to try to disembowel her with his eyes._

She reached for her copy and flung the paper open. Her jaw dropped. At the bottom of the front page, under an article about the death of some Quidditch player or other, was the headline that hit Hermione like ice water.

FIRST MARRIAGE LAW CHILD CONCEIVED
by Rita Skeeter

LONDON — Mere months after our great Minister for Magic, Rufus Scrimgeour, first declared his intention to improve wizarding bloodlines and replenish the stock of great wizards that has been diminished by the war with You-Know-Who, the first child to be born from one of these idealised parentages has already been conceived. Though the identities of the proud parents will remain undisclosed for the time being, suffice it to say that the father of this future wonder-child is a prominent wizard in his field, possessed of a brilliant mind, and highly respected by his peers. The mother is an incredibly talented young witch who is herself only beginning to fulfill the very great potential she has in a vast array of fields. This is a very promising start to the Minister’s program, and it should not be long before the other couples involved make their own contributions.

Gasps of astonishment sounded throughout the room. “What is it?” Ron asked, noticing Hermione’s focus. She just looked at him, trying to think of what to say, whether she should show him or not. Before she could decide, he snatched the paper from her. His eyes popped when he looked at it.

“Finbar Quigley? Captain of the Ballycastle Bats? No! How did it happen?”

Hermione couldn’t even summon the will to roll her eyes at his cluelessness. She needed to get away, to be alone with her thoughts. Leaving the paper to Ron, she left the table.

He barely noticed in time to call to her. “Where are you going?”

She kept moving as she said over her shoulder, “I’m not going to Hogsmeade. I’ve got to study.” Hoping he would just accept that, she all but ran to the library.

Fortunately, the library was completely vacant. The first years likely still didn’t know where it was or were uninterested in investigating it, the second years too excited about returning and not being the youngest to care too much about studying yet, and the rest were largely preparing to leave for Hogsmeade (and, of course, it was a Saturday morning). Even Madam Pince was gone, probably still at breakfast.

She made a bee-line for her usual table near one side and plopped down, her elbows on the table and her hands in her hair.

This can’t be happening, she thought. I can’t be pregnant! Well, I suppose I can, technically, but so soon? No. No, it must be some other young girl. I don’t know who all the other people involved in this scheme are. Probably just some other young, intelligent, highly promising . . . Her head thunked onto the table. It was hopeless.

Her thoughts raced on, running through every possible reason the paper was wrong (It is the Daily Prophet, after all.) or the girl in question was not her. Distracted as she was, she still couldn’t help but notice when a dark figure blew in like a hurricane, slammed the door shut, and glared at her.

Before she could stop herself, she met his eyes. They looked much as they had during the recent joke Tonks had played on him. She feared for her life.

Snape said not a word, but immediately looked in every conceivable nook and cranny in the library, then cast a Silencing Charm and ward on the door. Only after ensuring they were alone did he face her once more.

“Harlot,” he spat.
She just stared at him aghast, unable to decide which of the myriad responses running through her head to give first, until she finally blurted out, “I am not a harlot!”

Snape stormed to the side of the table opposite her and leaned on it so he was staring her down, his nose inches away from hers, his voice deathly quiet, but full of venom.

“Then what would you call yourself? Wench? Tart? Whore? How many others have had you? Weasley, I assume. Maybe even Potter.” His voice got so soft she could barely hear it. “Did they find it funny that you were my first?”

“Excuse me?” His words were like wind whipping her anger into an inferno of righteous fury. “You’re accusing me of being some kind of—of sex fiend? What have I ever done to give you the impression I was even the least bit interested in sex? With anyone?”

“Clearly your passivity was a disguise for your wantonness,” he hissed.

“My wantonness?” she nearly screeched. “If anyone was wanton, Professor, it was you.”

He stood bolt upright at her nerve. “Fifty points for disrespecting a teacher, Miss Granger. How dare you accuse me, after using me in such an underhanded—”

“Using you?” she interrupted. “Let’s remember, sir, which one of us was holding onto the other for dear life while he grunted like a rampaging troll, and which one of us had to take a very hot shower to get the proof of said wantonness off of her before she could go to bed!”

Snape’s face was turning a startlingly bright shade of red, but Hermione couldn’t tell whether it was from anger or embarrassment. Probably some of both, though provoking either in that man was not a particularly intelligent idea.

She couldn’t be certain, but Hermione thought she saw Snape start to reach for his wand before the door was opened and Dumbledore walked in. They both snapped their heads around to look at him, and they might have continued berating each other if not for the fact that Tonks and Lupin came in on Dumbledore’s heels.

Snape forced himself calm much quicker than Hermione was able to. “Headmaster,” he said, respectfully, yet with a hint of annoyance and anger, then tossed Lupin and Tonks an unwelcoming look.

Hermione tried to smile at her friends, but couldn’t quite hide her anger as she did so. Tonks seemed not to notice, but Lupin’s brow furrowed and his eyes darted strangely between Snape and Hermione before going back to Dumbledore.

“Is there a problem, Severus?” asked Dumbledore with a knowing look.

“No, Headmaster,” Snape responded, falling back into his obedient underling persona.

Dumbledore looked at Hermione, who was still flushed from anger. Without shifting his gaze to Snape, he said, “Then why have you taken such an inordinately large number of points from Miss Granger for such a non-existent problem?”

“Albus, she—” Snape caught himself and lowered his voice. “If we could discuss this in private . . .”

“That will not be necessary, Severus,” Dumbledore said, stepping toward Hermione. “I have something I must discuss with Miss Granger.”
Snape looked in a very put-out manner at all the others in the room, then turned in a flurry of robes and aimed for the exit. Before he reached the door, however, Dumbledore added, “You may stay if you wish. Perhaps you could contribute some insight to the discussion.” Snape turned and looked at him. Dumbledore returned the look with an even more commanding one, and inclined his head just slightly. “If you can avoid any unwarranted outbursts,” he added.

Snape just folded his arms, not leaving, but not drawing any closer to the others than he had to. Dumbledore reestablished the wards he’d broken to get in and took a seat at one of the tables. Tonks and Lupin joined them; only Snape remained standing.

“You know what I wish to talk to you about,” Dumbledore said gently.

Hermione nodded. “The article. It’s about me, isn’t it?”

Snape snorted. Giving him a sharp look, Tonks chastised him, “You know just as well as the rest of the Order, Snape, that she’s part of this program, too.” She turned to Hermione. “But it might not be you. It could be me.”

“Rita Skeeter heavily implied it was a student,” said Lupin, putting his hand on Tonks’s.

“So, what does this mean?” Hermione asked.

Rather than answer, Dumbledore asked her, “When is your next appointment set at St. Mungo’s?”

“Today, actually. I got the letter just before I read the *Prophet*,” she answered.

“Then all you can do for the time being is go and find out,” he said.

Hermione nodded, staring at the table. “I assume that means I have permission to leave the grounds, then?”

“Not unaccompanied,” the Headmaster replied.

“Don’t you think I’m old enough to go on my own, Professor?” Hermione asked. She really didn’t want anyone else to witness her humiliation if she could help it.

“It’s not a matter of age, my dear,” he replied. “You might be in some fair degree of danger.”

“More than the last time I went?” she asked.

Dumbledore simply nodded. “I fear that is the case.” Rather than explaining, he looked to Snape.

Snape didn’t respond right away, but looked almost petulant, as if he didn’t want to say something. Grudgingly, he complied. “Narcissa Malfoy has returned from France.”

“What?” said Hermione. “Why didn’t you tell me—” She stopped speaking mid-sentence, looking at Tonks and Lupin.

“You are aware, then, that she wants to kill you,” Dumbledore said.

“She’s not the only one,” Snape muttered to no one in particular. It was impossible to tell whether he meant Narcissa wasn’t the only one who wanted to kill Hermione, or Hermione wasn’t the only one who Narcissa wanted to kill. Although, in typical Slytherin fashion, he seemed to be saying both at the same time.

“So you want to send someone to protect me from her,” Hermione concluded, ignoring Snape’s
remark. Dumbledore nodded. “Professor Tonks?” she said hopefully.

Tonks laughed. “Oh, Hermione, you don’t need to call me ‘Professor’ when we’re not in class. You’re like a little sister to me.”

Hermione nodded and gave her a shy half-smile. It always went against her nature to refer to teachers by anything but their official title. She’d never known someone and then had her become her teacher before.

“Nymphadora is already scheduled to chaperone the other students at Hogsmeade,” Dumbledore said sympathetically. Hermione couldn’t understand why he would sound quite that way until he continued. “Remus has agreed to join her, as Professor McGonagall has pressing matters to attend to elsewhere. The only person both qualified and available to escort you at this time is Professor Snape.”

“Headmaster!” Snape blurted out. “I certainly do have better things to do today than babysit this insolent—”

“Short of a summons from Voldemort,” Dumbledore interrupted his tirade, “there is no more important issue for you to see to at this moment. And do not even consider faking one, Severus.”

Hermione wanted to argue, but she could see Dumbledore had made up his mind. “Then why,” she ventured, looking to Tonks and Lupin, “did you come to talk to me? Did you have more bad news? Is there someone else who wants to kill me?”

Tonks moved closer to Hermione. “We were just worried about you,” she explained.

Lupin sat beside his wife and put an arm around her. “All of the Order is. Your sudden marriage to a mysterious man you refuse to talk about, especially at your age, was a bit shocking for all of us.”

“We can’t imagine how difficult it must be for you,” Tonks continued. “And Albus, Remus and I can’t thank you enough for talking the Ministry into allowing our marriage—” Snape let out a loud snort; Tonks shot him a glare and continued. “But Hermione, we can tell it’s been hard on you. You’ve seemed more distant lately, and with what happened on the tower . . . there’s just so much to deal with at once. You need to talk to someone, and we know you’re probably not talking to Harry and Ginny much, them being gone, and with what happened with Ron, I’d understand if you’re not opening up to him.”

“What we’re saying, Hermione,” Lupin said with a kind smile, “is that we’re here for you. If you need to talk to anyone, especially about any . . . delicate issues that your schoolmates might be inadequately prepared to discuss . . .” A faint blush came to his cheeks. Hermione thought it was adorable, even as she was uncertain how comfortable she was with the offer. Looking past them to Snape, though, she could tell how comfortable he was with their offer.

“He means sex,” Tonks clarified unnecessarily, and Lupin’s blush deepened. “We know that’s pretty much the only part of this so-called marriage you’re actually expected to adhere to. But anything else, too. Whatever you need.”

“Thank you both, really,” Hermione said, trying to smile reassuringly. “That . . . means a lot.” Lupin and Tonks looked like they wanted to say something else, but couldn’t bring themselves to do so. “There’s something else,” she provided for them.

“We don’t want to push, Hermione,” Lupin began.

Tonks took up the line of thought. “But it must be hard not being able to speak freely to anyone
about all this. Except Dumbledore, of course. We know why you’ve kept this from your classmates, and while we don’t understand why you’ve kept it from Harry and Ron . . .”

“You know you can trust us . . .”

“So, if you wanted to tell us more about who you’ve been forced into marrying . . .”

“We’ll understand completely if you don’t, though,” Lupin finished. They looked at her, concern and sympathy in their eyes, waiting for her answer.

It was tempting, she couldn’t deny that. Since the wedding, she had, on several occasions, wished she had someone she could discuss this with. Dumbledore was a wonderful, grandfatherly figure, but it would help if she had someone near her own age with whom she could have some ‘girl talk’ as the Muggles said. And Lupin . . . well, she probably wouldn’t be taking him up on his offer of discussing sex, but it would be nice to have him in the know, another man to keep Snape in line, someone who wasn’t as soft on him as Dumbledore was. Having a couple of people really on her side in all of this would be most welcome.

Her eyes went to Dumbledore, who looked at her as if to say, Do what you want, then to Snape. His eyes, as usual, were hard and cold. A small part of her was almost frightened off of telling them, but a larger part saw that as all the more reason she wanted to. Of course, there was the matter of Snape’s reputation among the other Order members . . .

Finally, she simply said, “I would, but you must know the secret isn’t entirely mine to share.”

She looked again at Dumbledore, who smiled approvingly and glanced toward Snape. Hermione looked at the table, not wanting to give Snape away by looking at him. There was a long moment of silence. Once, Hermione thought Tonks was about to say something, but Lupin put his hand on hers. Tonks looked at him questioningly, but he was just calmly looking at their hands. Hermione stole a glance at Snape, whose arms were still crossed, his face set in defiance.

The silence progressed for over half a minute before Lupin spoke. His voice was soft, almost casual, but with a hint of a growl that reminded everyone what he was. “I can smell you on her, you know.”

“What?” Tonks asked, but Lupin ignored her and turned to Snape, who was trying to hide his surprise.

“You two reek of each other, Snivellus,” he growled. “It was obvious the moment I stepped in the room.”

Tonks looked in shock from Hermione to Snape, then back again. “Snape!? He’s your husband?”

Hermione was mortified, humiliated by the shock and disgust on Tonks’s face, and by the revelation that Lupin could tell so easily what had gone on between Snape and herself. She only nodded dumbly at Tonks’s question.

Neither Snape nor Lupin paid any attention to the looks exchanged between the women.

“I always thought James and Sirius were being unfair when they called you by that name,” Lupin said, standing to confront Snape, “but now you have proven yourself more worthy of it than ever.”

“What, precisely, are you accusing me of, Lupin?” Snape asked, his eyes narrowing dangerously. “Not even you could be stupid enough to think I wanted to bed, let alone wed, an insufferable, rebellious child.”
“If I thought that, Snape, I wouldn’t have said anything. You would have merely woken up dead one morning.” Snape scoffed in a way that very clearly said, I’d like to see you try. Lupin ignored him and continued. “But you did have a chance to allow Hermione some comfort from the situation, at no cost to yourself, and you denied her.”

“My approval was obviously not needed,” Snape sneered.

“You didn’t know that.”

“Wait a minute,” Tonks interjected, shaking her head as if to clear it. “You mean that you, Hermione, are actually legally married to him?”

Hermione sunk down on the bench. “I’m afraid so.”

Tonks looked torn between hexing Snape and hopping over the bench and giving Hermione a hug. After a moment, she opted for the latter. “I’m so sorry,” She said as she smoothed out Hermione’s bushy hair in an almost motherly way.

When Hermione looked back at Snape, he was toe-to-toe with Lupin. “Do not expect me to explain myself to you, mongrel,” he sneered.

“That’s enough, both of you,” Dumbledore finally spoke up, and when the alpha male spoke, the others backed down. Snape stood silently while Lupin went over to Tonks and Hermione. Switching back into comfort mode, Lupin put a hand on Hermione’s shoulder.

She looked up at him and said uncertainly, “You can really smell . . .”

He removed his hand and used it to ruffle his hair awkwardly. “I wasn’t trying to.”

“Nymphadora, Remus,” Dumbledore said calmly, “I believe it is time to gather the students for Hogsmeade.”

Tonks and Lupin took their cue and left quietly, but not before giving her a reassuring squeeze on the shoulder. Hermione wished they’d stay, but at least Dumbledore was still there.

Once the three of them were left alone, Snape leveled a dark gaze at Dumbledore. “That was low even for you, Albus,” he said, very softly.

“What just happened was neither my idea nor my intent, Severus,” Dumbledore replied calmly. “Remus and Nymphadora desired to speak with Miss Granger and had followed her here shortly before I arrived. Had you not so thoroughly warded the doors, they would have made their presence known earlier.” He let out a tired breath that was not quite a sigh. “Really, Severus, you must have known it was only a matter of time before they found out. You didn’t think Remus would stay away from both you and Miss Granger forever, did you?”

Snape’s eyes shifted around the room. Hermione surmised that, no, just like herself, he had not thought of the consequences of the werewolf being around.

Dumbledore turned his attention to Hermione. “You showed remarkable discretion and respect in waiting for Severus’s permission, my dear. Such concern for another’s feelings, even when under great personal stress, is deserving of, say . . . fifty points to Gryffindor?” Hermione detected a definite twinkle in the old man’s eye, and she smiled in return.

“Yes, by all means,” Snape sneered, “give the little chit back her points. She couldn’t possibly have deserved the deduction.”
“I did not!” Hermione protested.

“‘You’re a selfish, arrogant fool!’” Snape spat at her, then turned to Dumbledore. “She had the unmitigated gall, Headmaster, to claim—”

“To claim something which only you and I are in a position to verify,” Hermione interrupted.

“No,” he snapped. “Your opinion is nothing more than a guess, at best. Only I can tell if I enjoyed something, and I assure you, I did not.”

Dumbledore sighed. “Severus, it is not the most heinous of crimes to enjoy physical relations with your young, attractive wife.” Snape harrumphed. Hermione blushed. Dumbledore continued. “Hermione, you cannot fault Severus for reacting strongly to certain stimuli. He may not wish his students to believe it, but he is only human.”

“I am not the one whose reaction needs to be justified, Headmaster,” Snape said.

“Oh, here we go again.” Hermione rolled her eyes. “Sir, Professor Snape called me a whore, among other things.”

“Is this true, Severus?” Dumbledore asked sharply.

“It is.”

“And why would you do such a thing?”

“Do you honestly believe, Headmaster,” Snape began, his voice betraying his anger once again, “that Miss Granger could have been pregnant for over a month without realizing it?”

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. “Have you not, er, fulfilled the Ministry’s requirements since your wedding night?”

Hermione averted her eyes and shifted uncomfortably, her hands unconsciously wrapping around her bruised sides.

“Once,” Snape answered. His face showed no such embarrassment, only anger. “Last night. And had that encounter been . . . productive, it is unlikely word would have reached Rita Skeeter so quickly. Which only leaves one of two options. Either she is engaging in those activities with someone else, or she lied to me last night about the necessity of our actions. In either circumstance, my claim of her salaciousness is well-founded.”

Dumbledore looked at Hermione gently. “Miss Granger?”

“How can you even consider that to be true?” she asked. “How was I supposed to know I’m pregnant? Assuming I am. You have to admit Rita Skeeter isn’t exactly the most reliable source in the world.”

“That is true,” Dumbledore replied. “Tell me, Miss Granger, have you had your cycle in the past month?”

Hermione’s eyes popped wide open. In all the stress and hecticness of all that had happened, she had completely missed the fact that she hadn’t had her period that month. Then, like a flash, the memory of Partridge telling her of the purposes of the potions he gave her came to her mind for the first time since he spoke the words. She looked in a panic back and forth between Dumbledore and Snape. She couldn’t answer, but dropped her head into her hands in shame.
“I’m so stupid!” she chastised herself. “In all that’s been going on, it completely left my mind. No, I haven’t, not in nearly two months now. And the Healer said it would be every week after he gave me the potion.”

Dumbledore patted her hand. “There, there, child. It could happen to anyone.”

Snape scoffed. “Has the daily morning retching escaped your notice, as well?”

She lifted her head, hope dawning. “You mean morning sickness. I haven’t had any. None at all!” She dared a smile. Snape’s certainty faltered.

“This is a mystery that requires solving.” Dumbledore announced. “Luckily, it will not take long to do so. You will accompany Miss Granger to her appointment, Severus, and you will both receive your answer.”

Snape grumbled, but asked, “What time is it at?”

“Eleven,” she said.

“Come to my office at ten-thirty, Miss Granger. We shall leave from there.” Without another word, he swept out of the room.

After several long, silent seconds, Hermione looked woefully at Dumbledore. “What am I going to do, Professor? I’m just a student. This wasn’t supposed to happen.”

Dumbledore looked thoughtfully at his withered, useless right hand. “I’ve a feeling, child, that a great many things have happened that weren’t supposed to.”

#

With a pop, Hermione and Snape appeared outside St. Mungo’s. Pulling her robe about her tightly to ward against the chill, Hermione was glad she had her Apparition license and didn’t have to do a Side-Along with Snape. The silence had been awkward enough as it was. Snape, as usual, remained stoically reserved, and Hermione followed suit, afraid that if she spoke she would be unable to control her tongue. She was still bitter about the way Snape had treated her that morning, and the last thing they needed was to make a scene.

It didn’t take long before they were inside. It wasn’t terribly busy, but there were more than a few people milling about. Snape did not follow her to the reception desk, but merely stood beside one wall, out of the way, with a clear view of the room.

“Excuse me,” Hermione said to the plump blonde witch at the desk. “My name’s Hermione Granger. I’ve got an appointment with Healer Partridge.”

“Oh, yes,” said the Welcome Witch stiffly, shuffling some parchments. “Here you are. Take a seat over there and someone will call you shortly.”

With a nod, Hermione glanced at Snape, decided she didn’t care to stand with him, and chose a chair in the middle of the room.

“Hermione Granger?” asked a witch standing in a hallway entrance, several minutes later.

Hermione made haste to go to her, not bothering to see if Snape was following.

“And who are you, sir?” asked the mediwitch.
“I am this girl’s chaperone,” came Snape’s voice from just behind Hermione. She fought the urge to jump. Over the years, she still hadn’t quite become accustomed to Snape’s way of sneaking up on a person without even trying. “As you must be aware, she is a student at Hogwarts. And as you also must have heard, Hogwarts was attacked by You-Know-Who’s followers last term. Surely, then, you cannot be so dim as to presume the Headmaster would allow any students out alone when their parents believe them to be under his protection.”

The woman fluttered a bit, glancing between Snape and Hermione. “Well . . . if the patient is all right with it, I suppose it could be allowed.” Hermione nodded. “Okay, then. This way.”

“So very kind of you,” Snape sneered.

They were led into a small exam room, much like the one Hermione had been in before. The mediwitch left them with an assurance that the Healer would be along shortly. Silence filled the room. Hermione glanced at the table with stirrups hidden beneath the edge, to the bottles of potions in a cupboard, to Snape. If the trip had been awkward so far, it could only get worse from here on.

Mercifully, Healer Partridge arrived within a minute. He walked to her immediately, failing to notice Snape.

“Good morning, Hermione,” he said with a smile. “And how are you feeling today?”

“Well enough,” she answered, “for someone who just found out she was pregnant via the morning paper.”

Partridge’s smile fell. “Just found out? Didn’t I tell you that last time?”

“No.” Hermione kept her tone soft, but the bitterness shone through.


“Was it this same incompetence, then,” Snape said, startling Partridge, “that led the news to be leaked to Rita Skeeter?”

“No, of course not!” Partridge said. “Honestly, I don’t know how she found out. You can be assured, an investigation is underway. On the bright side, she must have had access only to the versions of your file with the names blotted out.”

“How reassuring,” Snape drawled, but Hermione thought it rather was.

“Bit of advice,” she muttered to Partridge. “If you see a beetle flying around here, squash it.”

Partridge looked at her oddly and fidgeted under Snape’s glare. “Excuse me, sir, but who are you?”

Snape’s words were quiet, but intense. “Severus Snape.”

Partridge’s eyes widened. “Ahh. It is very kind of you to come with your wife to her appointment. It’s good for witches to have some emotional support during this sort of procedure.”

Hermione snorted at the idea that Snape could offer any such support. Then Partridge’s last words sank in. “Procedure? What procedure?”

Partridge looked perplexedly from one to the other. “The transfer, of course.”

Hermione’s patience was wearing thin. “What transfer?”
Partridge blinked dumbly. “Didn’t I tell you?”

“No,” Hermione ground out.

“Really? I thought for sure I mentioned . . .” Partridge flipped through his paperwork. “Let’s see. I think I saw a note in here about it earlier.” Hermione made a mad grab for the Healer’s papers, but he snatched them back, looking scandalized. Partridge continued shuffling through them until he found the one he was looking for. “Well, Hermione, part of your amended agreement is that one month after pregnancy is achieved, you are to return to St. Mungo’s . . .” He trailed off and had a look as if checking to see if Hermione were ready to hear what came next. “. . . where your child will be magically transferred into the womb of a surrogate mother, at which point, the cycle will start again.”

Hermione was struck dumb. For several seconds, she simply couldn’t speak. “Are you insane?” she asked after she found her voice.

“It’s not my idea,” he said defensively. “According to this note, the transfer clause is part of a special arrangement made with the Minister himself by your husband.” He looked pointedly at Snape as if trying to shift the blame to him.

Snape blinked.

“You?” Hermione gasped. “You did this? Was this the cost of allowing us only once a week instead of every day?”

Snape looked at her coolly. “I thought it a reasonable exchange.”

“You thought wrong!” she spat. “I have to get pregnant again and again, only to see my children taken from me when they’re barely starting to be formed? You call that reasonable?”

“Be grateful you get a full month from the time you become pregnant until the transfer, during which time you won’t have to suffer my presence,” Snape snapped. “It might have been one week.”

“But why transfer the child at all?” she asked. “Why not let me just have my own baby, if they’re forcing it on me, anyway?”

“The Minister was quite relentless on that issue. It was the only way to prevent daily—” he forced the next word through his teeth—“intercourse. Which would, I assure you, be a far greater disruption to your life and would involve considerably more likelihood of being found out by your friends.”

“But why?”

“It makes sense,” Partridge said, oblivious to the cold-heartedness of his own words. “The entire point of this program is to get offspring from the desirable parents such as yourselves. Once the child is conceived, there’s no reason it has to remain in the original mother’s womb, once it can be safely transferred. Then, once the children are born, they could even have them adopted by Ministry-approved families. The Ministry probably sees this as getting more bang for their buck . . . so to speak.” He quavered under their dual glares and added meekly, “I didn’t say I agree with them.”

Hermione dropped into a chair, shaking her head. “This is insane. I knew this whole thing was mad, but . . . this is beyond description.”

“Believe me, Miss Granger,” Snape said quietly, “it could have been worse.”
“How?” she shot back.

“It can always be worse.”

“It will be worth it in the end, I think,” Partridge said. “The betterment of the wizarding population is always to be hoped for, even if the means may be questionable. To say nothing of what else we might learn in the process . . .”

“If everything is understood,” Snape said, “could we move this along? I have other things to do today.”

“Right,” Partridge said, despite the look of panic that suddenly crossed Hermione’s face. She barely looked at the bundle he offered her. “Hermione, if you’d care to put this on, a medwitch will come to get you in a few minutes. Mr. Snape, you can wait in the lobby and we’ll let you know when we’re all through . . . unless you’d prefer to watch.”

“I’ll wait,” Snape said simply, then left.

“Well . . . yes . . .” Partridge said, his eyes empathetic. “I’ll leave you to change, then.”

Once the door closed, Hermione looked at the hospital robe Partridge had given her and braced herself. Short of fighting her way out of St. Mungo’s and catching the first Portkey out of Britain, it didn’t look like she had any option but to go along with this. But she’d not said her last about it.

Five minutes later, she found herself lying on a table in a larger room. There was another table a few feet away, which she assumed would be occupied by the poor woman assigned to bear her child. Partridge stood over her, smiling as cheerfully as he could. There was a flap in the robe over her stomach, which Partridge carefully opened and placed so as to expose her midsection.

“What’s this here?” he asked, startled.


“Someone get a little overly enthusiastic, did he?” Partridge asked.

Hermione blushed deeply. “Can you fix it for me? I . . . didn’t want to go to the hospital wing at school.”

Partridge pulled a small vial of potion from a side table and gave it to her. As soon as she drank it, she felt the soreness dissipate and saw the bruises vanish. “Good as new,” he said, then went back to arranging her robe.

“What was that other potion you gave me?” Hermione asked.

“Which potion?”

“At the end of my last exam.”

“Oh, that,” he said. “Just something to help with the morning sickness and other pregnancy-related discomfort. Did it work?”

Hermione nodded, then fell into silence.

A few seconds later, Partridge said, “I don’t mean to pry, but . . . I noticed your husband calls you, well, rather formally.”
Hermione wasn’t quite sure how to answer that. “Yes. It’s just . . . this marriage was sort of sprung on us. We haven’t had time to get used to the new arrangement yet. After six years of calling someone one thing, it’s hard to change to something else.”

Partridge nodded in understanding. “Thank you for indulging my curiosity. I’m sorry if that was an uncomfortable question.”

“It’s all right,” Hermione muttered.

“We’re all ready,” Partridge said, taking a small potion bottle from a tray. “You’ll need to take this potion. It will prepare your body for the transfer. It will also render you unconscious until it’s complete.”

“Won’t I even get to see who the surrogate is?” Hermione asked, her voice high and strained as her last hope for some comfort in this situation was sapped.

“I’m afraid regulations don’t allow it,” Partridge told her, looking genuinely apologetic. “Perhaps your husband could talk to the Ministry again about it, but my hands are tied.”

With renewed despair, Hermione took the potion from him and drank it. Immediately, she felt herself slipping into unconsciousness. The next thing she knew, she was waking up.

Partridge smiled. “All done.”

When Hermione returned to the waiting room, fully dressed in her own clothes, Snape met her not with reassuring words and a hug, as any other woman might expect from her husband after such an ordeal, but with folded arms and a terse, “Finished?”

She nodded and set her jaw, firmly refusing to allow him to see how any of this was affecting her.

They returned to the school just as silently as they’d left it. Most of the students were, fortunately, still in Hogsmeade. Hermione didn’t care to have everyone seeing that she’d just been somewhere with Snape. They wouldn’t be likely to guess the real reason, of course. They’d probably just think she was in some sort of trouble, but that wasn’t exactly better.

As soon as they entered the castle, Snape strode off down to the dungeons without so much as a parting glance at his wife. Hermione decided to grab a bite to eat before going to her room. She was able to sit by herself, as the only other people at any of the tables were first and second years. Even the High Table was mostly empty, with only Flitwick, Sprout, Trelawney and Sinistra present. Hermione ate quickly and left before anyone got the urge to speak to her. As she left the Great Hall, she nearly ran into Professor McGonagall, who had a Hufflepuff trailing behind her. She muttered a polite greeting and hurried to her room before she ran into anyone else.

Hermione spent the rest of the day studying everything but Potions. It succeeded in calming her and taking her mind off the mess that her life had become, until evening came and the fertility potion she’d taken a month ago began to kick in now that her body was no longer carrying a child.

She spent most of Sunday curled up in bed, making frequent trips to the toilet, her back aching horrifically as her body worked to expunge the uterine lining built up during her short pregnancy. She managed to make a trip to the hospital wing to see Madam Pomfrey and was given a potion to help with the pain, but it didn’t seem to be enough. This could have been partly because she was required to downplay the extent of said pain, lest Madam Pomfrey insist on finding out what exactly was the matter.
Around three o’clock, she lay in bed, attempting to study, but unable to concentrate through the pain. Everyone else in the tower was off doing more interesting things, so Hermione was surprised to hear a knock on her door.

“Come in,” Hermione called, her voice strained.

Tonks quietly came in and closed the door. “You all right? I haven’t seen you at any meals since we got back from Hogsmeade yesterday.”

Hermione shook her head. “I don’t believe I’ll be all right for a very long time.”

Tonks pulled a chair up next to Hermione’s bed and sat. “You look terrible. Are you sick?”

“Not in the traditional sense.”

“Morning sickness?” Tonks asked.

Hermione shook her head. “They took the baby.”

“What?” Tonks gasped. “What do you mean?”

“They transferred it,” Hermione told her, her jaw clenched from anger and pain. “To a surrogate. And they’ll keep transferring them each time I get pregnant. They want to get as many babies out of me as possible before I get killed in the war.”

“That’s . . .” Tonks was aghast. “They can’t do that.”

Pain suddenly stabbed through Hermione’s uterus and she doubled over, clutching her lower abdomen. “Can,” she ground out. “Did.”

Tonks got up. “I’ll tell Dumbledore. He’ll talk to them. He can’t let them do that.” She made for the door.

“Wait,” Hermione said desperately. Tonks stopped and turned back to her. “Not right now. Please, stay. I wanted to be alone, but . . . now that you know . . .”

Without another word, Tonks sat back down, then reached over and stroked Hermione’s hair until she fell asleep.
When Hermione awoke the next morning, all the pain was gone. She allowed herself a soft sigh of relief and snuggled into her blankets. Then she realized, This is going to happen every week. Her relief was replaced with renewed fury at the Ministry. Flinging off her covers in irritation, she got out of bed and prepared to make the most of one of the now only six productive days she had left in the week.

Ron looked at her in surprise, his mouth full of cereal, when Hermione plopped down next to him at breakfast. She wasted no time in tucking into her meal, ignoring his expression.

“Feeling better, Hermione?” Neville asked from across the table.

Hermione, her fork already in her mouth, just looked at him.

“Professor McGonagall told us you were taken ill,” he explained.

Hermione paused chewing, wondering if Tonks had told McGonagall about Hermione not being well or if McGonagall knew something about her situation. She resolved to ask Tonks later.

Ron finally swallowed his mouthful. “You okay? We haven’t seen you all weekend. We went to the hospital wing to visit you, but you weren’t there.”

She shook her head. “I was in my room. It wasn’t so bad I needed Madam Pomfrey.”

Ron squinted at her for a moment, sizing her up. “Nah. I think you just got some new book and needed an excuse to hide away and finish it.”

Hermione’s face was blank until Ron cracked a smile. She laughed, realizing he was only joking. “I wish. How was Hogsmeade?”

“Same as ever.” Ron shrugged, then grinned. “Bloody brilliant.”

Hermione looked at him and sighed. “Do I even want to know?”

“Well,” Ron said, turning to her, “you know that side street that we’re told never to go down, the one with the shop that’s got the wooden sign with a pair of knickers on it?”

Hermione waved her hand in the air, trying to sound displeased but nearly laughing. “Never mind, I don’t. I don’t!”

She somehow managed to keep herself busy enough to avoid thinking about Snape (and their stolen child) entirely until their Potions class the next day. As he swooped into the room like an owl going after a field mouse, her mood descended just as quickly.

Seeing him standing up at the front of the room, scowling at the lot of them, she was reminded of the heartless way he’d looked at her after the transfer.

For the entirety of the class, she did something that went utterly against her basic nature: she remained silent. She kept her mind on her work, her eyes on her cauldron, and her hand out of the air. This earned her more than a few questioning looks from her classmates, but news of her “illness” had spread, so no one voiced their curiosity.
They were well into their assignment, and Hermione thought that Snape really might let the whole lesson go by without making note of her silence. To her dismay, she found she gave him too much credit.

“No questions today, Miss Granger?” He spoke from just behind and to the left of her, causing her to start and almost drop too many dragonfly wings into her cauldron. She could practically feel his smirk before even looking at him. “You seem jumpy. Not been doing something you shouldn’t, have you?”

Hermione glared at him and said in a voice barely above a whisper, “Not some thing, Professor.”

Snape stood straighter and his frown deepened. “You appear even more disheveled than usual, Miss Granger. Have you abandoned personal hygiene altogether or is this carelessness reserved for the disrespect of my classroom?”

*You’re one to talk about hygiene.* She fought the urge to slap him. “I had a rough weekend.”

She had hoped to see some evidence of remorse in his expression, but wasn’t too surprised when all she detected was a slight twitching of his upper lip as he fought a sneer. What she didn’t expect, though, was what he said.

“As did I.”

He walked back to the front of the class, leaving her wondering what on earth he meant by that. *Surely he doesn’t mean the transfer was hard on him, as well?* She thought on it for the rest of the period, but was unable to formulate a cogent hypothesis.

Thinking that she would soon be free of the greasy git and his blasted enigmacity, she packed her bag as the rest of the class filed out.

“Miss Granger, a word,” came Snape’s quiet voice from the front. When she turned to him, she bristled. He wasn’t even looking at her. A nod to Ron let him know not to wait for her. He gave her a sympathetic look and made his escape, and Hermione found herself alone in the room with her husband. Leaving her bag where it sat, she approached Snape’s desk.

“Be in my office tonight at seven,” he said simply, still marking papers.

Her lips pursed with bottled anger. *How dare he?* But what could she do?

Balling her fists in impotent fury, she turned to go. After two steps, she stopped. Turning back to him, she strode right up to his desk until she was nearly touching it.

“No.”

Slowly, his eyes moved up to her face. His lips tightened. “What?”

She felt her nerve waiver at his tone, but pressed on. “I will not be ordered around in this manner. You may be my teacher, Professor, but that does not give you the right to control every aspect of my life.”

He put his quill down and sat back, folding his arms. “If I did, Miss Granger, you would have long ago been expelled and not currently vexing me with your insufferable presence.”

She fumed. “Why do you do that? Why must you make this so difficult? I’m beginning to think having my wand snapped is worth getting out of this . . . *this!*”
“Do you really?” he asked. “Then you’d better owl the Ministry immediately, if you’re so
desperate to escape my clutches.” His tone grew bitter with the last. When Hermione didn’t answer,
he resumed his marking. “Seven o’clock.”

“Say please.” The words came out of her mouth before she knew they were going to.

Snape’s eyes narrowed. “Pardon me?”

There was no backing out now. “I will not be ordered to these . . . liaisons. I want you to ask me.”

“No.” There was little inflection in his voice, but it was a tone not to be questioned.

“No?” Hermione asked. “Then I won’t come. Until you ask me like a civilized person, I won’t
come. I refuse to be treated like a common whore.”

He sprang from his chair and leaned across the desk at her. “Need I remind you, little girl, that
none of this is my choice, either? I will continue to set the time and you will continue to come, not
because either of us desires the company of the other, but because, if we do not, we will both lose
everything. Your friends, your future, your very identity as a witch will be forfeit if you do not
comply with this devil’s bargain. That is the way it is. Live with it.”

For a few seconds, Hermione almost conceded. Then she flipped her hair back, said a proud, “No,”
and turned to leave.

As she paused to pick up her bag, Snape said casually, “When you change your mind, the potion
will be in my office.”

Not dignifying that remark with a response, she strode out, head held high.

#

As she marched down the halls, steaming, she had to work very hard to keep her thoughts to
herself. Who does he think he is, ordering me around like that? The very nerve! As if I have nothing
better to do than to wait at his beck and call. Well, I’m not taking it anymore. If he wants me, he’s
bloody well going to have to ask nicely. She stopped dead in the hallway. Something about using
the word “nice” in relation to Snape made her realize,

He’s never going to ask me . . . . But why
not? He’s got as much to lose as I do . . . . Hasn’t he? He spends his life split between teaching
children he loathes what he considers a second-class subject and playing a sycophant to an
egomaniacal madman who makes his life a living hell. Besides that, when has Snape ever done
anything remotely nice in his life?

Shoulders slumped, Hermione continued down the hall. It’s utterly hopeless.

At six-thirty, Hermione found Snape’s office door half-open. Hearing only the sound of a
scribbling quill, she went inside as quietly as she could.

What would she say? What could she possibly say that wouldn’t make a fool of her? “Well,
Professor, I just realized that putting up with your belligerence and having sex with you on a
weekly basis wasn’t the worst thing I could think of, as long as I get to keep my wand.” “I’ve
decided to hold out hope that eventually you’ll become a nice person, even though I know it’s
completely impossible.” Or even, “You were right, Professor. It’s really not all that bad.” Except
that it was, and it was killing her to admit that she was so desperate to keep her magic that she was
willing to humiliate and degrade herself.

Just as she opened her mouth to say something (though she knew not what), without so much as a
glance up at her, Snape opened his desk drawer, reached in, and pulled out the small vial she had come looking for. She braced herself for his gloating, for a condescending sneer or snide comment . . . but none came. Snape merely set the vial on the front edge of his desk and continued working.

Hermione stood there for a moment, uncertain what that meant. Snape’s quill paused. She snapped into action, stepping forward to retrieve the vial before Snape had to tell her to do so. The quill resumed scratching. Briefly, she considered thanking him, but quashed that thought when she remembered her own pride. As quietly as she could (this time, more to avoid disturbing him than out of nervousness), she left.

#

The fact that Snape had not pressed his advantage when she fully expected him to did a bit to soften her anger, but she wondered if he hadn’t spoken simply because he was too busy. A small part of her liked to imagine that what he did was a show of sensitivity or empathy, but most of her was certain he simply didn’t want to hear her whinging or yelling at him again.

But now she knew that no matter how poorly he treated her, she was going to continue with this arrangement because her magic meant more to her than her own personal freedom, or even her sense of self-respect. It was a terrible realization and she couldn’t help but feel shallow for it. What would her parents say?

*Sweet Merlin.* Her parents. If they won the war, if Voldemort was defeated and she was able to bring them back and return their memories, what would she tell them? How many grandchildren would they have by then? And how does a teenage girl tell her parents that she’s married against her will to the nastiest teacher in the history of the school?

She pushed those thoughts aside and trusted that by the time it became an issue, she’d think of something. Right now, she had to deal with Snape. And even though she’d confirmed to him that she won’t risk defying the Ministry on this, she still had to show him that she wasn’t happy about it, nor would she ever be. After his accusations of her *wanting* to have sex with him, she resolved to be even more cold and uninvolved. Her pride may have been weakened, but she still had some.

#

Hermione appeared at Snape’s office, once again, right on time. She gave the door a quick rap, listened for his command to enter, and pushed her way in.

Her jaw was set, her chin held high. She closed the door and turned to look at Snape, marking scrolls at his desk. In the four seconds it took him to set the ward, she marched to his desk, spread her legs, leaned forward and assumed the position.

“Reporting as ordered, Professor,” she said. “Please try to keep a looser grip this time.”

Snape didn’t even bother looking up at her. “Kindly remove your hands from my workspace,” he muttered.

Hermione was taken slightly aback at his casual attitude, but didn’t budge. “No.”

He glanced at her, his eyebrow cocked. “Pardon?”

“I know you’re ready,” she told him. “You wanted me here at this time, so get on with it. I’ve got other things to do tonight.”

The corner of his mouth quirked momentarily before resuming its customary scowl. “No.”
“Wha—what?” Her resolve faltered.

He finally gave her his full attention. “I said no. I will not allow you to play the sole victim in this arrangement any longer.”

She pulled her hands from his desk and stood upright. “Excuse me?”

“This has all been very convenient for you,” he said, leaning back in his chair. “Only doing what you’re told, like a dutiful student. Letting me be the one to take all the action, and therefore all the responsibility. Tell me, did you cry yourself to sleep the last time, knowing that you’d been so horribly taken advantage of by your greasy, old, lecherous teacher?” He finished with a sneer as her jaw dropped.

“How dare you?” she screeched. “You think this is easy for me?”

“How easy do you think it is for me?” he asked, his voice dangerously low. “Do you imagine I secretly enjoy taking you? That my heart fills with glee at the prospect of repeatedly raping such an unwilling victim?”

Her heart sunk as she heard the self-loathing in his voice. “It’s not rape,” she said softly.

“It very nearly is!” He was on his feet in an instant, staring down at her in anger. She took a step back.

“Well, I’m sorry if I’m not quite as enthusiastic as you’d hoped,” she snapped, “but you can’t possibly expect me to enjoy this.”

“No,” he said, “but you will take some initiative.” He sat down and pushed the chair back a foot or two from the desk.

Hermione blinked several times.

“I will not lay a hand on you tonight,” he said, once again calm.

“But . . .” she stammered, “the agreement with the Ministry. They’re expecting us—”

“That is not to say,” he interrupted, “that you may not lay . . . anything . . . on me.”

She got it, and gasped. “You want me to—”

“Do what you will,” he said with a slight air of martyrdom. “I will not fight you.”

For a moment, looking at Snape sitting smugly in his chair, waiting for her, Hermione wanted to bolt from the room like a fox released from a trap. Then she remembered what the Ministry would do if the agreement would not kept. She scowled. So, this was his game. Well, she wouldn’t let him win. Summoning up the courage and conviction she’d had when she entered the office, she made to walk around his desk.

She took one step and stopped. Her mouth had suddenly become quite dry and her heart was racing at triple-speed. “Um, what do I . . .” she started.

He simply folded his arms. “You’re a bright witch, or so your other teachers keep telling me. I am certain you’ll figure something out.”

A surge of frustration and annoyance helped to loosen her feet from the ground and she stomped around to his side of the desk. She looked down at him, noting the telling bulge in his trousers. His
robes were open in the front, so that was one layer she’d not have to get past. Sticking her chin out and taking a deep breath, she strode over to stand directly between him and the desk. She was not yet touching him, but could tell that would not last long.

She glared at him impatiently. “Well?” Her eyes flitted to his crotch just long enough for the message to get across.

With a long-suffering sigh, Snape moved his hands to the buttons of his fly. She looked straight up, not wanting to catch even a glimpse of what she heard going on before her. After she heard his hands move back to his sides, she closed her eyes and braced herself.

From this position, there was only one thing for her to do. She gulped down the disgust that rose in her throat as she hiked her robes and skirt up with her hands, high enough to not get in the way but not so high that he could see anything but her legs, and got herself into position. She fought an inner battle, part of her wanting to brace her hands on his shoulders for balance, but the other part wanting to touch him as little as possible. In the end, the latter part won out, and she slowly bent her knees.

_I can’t believe I’m doing this_, her mind said over and over again. After a few adjustments, she attained the correct position. Clenching her jaw and throwing her eyes to the ceiling, she did what she had to.

She heard a sharp intake of breath from in front of her, and Hermione suddenly found herself looking across a disturbingly short space into a pair of dark, fathomless eyes which were looking at her in a most unwelcome manner.

And then she realized that she was sitting on Snape’s lap. She didn’t think Snape had likely had anyone sitting on his lap before, and the thought brought unbidden visions of Snape dressed as Father Christmas to her mind. She inwardly giggled and fought the urge to ask for a pony. That, however, only made her think of riding, which brought her crashing back to the reality of her situation.

“Comfortable, Miss Granger?” asked Snape snidely. From this distance, she could almost feel his breath on her. It smelled of pumpkin juice.

She looked at him, but fought it, like looking into an eclipse. “Just resting my legs,” she said.

“Are you sure,” he asked, “that you are not dallying because you enjoy the sensation of taking me? Does it fill you with glee?” His words were meant as an attack, a challenge, or a conviction of some kind. She couldn’t be sure.

In response, Hermione glared at him as hard as she could and began to stand up. A claim that she would leave right then was stilled on her lips as she watched the way Snape’s face twitched at her motion. She could tell he was trying to hide it, to keep control, but she knew what she was doing was affecting him. _Interesting._

He wanted her take initiative? Okay, then. He’d get what he demanded.

Hermione moved over him, testing new muscles she’d never tried to use before, drawing sharp hisses and pursed lips from the scowling, stoic man. Trying to tease out the Man from the Teacher. To her surprise, one particular motion teased something out of herself as well. Something new and strange and wonderful. Her eyes slid closed in shame and she repeated the motion, more purposefully this time.
“What are you playing at, Miss Granger?” Snape cautioned.

She couldn’t answer him. She couldn’t even answer herself. So she kept going, teasing herself, teasing him, searching for something she didn’t even know and, deep in the back part of her mind, reminding herself who she was and who he was and what was happening—but she didn’t care. If there was something not-horrible to be had in these forced encounters, she wanted to find it. Even as she heard Snape’s breathing go uneven, she felt her muscles falter, and her chin dropped to her chest as she was overwhelmed with a feeling unlike any she’d ever felt before.

Unlike the last two times, she did not need to keep herself busy with her own thoughts, with mental graphs and evaluations. In fact, she found rational thought of any kind quite impossible. She only knew that she had to keep the motion going.

She didn’t even mind when Snape broke his promise not to touch her and grabbed her by the hips, where only her robes stood in the way of skin-to-skin contact. On the contrary, she was grateful, as it freed her from any reticence she felt in putting her hands on him. As her body began to shudder, she reached out and grabbed Snape’s shoulders for balance.

For one brief moment, she opened her eyes wide enough to see that she’d succeeded in loosing the beast.

Her body felt energized and exhausted all at the same time, and she could feel the sensations building to something, though she couldn’t imagine anything more intense than what she was already feeling. Before she could get there, however, Snape shuddered, and it was over.

He released her, but she tried for a few more seconds, moving over him all on her own, but it was no use, and that strange momentum flitted away. Her movements slowed and finally stopped. She felt tired, weak, and strangely sated yet unfulfilled. It took several moments for her to catch her breath and regain her senses. She was leaning heavily on Snape’s shoulders with her hands. They were incredibly solid beneath her fingers, and only a bit bony.

When she finally looked up at Snape’s face, she almost laughed. His eyes were wide, his mouth slightly agape. He was looking at her like she was something he’d never seen before.

As she looked into his eyes, they hardened again. His mouth snapped shut. The memory of what she’d just done came rushing back to her now mostly-clear head, and she blushed deeply. She felt foolish and ashamed, and his next words didn’t help.

“I am not a chair, Miss Granger. If you wish to rest, I suggest you return to your room.”

She averted her eyes from his. “Sorry, Professor Snape,” she murmured. “I don’t know what got into me.” Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him raise an eyebrow at that. She blushed even deeper and snapped her hands back from his shoulders.

“If you do not remove yourself from my person in the next five seconds, I shall have to deduct points. And you shall have to explain to your Housemates why Gryffindor is once again losing.”

Hermione stepped back from him and immediately strode around the desk, not looking at him as he fastened himself up. She hesitated at the doorway. She should have marched out as quickly as she had marched in. Their purpose was concluded. They had nothing more to say to each other. So, why wasn’t she leaving?

“Was there something else?” Snape asked impatiently.

She looked at him, opened her mouth to speak, thought better of it, said a quick, “No, sir,” and took
her leave.
The next day, Hermione lingered after the D.A.D.A. lesson. By the time the other students had cleared out, Tonks had just finished locking the kappa back in its cage and turned to see Hermione still standing there.

“Oi, Hermione. You’re still here.”

“Yes,” Hermione said hesitantly. “Um . . . did you tell Professor McGonagall that I wasn’t well on Sunday?”

Tonks nodded. “She was about to go check on you herself when I left, but I told her you were sick, but that it wasn’t anything life-threatening. From the looks of you, it seems I was right.”

“Thank you,” Hermione said, but didn’t move.

“Something else?”

Hermione looked at her nervously. “I was wondering if I might . . . talk to you about something.”

“This isn’t about the homework, is it?”

Hermione clutched her bag, embarrassed, and shook her head.

“Well, come on,” said Tonks, walking toward her office door. “I have a feeling this isn’t the sort of thing you want to risk being overheard.”

Once in her office, Tonks motioned Hermione toward a chair, then took a seat behind her desk.

“Is it about the baby?” she asked.

“No . . .” Hermione said, then blushed. “It’s . . . something else.”

Tonks lost her concerned face and got a twinkle in her eye that Dumbledore would have been proud of. She leaned forward and asked, “So, how’s the sex?”

Hermione looked at her in shock, her cheeks suddenly pink. “Well . . . I . . .”

“That is what you want to talk about, right?” Tonks clarified. “Or do we keep playing twenty questions?”

“Well, yes, but I . . .” Hermione fumbled, “I didn’t expect you to just come out and say it.”

“No use delaying the unpleasant inevitable,” Tonks pontificated. “Though I suppose you’ve learned that already.” Hermione didn’t respond, but she failed to meet Tonks’s eyes. “So, what’s the bad news?” Tonks asked, then suddenly straightened. “He’s not hurting you, is he? The man’s a right bastard. God knows ‘tender’ isn’t in his vocabu—”

“No, he—” Hermione said, still staring at Tonks’s desk. “No . . . he’s not hurting me.”

“Then,” Tonks asked, growing confused, “what is it?”
“Well, the . . . last time,” Hermione began, wringing her hands in her lap, “I sort of . . . I mean, I think I almost . . . liked it.”

Her words were met with utter silence. Several seconds later, when she finally dared look at Tonks, she saw the rosy-haired young woman staring at her in curled-lip, open-mouthed, furrowed-brow, wide-eyed, befuddled revulsion, as if Hermione had just confessed to enjoying the taste of pickled bull scrotum.

“Is that . . . okay?”

Tonks snapped out of it, shaking her head. “No, no, I mean, that’s great! Yeah, definitely, no, that’s . . . that’s a good thing.”

“I have a hard time thinking you really believe that.”

“Look, Hermione, you can’t help who you’re stuck with, right?” Tonks asked. “And no matter what my or anyone else’s feelings are about Snape, you’re right to make the best of this. He may be the only man you’ll ever have sex with in your life (unless he’s brutally murdered, fingers crossed), so you’d damn well better learn to enjoy it.”

“But, Professor—”

“Hermione, please, I told you, when we’re not in class, call me Tonks.”

“Right, sorry. Tonks—”

“Do you call him that?” Tonks asked.

Hermione floundered. “Why would I call him ‘Tonks’?”

“Do you still call him ‘Professor Snape’ even when you’re alone?”

Hermione glanced around the room as if looking for the reason why that would be seen as unusual. “Er . . . yes.”

Tonks blinked. “Really? Even when you’re . . .”

The pink returned to Hermione’s cheeks. “Well, yes. It would seem so strange not to.”

Tonks leaned back in her chair. “Wow. Kinky.” She got a faraway look, then snapped out of it. “You mean to tell me that you’ve never once called him by his given name?”

Hermione looked away, blushing furiously. “Maybe . . . there was . . . one time.”

Tonks grinned in a manner that Hermione found rather disturbing. “So he actually got you there, huh? Color me surprised.”

“What?” Hermione’s face was almost entirely red by this point. “No, it wasn’t . . . like that. Not for me, anyway.”

Tonks’s grin faded and her eyes narrowed appraisingly, but she didn’t push for details. “You were going to ask me something.”

“Oh, yes,” Hermione said, allowing the color to fade from her face a tad. “You said I should enjoy it. I was just wondering . . . how?”
The other woman looked at her disbelievingly. “What do you mean ‘how’? You already said you were.”

“To a degree, yes, but not . . . quite as much as I’ve heard is possible.”

“It’s not exactly something you need an instruction manual for.”

“Well, I have read a lot on it, but people seem to have such differing opinions—”

Tonks clasped her hands together and leaned forward on her elbows. “Okay, here’s what you do. First of all, stop calling him ‘Professor Snape’ when you’re alone together. It’s creepy and only makes things worse.”

“But he hasn’t given me permission to—”

“Doesn’t matter,” she said simply. “You’re his wife. You have the right. And second, experiment. See what you like. Might be safer to do it on your own first, where you don’t have to be nervous. Okay?”

Hermione nodded but didn’t get up.

“Something else?” Tonks prompted.

“Now that you’ve mentioned it,” Hermione said quietly, “it is bothering me, about my baby.”

Tonks came around the desk and crouched by her. “Are you doing okay?”

“I don’t know,” Hermione confessed. “I had barely known I was pregnant before they took him . . . or her. It bothers me, but . . . not as much as it seems like it should. I feel like I should be distraught. After all, they took my child from me, but . . . how can I miss what I didn’t even know I had? None of it seems real.”

“Don’t beat yourself up, Hermione,” Tonks told her. “Think of it as a blessing. I’m sure a lot of women would kill to not miss a child they’d lost.”

Hermione nodded and stood. “Thank you, Pro—Tonks.”

“Any time,” the Metamorphmagus said with a reassuring smile.

#

It wasn’t until three nights later that she consented to try Tonks’s suggestion. She had finished all her schoolwork through the next two weeks and had read every book she currently had borrowed from the library. She supposed she could re-read *Mysterious Muggle Artifacts of the 17th Century*, but it wasn’t very interesting the first time around. And besides all that, she was alone in her room.

The other girls that shared her bedroom were out at the moment, off on their various dates and whatnot, so Hermione had it to herself for at least another hour. She felt a brief pang of jealousy for them, for their ability to frolic freely with whatever boy they wanted and that if they chose to have sex, it would be on their terms and with a cute guy who had a nice, young body, not some grumpy old man with neither the attractiveness of youth nor the skill of age and experience.

She thought of the last time she’d seen Snape, in class earlier that day. As usual, he’d treated her no different than he ever had, unless it was to be even more cold. But she had thought, just for a moment, right after she’d taken her seat, that there’d been a brief glimmer in his eye as he looked at
her, a shadow of confusion, before his gaze turned steely and he looked away.

She got up from her bed and made sure the door was locked, then checked the windows as well. Waving her wand, she placed protective charms around the room. It would raise questions should any of her roommates try to get in, but she’d rather that than them walking in and seeing what she was doing.

Lying on her bed, she tried to do what Tonks suggested. She touched herself in ways she never had before, but there was nothing interesting in it. No rush of sensation. Very quickly, she began to feel silly and a tad disappointed. But she did satisfy her curiosity about one thing. Putting one finger inside herself, she noted the warmth and spongy softness, and though it did nothing to cause any pleasant feelings in her, she imagined what that would feel like to a man, especially on such a sensitive part of him. And she remembered the recalcitrant purse of Snape’s lips.

*Interesting.*

#

On Saturday, Ron convinced Hermione to take a break from studying and take a walk around the lake with him, Neville, and Luna. It was a bright and cheerful day and many other students were making use of it, sitting and reading outside, going for walks, playing pick-up games of Quidditch, and generally enjoying themselves. Hermione allowed herself to, just for a few minutes, let go of her worries, relax, and pretend she was just a girl at school, with no other cares in the world.

“Professor Tonks is definitely the best Defense teacher we’ve had yet,” Neville observed as their conversation meandered toward the subject. “Except for Professor Lupin, maybe. It’s hard to pick between those two.”

“Obviously it *is* between those two, isn’t it?” Ron countered. “What have we got otherwise? Let’s see . . . Death Eater, nancy prat, Death Eater, evil bitch, and oh, yeah, Death Eater.”

“*Reformed* Death Eater, Ron,” Hermione reminded him, frowning.

“Same difference,” Ron huffed. “He’s still a nasty git.”

“Professor Snape’s not so bad,” Luna commented in her airy voice as she stared at the clouds above their heads, somehow managing to avoid tripping over or running into anything. “He did send the Order to rescue us in the Department of Mysteries.”

Ron grumbled, but didn’t have a proper response.

“I guess that proves he’s not evil, at least,” Neville said, not sounding entirely sure of himself. “If he were evil, he’d have let the Death Eaters kill us and take whatever it is they were after.” After an *I thought you were on my side* look from Ron, he amended, “He’s still quite scary, though.”

No one could disagree with that, so they walked on in silence for a while.

As they were passing not too far from a group of fifth-years playing Quidditch, Hermione heard a voice yell, “Look out!” just in time to duck a rogue bludger.

“Hey, watch what you’re doing!” Ron yelled at the players. “She could have been killed by that thing!”

Duly chastised, the players moved their game farther away from the general mass of people.
Hermione looked to where the warning had come from and saw a sixth-year sitting under a tree, holding an old book.

“Thanks for the warning,” Hermione said, approaching the girl.

“No problem,” the girl said. She was slightly plump, with a soft, gentle voice and kind eyes.

“I’m surprised you’re still here, Antoinette,” Hermione told her. “After the school was attacked last year, especially considering, you know . . . what happened to Cedric, I’m surprised your parents didn’t pull you out.”

“They almost did,” she confessed. “I told them that I was hardly going to be much of a target, but promised not to put myself in the line of fire if there was an attack. Surprisingly, Uncle Amos backed me up. I believe his exact words were, ‘damned if this family’s going to cower from that murdering son of a bitch.’ Not what Cedric would have wanted, he said. That’s what finally convinced my parents.” Her voice sounded quite sad by the time she’d finished.

“We’ll defeat him,” Hermione said after a long moment.

Antoinette looked up at her and smiled, though Hermione thought she saw the glisten of tears in her eyes. “I know."

Hermione gave her a reassuring smile and walked back to her friends.

“Who was that?” asked Ron as they continued walking.

The other three looked at him incredulously.

“Honestly, Ron,” Hermione chastised. “We’ve been going to school with her for over five years.” He still looked clueless. “That’s Antoinette Diggory. Cedric’s cousin.”

“I didn’t know Cedric had a cousin,” Ron said, sounding as if it was indeed news to him.

“You’ve never noticed her in all these years?” Hermione asked.

“Well, she’s not very loud, is she?” Ron said in a feeble attempt to defend himself.

Hermione shook her head. “Just because she’s not part-veela . . .” She didn’t bother to finish the thought, but quickened her pace, with an exasperated sigh of, “Boys.”

“Hey!” Neville protested as they hurried to catch up with her, “I knew who she was!”

#

Hermione woke up Sunday morning believing that she had wet her bed. After slowly waking up part way from the light in the room, the feeling of soaking-wet knickers woke her up the rest of the way in an instant.

What in the . . . ? She hadn’t wet the bed since she was three and she couldn’t imagine a reason she’d do so now. She tossed the covers off of herself to get a look and nearly passed out. The crotch of her pajama bottoms and the sheets beneath them were covered in blood. Her mind raced in a panic and she wanted to send for Pomfrey immediately, thinking she had some horrible and acute disease. But then, after a few seconds, she remembered about the once-weekly, one-day periods the fertility potion caused. This eased her mind, but then she felt disgusted by the mess and mortified that someone would see her.
She peeked out of the curtains of her bed. Lavender and Parvati were still asleep, best as she could tell. She grabbed her wand from her nightstand and whispered a Scourgify. Grateful that it worked so easily, and once again immensely glad that she had magic, she carefully got up and hurried to the bathroom as quickly as she could.

She spent the next several hours on the toilet, often doubled over in pain from cramps. When Lavender and Parvati yelled at her through the door, she was forced to claim she was having severe diarrhea and they most definitely did not want to come in. They accepted her excuse easily enough and even offered to send for Pomfrey, but she assured them that it was nothing serious.

Well, she thought after they left, I’ll have to put this on this list of ‘Things to Flay Scrimgeour Alive For.’ How humiliating.

#

As Hermione walked to the Potions classroom the next day, the fluttering in her stomach returned as she realized that Sunday’s flash-period meant she wasn’t pregnant, and that her lack of childbearing meant another round with Snape.

She walked quietly into class and took her seat. As the other students were filing in, Snape looked down at her from his desk at the front. His expression was blank, but she guessed he knew that she would have had a period since their last attempt if she was not pregnant and he wanted to know if they’d need to schedule another one or not. The Ministry already knew, of course, thanks to the monitoring crystal. She and Snape, on the other hand, were forced to figure it out the old-fashioned way unless the Ministry deigned to inform them.

Trying to disguise the motion from any prying eyes that may already be settled in their own seats, she looked down to take her Potions book from her bag, giving her head a quick shake. It was a small gesture, but she hoped it would be enough to convey her non-pregnancy to her husband. Unless, of course, he interpreted it to mean that no, she hadn’t had her period. There wasn’t a way to make it clearer that she could think of, so she just hoped he understood.

Her uncertainty was settled half an hour later, when he picked a fight with her in a clear attempt to give a plausible detention. Hermione was well-known for being a quick study and so had already picked up this game, not that it was one she enjoyed.

“Miss Granger,” snapped Snape, loudly enough for the whole class to hear, “explain to me what you believe you are doing.”

“Adding the adder fangs to the potion, sir,” she replied dutifully.

“And how many,” he continued, scowling down at her from the other side of her table, “have you put in?”

“Twelve, sir,” she answered, her tone growing defensive. “Just like it says in the book.”

“Have you gone colorblind or simply daft?” he asked, and she could hear the venom seeping into his words.

Hermione almost forgot what he was doing at this insult, but the resentment that rose in her was exactly what was needed, so she let it show. “And what, if I may ask, sir,” she said, injecting her own sarcasm into her words, “does that mean?”

“It means, Miss Granger,” he said, “that this potion is meant to be a soft violet, while yours appears to be nearly pastel. The number of adder fangs given in the book is meant simply as a guideline.
You are to continue adding fangs to the potion until it achieves the correct color, not merely until you have satisfied the minimum requirements of the instructions.”

“I wasn’t finished, sir,” she ground out.

“Indeed?” said Snape. “Because it appeared to me as if you had finished and were already moving on to the next step.”

She glared up at him. “You were mistaken!”

“Pardon me?” His voice was soft, and she had to remind himself that he was only forcing this scene to give plausible reason for a detention. Probably.

She lowered her eyes to her cauldron. “You were mistaken, sir,” she said, trying to sound more respectful. “I was only reaching to the beetle eggs to move them closer for when I would need them, not to put them in directly.”

She kept her eyes down as she could feel his stare on her. “Then continue,” he finally said, then walked back toward his desk, adding, “Five points from Gryffindor for raising your voice to a teacher.” She looked up, slightly confused, as he sat at his desk. The other students looked from Hermione to Snape, appearing just as confused at the light punishment. That is, until he added, as if as an afterthought, “Plus detention. Tomorrow night.”

The other students went back to working, satisfied that Snape had not developed a charitable streak, and Hermione felt some relief that at least she would have one more day.

#

Hermione sat between Ron and Neville at dinner, chatting away and having a pleasant time. On occasion, she looked up at the High Table, but not once did Snape look in her direction. She wasn’t quite sure if she was glad or disappointed, and that uncertainty worried her. Surely she wasn’t actually looking forward to tomorrow night. No, the sinking feeling of dread in her stomach whenever she thought of him touching her reassured her that she was not going crazy. Yet on the other hand, she did want to learn more about this fascinating aspect of life that had recently opened up to her.

She saw Tonks at one end of the table, talking quietly with Lupin, who had joined them for the evening. Tonks had a rather wicked smile on her face and Hermione could have sworn she saw Tonks’s mouth form the word ‘Professor’. Lupin’s response to this was a grin that Hermione could only call . . . wolfish.

Looking away, Hermione came to observe Dumbledore.

“What is it, Hermione?” asked Ron, who had noticed her scrutiny of the Headmaster.

“Dumbledore,” she said softly. “He looks like he’s . . . in pain.”

Ron looked at Dumbledore for several seconds. “I don’t see anything.”

“He keeps touching his right arm.”

“Well, his hand’s cursed,” Ron said reasonably. “It’s no wonder it would bother him.”

“No, not his hand,” Hermione protested. “His arm. Look.” Just then, Dumbledore did indeed move his left had to seemingly unconsciously rub his arm at the elbow.
“Does that mean what I think it means?” asked Ron.

Hermione nodded. “The curse. It must be spreading.”

But before they could think on it anymore, the owls swooped in to deliver the mail. To their surprise, Hedwig flew down and dropped a letter right in front of Hermione.

“Hedwig!” Hermione exclaimed, then hushed herself. “It’s from Harry.”

“Why didn’t I get one?” Ron asked.

Hermione gave Hedwig a bite of chicken from her plate, then grabbed Ron and ran out of the hall.

They didn’t stop until they’d found an empty classroom to duck into. Hermione ripped the envelope open and read the letter aloud:

“Dear Ron and Hermione—See, he put your name first, even though he addressed it to me.—Hope you are doing well. We’re fine. I’ve recalled Kreacher from Hogwarts to help with the house.”

Ron made a disgusted sound. “Why? That thing’s a menace!”

She shushed him and continued. “We’ve got a lead on one of them. Solved the R.A.B. mystery. Hope to see you soon. Harry and Ginny.”

Hermione sighed. She had been so consumed with her own problems lately, she hadn’t bothered to worry about Harry and Ginny, but it was good to hear from them and know they were okay.

“At least some of us are doing something to stop You-Know-Who,” said Ron glumly. “I can’t help feeling as useless as Hagrid’s hairbrush, wasting my time in school while my little sister and best friend are out destroying bits of ultimate evil. I told you, we should have gone with them, Hermione.”

Hermione shook her head. “It would have been impossible. For me, at least, with this blasted P.E.W.S. nonsense I’ve got wrapped into. And you’re the one who insisted on coming with me if I came back to school.”

“That’s because I wanted to help you, Hermione!” said Ron, getting agitated. “But you’re not telling me anything. Not what’s happening, not how it’s going, not even who you were bloody well forced to marry!”

Tears started welling in Hermione’s eyes at his words. “I can’t, Ron,” she said in a quiet voice. “I just can’t. You’ve no idea how much I want to, but . . .” She thought of Ron’s reaction if he found out who had been decreed a better match for her. An image of a very short, very violent duel flashed before her eyes. “. . . I just can’t.”

Seeing how he’d upset her, Ron’s tone softened. “Just tell me you’re doing all right,” he implored.

She wanted to say everything was perfectly fine, that it really wasn’t as bad as all that, but considering the hell the Ministry had in store for her, psychologically and emotionally, if not physically, the best she could respond with was, “My h—husband,” she tripped over the word, “is a good man. He’s not you, Ron, but . . . he doesn’t hurt me,” much, she added to herself, remembering the bruises she’d got. “He has no more choice in this than I do. Considering that, I think we’re both managing the best we can.”

In a remarkable show of tact, Ron didn’t say any more. He simply opened his arms and hugged her.
She held on tight, letting the tears that had built up fall. After a minute or so, she had regained most of her composure, and Ron led her out of the classroom with an arm around her shoulder and hers still around his waist.

They had barely come out into the hallway when a black figure approached and Hermione’s stomach lurched.

Snape, who appeared to have just been passing through, stopped in front of them. He glared down his nose at them, and his eyes flicked from Hermione to Ron and back. Ron was looking at him with the same dislike as ever, but Hermione saw something in Snape’s eyes that Ron didn’t, because she’d seen it in Ron’s when she had been going out with Viktor: jealousy. Oh, it was a much more hidden variety, much deeper under the surface . . . but it was there, and she was a bit shocked to see it.

She said nothing but removed her arm from around Ron’s waist. Snape’s eyelids twitched into a momentary squint at her action and she wondered if he’d got the message.

Finally, when things were about to start looking suspicious, Snape declared, “Fifteen points from Gryffindor for loitering,” and strode off the same direction he’d been going. He passed by so near to her that his billowing cloak nearly caught on her shoulder.

“Loitering?” Ron practically squealed once Snape was out of earshot, his voice full of indignation. He lowered it to more of an outraged muttering as they walked down the hall. “Dirty, greasy git, taking points for no reason at all. I’d like to give him a . . .”

Ron’s continued tirade against the injustice of Snape only served to solidify even further Hermione’s certainty that he must never find out that the ‘greasy git’ was the one shagging the friend he so badly wanted to protect.

#

The next day during lunch, Hermione found herself standing at the door to Snape’s office. He hadn’t been in the Great Hall, so she thought he might be hiding away, possibly to avoid seeing her. She wasn’t entirely sure she truly wanted to see him either, but she felt that, whatever his reaction, perhaps it was best to confront the situation before it got out of control. She could only imagine the horrible thoughts going through his head since last night . . . that is, if her perceived indiscretion really bothered him as much as it had looked like. She needed to know.

She knocked.

“Who is it, and what do you want?” came his voice from the other side of the door, sounding like he was in the middle of something.

There were students passing nearby, so she took care in her response. “Hermione Granger, sir. I would like to . . . appeal my detention.” She heard a snicker from a passing Slytherin, but he scurried away when she looked at him.

“No appeals!” Snape shot back, anger clear in his voice now he knew it was her.

“Please, sir,” she persisted. “It’s important. You see, it wasn’t . . . what you thought it was.”

There was a long pause and Hermione was nearly certain he had decided to ignore her until she went away, until his voice, so quiet she could barely hear, answered, “Enter, then.”

Amazed, she opened the door, slid inside, and shut it behind her. Snape was sitting at his desk as
usual, marking scrolls. He didn’t acknowledge her as she entered, but she saw him tense as she
approached. On one side of his face, his hair was brushed behind his ear, and she could see the
muscle in his jaw clenching and unclenching.

“S—” she started, thinking momentarily of Tonks’s suggestion, then thought this wasn’t the time
to try calling him by his given name. “Sir . . . ?”

He did not look up at her. “You have something to say to me, Miss Granger?”

“Yes, sir.” She stopped in front of his desk. Glancing down, she saw amidst the scrolls five clear
gouge marks the shape of fingernails, quite near the desk’s solitary candle. A furious blush rose on
her face. Had he simply not noticed them yet, or was there some other reason he hadn’t repaired
the desk? She guessed the former, as she couldn’t conceive of the latter. Returning her attention to
Snape’s face as he was still stooped in marking, she continued, “About last night, Professor, when
you saw Ron and me—”

“I am not interested in your pathetic excuses,” he spat, finally looking at her, but with such anger
that she wished he hadn’t. He waved his wand at the door before continuing. “But if this is an open
relationship,” he said the word as if it disgusted him, “may I assume it goes both ways? Am I now
free to take a lover as well?”

“Professor!” Hermione gasped. “Ron and I are not lovers. That’s what I’m trying to tell you.
You’ve got to believe me. We’re just friends.” Then she added, in a smaller voice, “Besides, you
wouldn’t do that.” She wasn’t sure why she said that, but she believed it. After all, he didn’t want
to have sex with her. Why would he want another woman?

He ignored her last comment entirely. “Just friends? And yet you tried to marry him.”

“Of course I did!” she protested. “I thought it would be better than—” She stopped, the look on his
face seeming to challenge her to continue. “Better than some stranger the Ministry decided to pick
out for me.”

Snape sneered. “Some stranger. But not me. You wouldn’t have rather married him than me.”

This is ridiculous, she thought, and abandoned caution. “Of course I would have rather married
him! He’s one of my best friends and, yes, I do . . . have feelings for him. I can’t help that. If this
bloody P.E.W.S. nonsense hadn’t happened, we might have—” She cut herself short, realizing
what it was she’d been forced to trade for what she now had.

Snape was in shock at her outburst. “You wish to discuss missed opportunities?” he asked, his
voice low, sharp, and venomous as a serpent.

She shook her head, calming herself. “No. No, sir. I just want . . .” She raised her head to look at
him, her eyes begging for understanding. “I want you to believe me. Whatever might have
happened, that’s gone now. I made a vow and, coerced or not, I plan to stick by that. I take loyalty
very seriously.”

He looked at her from under his eyebrows. “As do I.”

They seemed to be at a stalemate. Hermione knew perfectly well that so often Snape chose to
believe only what he wanted to, even if it added to his misery. She saw only one option.

“Read my mind.”

“What?” he asked as if he thought she was making a bad joke.
“If you won’t believe what I say, then read my mind. See for yourself.” She stood straight, her shoulders back. Only then did she realize that she actually did have something to hide from him, though it had nothing to do with her fidelity. Harry’s quest for the Horcruxes was a secret between five people and she doubted Snape was supposed to find out about it. But it was too late. She’d just have to try her best to hide that part of her—

“Legilimens!”

She hadn’t even seen him raise his wand, but now she knew he was in her mind, rummaging through her thoughts like so much dirty laundry. There was a flash of her childhood, playing on a swing set with another girl. Then she was being Sorted. The memories cycled through faster than she could keep track. She was dancing with Viktor at the Yule Ball. She was walking into her living room to find Professor McGonagall sitting on her sofa, talking to her parents. She was eleven, deciphering Snape’s riddle. She was helping the twins, Molly, and Sirius decorate the Christmas tree in Grimmauld Place. She was leering starry-eyed at Gilderoy Lockhart. She was running for her life from a werewolf. She was casting a Patronus at a D.A. meeting. She was watching Draco’s body fly over the tower wall. She was telling Ron her husband was a good man. She was in Snape’s office, gasping with pleasure as he grunted beneath her—

Then she was in Snape’s office, gasping to find herself back in the real world. It took her a moment to focus her eyes, but when she did, she saw that he’d lowered his wand and was standing, staring at her with a haunted expression. She wondered if he thought he had imagined her reaction in their last encounter. Perhaps he was waiting for her to chastise him for seeing something so intimate. He had been very protective of his own memories when attempting to teach Harry Occlumency. But why should she yell at him for seeing that? He had, after all, been there.

“Satisfied?” she asked, but there was no harshness in her tone.

In response, he merely sat back down, saying nothing, staring at the desk before him.

“There is . . . another matter,” she ventured. He looked at her to continue, his face remarkably free of resentment. “As you know, I take pride in my academic record. I don’t want all these false detentions to tarnish it. Besides, considering how few detentions I’ve earned before this year, I think it will become suspicious before too long.”

“What do you suggest?” he asked, and she was astonished to find no sharpness in his tone. He was really asking.

“We concoct a plausible story,” she said, encouraged by his response. “We say that I’m helping you with some project for extra credit. People would believe that of me easily enough.”

“But would they believe it of me?” he asked. “That I would require the help of not only a student, but a Gryffindor, for anything?”

She paused, considering, unoffended by his question. “No . . . you’re right. I suppose that would be a stretch. Then say that I have taken on an extra-credit project of my own, and that I must report to you periodically for grading and”—she smiled—“so you can make sure I’m not going to blow up the school.”

He looked at her, eyebrows raised slightly in surprise.

*Did I just joke with Snape?*

He didn’t make any further response to the joke, but nodded. “A plausible explanation. Though in
“case anyone should ask, you would need to actually be working on a special project of some kind.”

“Any suggestions?”

“A research project,” he said without hesitation. “You remember the paper I had you write?”


“There is no known counter-potion.”

“How would someone want a counter-potion to a healing potion?” she asked. She suspected the answer perfectly well, but she thought it best, given his reaction the last time she’d referred to the potion’s side effect, to play dumb.

“Find one,” he commanded, not even acknowledging her pretended ignorance. His voice was surer now that he was away from topics of intimacy and back on potions and teaching. “That should easily take you the better part of the year.”

It was Hermione’s turn to be surprised. “But my research indicated no counter-potion was even possible.”

“Then it will be a plausible challenge to set for you,” he answered with a hint of smugness.

She nodded, glad that they’d solved the problem of her racking up detentions. “Thank you, sir. I’ll . . . see you tonight.” Without waiting for him to respond, she turned and left, trying not to look too upbeat lest someone think she’d succeeded in talking her way out of detention.

#

Hermione’s mind buzzed with questions as she walked down the hallway. She may have been able to dismiss the importance of that potion before, but now she knew it must mean something. But what? She went over everything she knew about Wentworth’s Brew, trying to think of any possible reason Snape would have for the assignment. Not coming up with a satisfactory answer, she had a moment of self-doubt. Maybe it really was just a conveniently difficult project, and the fact that she was recently familiar with it meant that she wouldn’t have to waste time looking it up again. She chewed on her lower lip as she tried to come up with an answer.

She really should have known better than to let her mind wander while in enemy territory.

Hermione was almost out of the dungeons when she heard a peal of laughter echo down the hall from somewhere nearby. Instantly on guard, she drew her wand and looked around.

“Little Mudblood’s all alone.” Pansy Parkinson slipped from the shadows. “Just like Draco was.”

Crabbe, Goyle, Blaise, and Millicent all came around a corner, blocking Hermione’s way out. Her heart was pounding. She should have expected this. The Slytherins were afraid of her, yes, but she should have known they’d try to exact some form of retribution.

“It was an accident.” She forced her voice to remain calm. “I swear, Pansy, I didn’t want to kill him.”


“I didn’t!” Hermione protested. “He was the one who hated me. He was the one who was always starting it. And anyway, I only meant to disarm him.”
“Hear that?” Pansy asked her friends in a cold, mocking tone. “It wasn’t her fault. It’s never their fault, is it? Poor little Gryffindors, defenders of right, upholders of justice, all-around knights of good. You might fool yourselves, but you don’t fool us.”

The Slytherins were circling her, closing in for the kill, and they might very well murder her. She tried to think of a spell that would incapacitate them all at once. But it was too late. She’d let them get their positions. It would be impossible to hit all of them simultaneously.

As curse after curse nearly made it to her lips before evaporating, she wondered if her hesitation was entirely out of the self-preserving knowledge that her first hex would start a battle she wasn’t likely to win . . . or if it was fear of taking another life that silenced her. She had learned the hard way that even the tamest of spells could have unexpectedly fatal results. A part of her would rather risk death than risk another piece of her soul being stripped away if a spell from her wand ended another life, even if accidentally. There were times she could still hear the thud Draco’s body had made as it hit the ground, even though she couldn’t have been sure she’d heard it at the time.

“Oh, hello there.”

The tense, slow movement of the group stopped and everyone looked to see who had interrupted them.

Luna stood in the passageway to the Entrance Hall, her wand in her hand but at her side, looking at them all with a bemused smile. “I thought I saw a Nargle come this way. Did you see one?”

“Leave, Loony,” snarled Pansy through clenched teeth.

“We’d best find it,” Luna explained calmly, seemingly oblivious to the fact that the six people in front of her had their wands out and pointing at each other. “They can be quite a nuisance if not dealt with immediately.”

Luna walked toward them, and as she did so, Ron, Neville, Tonks and Lupin turned the corner behind her. Tonks and Lupin managed to keep up the casual façade. Neville and Ron, however, looked ready for battle, should it become necessary.

Some of the Slytherins’ wand hands faltered, but none went so far as to lower them. Their eyes went from Luna to Hermione to the others, not sure what to do, as Luna made to walk straight through them, her eyes wandering around the hallway as if she were searching out the Nargle.

“Better listen to her,” Tonks said, leaning against the dungeon wall. “Those Nargles . . . nasty little beasties. Real easy to bite off more than you can handle with them.”

Most of the Slytherins were clever enough to pick up on the veiled threat and lowered their wands. Crabbe and Goyle needed a look from Pansy before they got the hint.

Luna made her way to Hermione and looked at her as if she hadn’t altogether meant to go there. “You didn’t see one, did you?” she asked. Hermione shook her head, smiling at her friend with relief. “Hm. My mistake,” Luna observed easily, strolling back to the Gryffindors with Hermione beside her. “Do keep your eye out for one, though,” she tossed back at the Slytherins. “They can sometimes pop up where you least expect them.”

Hermione walked with Luna back to the safety of her friends, leaving the Slytherins to their impotent rage.

As they all made their exit, Tonks commented, “Ten points from Slytherin. Each. For . . . loitering.”
Making her way back to the Entrance Hall, Hermione laughed with amusement and relief. “Thank you. All of you. They just . . . surprised me. I’m embarrassed I let that happen, actually . . . or almost happen.” Her voice trailed off at the end, and she wondered if her friends guessed that she was more relieved to not have killed than to not have been killed.

“No, it’s our fault,” Ron said, putting a hand on her shoulder. “We shouldn’t let you wander around the castle alone, especially not the dungeons. Not when half of Slytherin wants to kill you and the other half wants to Crucio you. If I wasn’t so busy stuffing my face . . . I should have offered to go with you.”

“No!” Hermione protested, perhaps a bit too strongly. “I mean . . . I’ll just be more careful.”

“Why did you need to go down there, anyway?” Ron asked. “You can’t have really believed Snape would let you off the hook.”

“We’ll make sure there aren’t any more near-mishaps, Ron,” Lupin interrupted. “I’ll have a word with Professor Dumbledore about it.”

Ron looked about to say something, but Hermione spoke first. “How did you all know to come after me?”

“You can thank Luna for that,” said Neville, a touch of pride in his voice. “She took one look at that lot sneaking off and knew they were up to no good.”

Luna shrugged. “They had that look. I’ve seen it before.”

Hermione beamed at the Ravenclaw. “Thank you,” she told her. “You’re a good friend.”

Luna looked back at her as if she’d just said, “Water is wet,” and nodded. “So are you.”

“Well, you four had better be getting to class soon,” said Lupin. “Lunch is almost over.”

Tonks looked disappointed. “And I didn’t even get to my pudding. Treacle tart today.”

“There will be plenty of time for pudding later, Dora,” said Lupin. Hermione was fairly certain that only she and Luna caught the mischievous glint in his eyes at those words, and the answering one from Tonks.

#

That evening at dinner, Hermione received two small packages. The usual one from Snape, of course, which she quickly hid in her robes, and another which was wrapped in cheerful violet paper.

She opened it to find a golden object which resembled a large locket or a Muggle compact. It fit nicely in her palm and had a chain around it, which meant it was both too big to be a simple piece of jewelry and yet meant to be worn around the neck.

There was a note with it.

*Miss Granger,*

*I trust you know what this is and how to use it. And remember, should you need real help, your friends are often nearer than you think.*
Now more curious than ever, Hermione opened the strange object. There was only a mirror inside. . . but not a mirror. The images were mostly hazy and swirled lazily around the surface of the glass. Some of the images were a bit clearer than the others: Pansy, Crabbe and Goyle.

She looked across the Great Hall to the Slytherin table, where the three in question were shooting covert but hateful glances at her.

*A Foe-Glass!* she realized. She waited for the Slytherins to stop watching her, then slipped it around her neck, hiding it under her robes. She sent a smile of thanks to Dumbledore at the High Table, to which he responded with a gracious nod.

#

Hermione entered Snape’s office that evening less sure of herself than ever. She hadn’t realized until that moment that there was a certain comfort in knowing exactly what to expect, even if it was unpleasant. A disgusting, humiliating situation could be got through and moved on from. She had learned to do that, more or less, learned how to shut it out of her mind and allow herself to wallow in self-pity afterward. But now, the knowledge that she might actually get some enjoyment out of it bothered her. She wanted to experiment a bit, try different things, and yet it was still Snape she was dealing with. Was it only because of the potion and the darkness that she could find any pleasure in sex with him? Was it only because she had forgotten in that moment who she was with? He was not an attractive man; that much she was sure of. Nor was he a likeable man. But she was stuck with him. Even if she could learn to see past his failings, would he ever do the same?

He didn’t say a word as she closed the door and approached his desk. He was marking papers again, but much more calmly than usual. Deliberately, even. She stood silently before him for several seconds, her heart fluttering, before he set down his quill, stood, and passed by her without speaking or making eye contact. She turned to watch him as he moved near the door, raising the wards, replaced his wand in his robe, and turned silently to face her.

In the dim candlelight of the room, he nearly sank into the shadows. As she peered through them, at his face, she was surprised to see the strange expression he wore. It wasn’t angry or bitter or critical. If she didn’t know better, she would have had to call it . . . sad.

“Turn around,” he said, his voice incredibly quiet.

She straightened, not sure whether to say what she was going to. Well, he had wanted her to show initiative.

“No. Not that way.”

He looked at her sharply, as if not believing she’d just contradicted him. The sudden spark of anger in his eyes made her start, but she was already committed.

“That way,” she said, unable to meet his eyes as she did, “was . . . too hard. You left . . . bruises.”

She glanced up at him. The anger was gone. He immediately looked away, his gaze wandering aimlessly over the bottles on the shelves.

“There are few options, Miss Granger,” he replied. “The . . . other way . . . was unacceptable.”
Like hell, she thought, but didn’t press it. Instead, she turned and began arranging the scrolls on his desk into neat piles on either side. She expected him to snap at her not to touch his things, but she didn’t hear a word from him. When she turned back around, he was just watching her.

His lack of rebuke gave her nerve. Placing her hands on the now empty space on the desk, she slid back until she was sitting on it. Then she waited.

For several seconds, their eyes were locked, unblinking. Hermione’s heart thumped so loudly she was sure he could hear it as she waited for his response.

“Nox.”

Snape walked toward her, his footsteps echoing in her ears. The room was completely dark now, and she knew she must stay in the same position or else risk an awkward and embarrassing situation. That is . . . more awkward and embarrassing. She wasn’t surprised that Snape could get around his office in the dark, but she thought it best not to make it any more difficult. As she slid her wand from her robe and placed it beside her on the desk, a thought passed through her mind that this insistence on darkness was a bit childish, but then . . . it wasn’t as if she really wanted to see much. Was it?

As she leaned back and situated her clothes, she found that the darkness actually did make it easier. Enveloped in blackness so complete she might have been blind, she could, perhaps, for a moment, almost forget Snape was there . . . . But she still felt his presence. Still she could hear his breathing, which, to her surprise, was already betraying his lack of utter composure.

She felt him lean over her, bracing a hand on his desk. As she felt him meet with her, it occurred to her that, under this cover of darkness, she could imagine it was anyone. As that thought entered her mind, an unbidden mental image of Ron came with it, and her breath caught. No, she thought, pushing it aside. Absolutely not. She’d promised to be faithful to her husband, and faithfulness came from the inside. She may not be able to control what her heart felt, but she did have control of her mind. Which rules you, Hermione? she thought. Your heart or your mind? Of course, she knew the answer.

This man with her was Snape. Her husband. For better or worse.

She closed her eyes (more an affectation, at this point, as it changed nothing) and let her other senses examine her situation. The smell, as always in Snape’s office, was a mixture of many less-than-pleasant aromas. Potions were rarely composed of pretty-smelling things, after all. She could hear her breath, along with Snape’s, soft and haggard . . . but she knew that would change. The desk beneath her was cold and hard and not all that comfortable to lie on.

This time, rather than searching for something to distract her mind, she focused it entirely on what she was feeling as Snape moved. A peculiar thing, it was. To her shock, it wasn’t all that bad as she remembered it being before.

There it was again. That sensation. That strange pleasure that defied description. She needed more.

Her own breaths turned ragged and shallow. Nearly unconsciously, she braced her feet against the desk and began trying to move with him. It was no good. The angle was all wrong.

To her astonishment, her feet left the desk and clasped behind Snape’s back. In that instant, they both froze. She couldn’t believe she had made so bold a move as to wrap her legs around his hips. The implication was undeniable, and he couldn’t have missed it. She was glad at that moment not to be able to see the look on his face.
And then he started moving again. And kept moving.

That strange sensation was so strong now. Any analysis of the feeling was impossible as it overwhelmed her senses.

She tried to speak, tried to form words to express the feeling she couldn’t understand.

“Pro . . . Prof . . .” was all she could get out between gasps. No, that’s not right, some distant voice in the part of her mind that was still coherent informed her. The Teacher was gone. This was the Man. And the Man had a name.

The next second she was overcome by a pleasure she’d never known, strange and intense. Her breath caught in her throat, but as the sensation washed through her, she found her voice.

“Severus!” she half-moaned, half-cried.

With her legs, she clutched him to her, clinging to him as the blissful feeling rocked her body. Eventually the feeling subsided, finishing its pass through her system, and her legs, weakened, loosened their grip. Still moving, Snape shuddered, and a name fell from his lips.

“Lily . . .”

It took Hermione a split second to realize what had happened. When she did, she grabbed her wand from its place beside her.

“Lumos!”

The wand tip lit up like a torch as she held it between them. Snape’s face was flushed, damp, and he was looking down at her with the same expression of utter shock and disbelief that she was giving him. Neither moved as they processed what had just happened.

Then Snape sunk to the floor.

“Lily?!” Hermione cried. Somehow, she had almost forgotten about that. She scooted backward off the desk, standing behind it and shoving her skirt and robe back down.

Snape was still crouched on the floor, his head bowed low, his hand run roughly through his hair.

“Lily?!” Hermione shouted again, incapable of thinking of anything else to say. She saw him move then, shuffling his clothing as she moved around the desk to face him.

He was crouched still, holding his head in his hands, when she thrust the light at him.

She stopped. He seemed so pained, so . . . guilty. He still wouldn’t meet her eyes. She looked down at him, hoping for some explanation, but the pain of what he’d just said tore at her. When she spoke again, her voice was soft, thick with disbelief and confusion. “. . . Lily?”

He shot to his feet, his face a cold, furious scowl. “Out.”

Hermione’s brow furrowed. In that moment, she honestly didn’t understand what he was saying.

“Out!” he repeated, grabbing her by the arm. He dragged her to the door forcibly, ignoring her yelp of pain and her questioning stutters. “Out! Out! OUT!”

Snape flung his door open wide and threw her into the hallway so hard she stumbled and fell to her hands and knees. Not even pausing to see if she had been injured, he slammed the door.
Hermione lay there in the hallway, trying to figure out what had happened, trying to come to grips with it, to think of something that would make it less horrible. When the tears started running down her cheeks, she knew she should get out of there before another student passed by.

She hadn’t brought her bag, so she had nothing to gather. She stood up and dashed through the hall and up the stairs as quickly as she could without, she hoped, drawing too much attention.

Halfway to Gryffindor Tower, she realized she couldn’t go to her room until she’d composed herself, or her roommates wouldn’t leave her alone until she told them what was wrong. She ran to the Entrance Hall and outside, onto the grounds.
The Madness of Mrs. Malfoy

Chapter by Severely Lupine (ShawnaCanon)

Hermione raced across the soggy grass, heedless of the rain and hardly able to see more than her feet pounding in front of her, blinded as she was by her tears and her fury. She didn’t know where she planned on going in such a state, but her body found its way down the well-known path to Hagrid’s hut. When her feet stopped moving, she raised her head to look at it.

Yes, she thought. Hagrid. I can talk to Hagrid. What she planned to say or how she was going to explain what was troubling her, she had no idea. She hoped he wouldn’t ask too many questions but would offer a shoulder to cry on.

She knocked on the door, but there was no answer. “Hagrid?” she choked out. No response. She tried the doorknob and found it wasn’t locked. She opened it and peered in, finding the hut empty. Not even Fang the boarhound greeted her. Must be in the Forbidden Forest, she figured. Deciding to wait for him to return (or at least to make use of a dry, isolated place to have a cry) she went inside.

She closed the door behind her, peeled off her soaking school robes and dropped them by the doorway, then curled up into Hagrid’s oversize armchair beside a crackling fire. When she pulled her knees up, she remembered she wasn’t wearing underwear, so she cast a cleansing charm on herself and then transfigured a bit of kindling by the fireplace into a pair of cotton knickers, which she pulled on. Then, secure in the knowledge that no one was around to hear her, she let her tears flow freely.

Anger and betrayal whirled around in her mind. She wanted to lash out, to hurt Snape as he’d hurt her.

Do you love him? that troublesome voice deep in her subconscious asked.

Startling herself, she looked up and gazed into the fire. Of course not.

Do you often dissolve into a sobbing mess over someone you don’t care for?

She forced herself silent, holding in the sobs and sniffles. He’s betrayed our arrangement. After all his talk of loyalty, after I refused to think of Ron . . .

You don’t cry often. Why waste your tears on him?

I don’t love him. I don’t even like him. How could I possibly love such a self-centered, cruel—

Git? The voice finished. As if you didn’t know that’s exactly what he was. She had no response to that. And yet, at least on some level, you’ve already let him into your heart.

For the next ten minutes, Hermione wept, but not for Snape or what he’d said. She wept because she had been careless enough to not guard herself as she knew she should have. She had thought she could handle it, that she could come to a respectable and possibly even amiable arrangement with Snape, even if they would never love each other (not that she had ever even entertained such a ridiculous notion). She had thought they were making progress, had just begun to hope that perhaps this sham marriage would at least bring occasional pleasure during their forced couplings, had started to wonder if she might ever see him as anything other than her greasy git of a teacher. She should have known better, should have kept things cold and analytical. But she’d opened her mind,
and in doing so, unknowingly, her heart.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, she clenched her jaw and refused to let any further sound issue from her throat. She would be strong. She would do her duty to keep her wand and to keep herself safe, but she would no longer allow herself to become swept away in the feelings Snape’s body could make her experience, always bearing in mind the quite contrary feelings that everything else of Snape provoked in her. Upon a certain retrospection, she supposed she had thought herself at least safe from jealousy about him, both because she would never love him and because she couldn’t imagine another woman doing so. She squelched the desire to know more about his relationship with Lily (When had it started? How far had it gone?). She didn’t care. Lily was dead, and so she knew he would not be physically unfaithful in their marriage. And since this marriage was a purely physical matter, why should she care about anything beyond that?

The door creaked open, and Hermione quickly wiped the tears and snot from her face with the blanket draped over the chair, only realizing a moment later that it left quite a mess on the blanket.

“Oh, Hagrid, I’m sorry to—” she started, looking at the door, but the words froze in her throat as she saw who it was that entered.

“Do I look like that ridiculous half-breed to you, Mudblood?” sneered the hate-filled voice of Narcissa Malfoy.

_Bugger! _Hermione thought as she realized that she had stowed her wand in her robes, which currently lay in a pile on the floor by Narcissa’s feet.

The tall, slender, sopping wet witch standing in the doorway pointed her wand at Hermione and the emotionally distraught, wandless Gryffindor who really should have known better than to seek out a solitary place when there were people who wanted her dead and none of her protectors knew of her whereabouts had only time to pray that the next word she heard would not start with an ‘A’.

_“Stupefy!” _shouted Narcissa, and Hermione’s world went black.

#

Hermione awoke with a splitting headache. The first thing she registered, along with the pounding in her head, was that her movement was restricted. She looked around to see that she was in a large, lavishly furnished room that appeared to be a study of some kind. She was lying on the floor with her arms tied behind her and her feet bound at the ankles. As her gaze swept the area, she spotted a blonde woman pointing her wand at her from a dark corner of the room.

Hermione could barely register who she was seeing before a scream was torn from her throat and she writhed on the ground in pain. She felt like she was being electrocuted, flogged, and stabbed by a hundred knives all at once. A moment later, the pain was gone, but her nerves buzzed and her skin twitched all over her body. She lay on the floor, her strength sapped, attempting to regain her composure. She tried to speak but could only croak, so she moved her head, which still throbbed as it rested heavily on the floor, to look at her captor.

Narcissa wasn’t looking well. There were dark circles around eyes that held a crazed gleam which made her look all the more like her sister. Her hair was disheveled, as if it hadn’t been properly taken care of for months. Her silk robes were water-stained and wrinkled. She strode to Hermione, fist clenched around her wand, and stared down at her with more pure loathing than Hermione had ever had directed at her.

Hermione tried to speak, but couldn’t. She wondered if Narcissa would say something soon or just
kill her. As she looked into the woman’s furious ice-blue eyes, she realized that words were unnecessary. They both knew exactly why this situation had come about. Narcissa raised her wand again. Hermione braced herself.

#

By the time the sun rose, Hermione wanted to die.

Narcissa was very adept at the Crucius Curse, Hermione had to admit. She knew just how long to hold it each time and how long to let her victim rest, so that Hermione would not lose her mind under the torture. At least she seemed to have learned one thing from her sister’s mistakes.

As Hermione writhed on the floor, her raw throat producing a harsh, raspy, nearly mute protest (her voice had given out hours ago), her mind was detached enough from her agonized body that she wondered if Narcissa had become so proficient at the curse under her sister’s or husband’s tutelage, and who she might have practiced it on.

It had taken far longer than she’d have liked, but eventually Hermione had learned to make use of the one skill her first intimate encounters with Snape had helped to unlock. There was no way she could stop Narcissa, so she resigned herself, for the time being, to the fact that her body must be put through what it was currently suffering. The one thing she did have a choice about, however, was whether she would allow it to break her mind. While she had gathered from Narcissa’s seemingly careful timing that she would not let Hermione go mad, Hermione did not like the idea of what might happen should Narcissa suddenly change her mind. So, she started reciting in her head: potions ingredients, wand movements for charms, even the Quidditch statistics she’d overheard the boys talking about over the years . . . anything to keep her mind off the unbearable pain. Her body reacted on its own, but her mind . . . at least *that* she had some control over.

*Lacewing flies, leeches, knotgrass, bicorn horn, boomslang skin*, thought Hermione intently as her leg seized up and kneed her in the chin. Her recitation of the ingredients for Polyjuice Potion brought to mind a couple of other things, neither one particularly pleasant, but both preferable to letting herself focus on her current predicament. First, she wondered if disguising her as somebody else would have protected her from those who wished her dead. Second, she wondered what Snape would think when he found out she’d been so upset by his words that she’d run out and got herself kidnapped. She didn’t like to imagine it, so she was quite relieved when Narcissa chose that moment to stop torturing her.

Hermione lay weak, twitching, and panting on the rug, her face bathed in the bright morning sunlight that shone through the windows. She squinted up at the blonde woman as her tormentor took a leisurely seat in a stiff wingback chair. Hermione waited for the moment when she would direct her wand at her again, but it didn’t come.

Narcissa snapped her fingers and a greenish-skinned house-elf appeared. The house-elf took one glance at Hermione, who looked imploringly at it, before looking up at its mistress, wringing its hands.

“Bring us some breakfast,” Narcissa drawled. The house-elf disappeared immediately.

Hermione tried to sit up, and Narcissa didn’t try to prevent it. Hermione was very weak and incredibly sore, but she managed to sit up and lean against a book case, trying to keep the sunlight out of her eyes.

At first, she said nothing, not knowing if she could and wondering if it would set the older witch off again, anyway. She watched as an owl flew in through an open window and dropped a parcel in
Narcissa’s lap. Narcissa calmly withdrew a coin from her pocket and handed it to the bird, which flapped away as if it had not seen anything the least out of the ordinary in the room.

Hermione sat on the floor, laboring for breath, not taking her eyes off of her captor. She tried to work out what she could do to get out, to get away, to get back to Hogwarts, but nothing came to her. She certainly couldn’t attempt to Apparate; she’d be splinched for sure. In her current state and without her wand, she had little hope of escape. Her best bet would seem to be delaying any further torture—or death—until Dumbledore could mount a rescue.

She opened her mouth and attempted to speak, but as soon as her tongue moved, the dryness of her mouth and throat caused her to snap her mouth back shut and try in vain to swallow (which was even more unpleasant) and to work up some saliva.

Meanwhile, Narcissa flipped through the paper as if it was just another lazy morning. “Looks like the Harpies beat the Cannons yesterday. Not that anyone’s surprised.” She flipped to another page just as the house-elf reappeared with a tray of tea and scones. She allowed the elf to pour her tea and place a small plate with a scone on it on the end table beside her, then waved the elf toward Hermione.

Curiously, Hermione watched the nervous elf approach her as if she were a wounded animal that might lash out if it got too close (which it had plenty of reason to think), pour her some tea, and place a scone beside her.

She waited until Narcissa took a sip before grabbing the cup and greedily gulping down her own tea. The heat and wetness felt so good against her sore throat, she didn’t even register the flavor. When she placed the cup back on the saucer, the elf, which had jumped away in fright at her sudden lunge at the cup, inched forward and carefully refilled it for her.

Her thirst slaked, Hermione was more dignified in taking a sip of the second cupful. She looked at the scone, which she was less sure of. If Narcissa wanted to kill her, she would have done it already. Probably. Deciding she really had no idea what the witch would do, she left the scone on the plate.

With her throat now moistened, Hermione tried to speak again. Her voice was faint and hoarse, but audible. “Mrs. Malfoy, you’ve got… got to believe me.” Her throat spasmed, closing up at inopportune moments. “I didn’t… want to… .”

“It seems my husband’s finally seen fit to get himself broken out of Azkaban,” Narcissa commented as she browsed the paper, as if she hadn’t heard Hermione. “Fourth page news, no less. My, my, we are moving up in the world.”

Noting that news as just one more way the day was one of her worst ever, Hermione tried again. “It was an accident.”

Narcissa turned another page. “Hm. A wizard in Tanzania invented a new charm for cleaning out the insides of something called ‘sprinkler pipes’. Well, that sounds utterly useless.”

“Please,” Hermione persisted. “Please believe… I didn’t mean… .”

“And yet you did!” Narcissa snarled, shoving the paper aside and attempting to flay Hermione with her eyes. “Whether you meant to,” she said mockingly, “or not, the fact remains that my son is dead by your wand.” There was a finality to her words which struck Hermione dumb. She couldn’t, after all, argue that point.
Narcissa continued to glare at her, the hot anger draining from her gaze until it was cold as ice. Hermione didn’t look away, but continued to look into Narcissa’s eyes until she saw past the fury and madness, to the unbearable motherly anguish that shone so clear in those blue eyes. And while the color may have been different, the shape, Hermione noticed with some surprise, had been that of Draco’s eyes as well. And though she knew the witch had tortured her and might very well still kill her, she couldn’t help but feel now the deepest regret she had yet experienced since cursing Draco. Narcissa had had her child taken from her in a moment of well-intentioned brutality. And Hermione now had some small idea what that felt like.

“What . . . will you do with me?” she asked.

Before Narcissa could respond, another owl flapped through the window, carrying an even larger parcel. By the look on the woman’s face, she had not been expecting it. The owl did not fly to Narcissa, but dropped the parcel at Hermione’s feet before flying off. She only had time to glimpse her name before Narcissa Summoned it to herself.

Narcissa opened the envelope attached to the parcel. As she read it, one of her eyebrows crept up her forehead and she smirked. “Miss Granger,” she read aloud. “As you know, we have been monitoring your health very closely. So, we can take great pleasure in being the first to inform you that you have recently become pregnant.”

Hermione gasped, a dozen thoughts swarming her head at once.

Narcissa noted her alarm with amusement and continued reading. “Please drink these potions immediately and someone will inform you of your next appointment as it gets closer. Healer E. Partridge, St. Mungo’s.”

Hermione hardly heard her. She was still processing the fact that she was, again, pregnant. Her first thought after that realization, however, was whether the child—little more than a fertilized egg at this point, really—would have survived the extended Crucius session she’d just been put through. As far as she knew, there had been no studies on the effects of the Crucius Curse on fetuses. Was the barely-forming child already dead? Would it live, but suffer severe birth defects? Did the curse somehow bypass the child entirely? Other thoughts and worries came to the surface, but, to Hermione’s surprise, that one kept pushing them out of the way. When she pulled herself together enough to look at Narcissa again, she found the woman’s cold eyes watching her unblinkingly.

“I see my son was right about you,” Narcissa said calmly, but her tone was hard as steel. “Which of your snot-nosed cohorts is the sire of your bastard; the blood traitor or the blood traitor’s orphan? Or do you even know?”

Hermione just shook her head and unconsciously looked down and put a hand on her belly, still worrying about her newly-discovered child. There was a long silence and she wondered what Narcissa would do next.

Unexpectedly, Narcissa crossed the room to kneel beside her and set the parcel down next to her. Hermione met Narcissa’s eyes, and the woman smiled deviously. “Well, then,” said Narcissa, “you’d better take your potions.”

“You’re not . . .” Hermione ventured, “you’re not going to kill me?”

“When there’s an innocent child at stake?” Narcissa asked in what sounded like a kind tone, but Hermione distinctly distrusted it. Nevertheless, even if she was lying, it was at least a way to stall for a bit longer.
Hermione opened the package and saw some small potions bottles. She recognized a strengthening one and drank it immediately, hoping that it might give some help to the baby. The others she drank slowly, expecting that as soon as she’d finished, Narcissa would begin cursing her again. As she drank, it struck her as odd that she had given no thought to not doing everything she could to keep the baby. Most girls who found themselves pregnant while still in school would welcome any chance to avoid the responsibility of having a child. But Hermione had never been like most girls. Maybe it was her Gryffindor nature or maybe it was just who she was, but she desperately wanted some good to come from everything she was being put through, and she’d always been taught that children were, above all, good. She may not have sought to have kids so soon, but if she was being forced to conceive them, she certainly wanted to keep them.

When she finished off the potions, she caught Narcissa staring at her cleavage. At least, that’s what she thought for one crazy moment, before Narcissa snatched the Foe-Glass that Hermione had hanging around her neck, jerking Hermione forward as she opened it.

“What’s this?” asked Narcissa. Hermione held her breath, hoping against hope that the older witch would not take it and promising herself that if she was not stripped of it, she would take care to pay more attention to it. After all, if she’d bothered to open it in Hagrid’s hut, she might have avoided quite a lot of pain. “A mirror?” Narcissa asked derisively. “And just who are you so interested in attempting to look pretty for? Vain attempt though it may be. The child’s father, no doubt?” Her voice was sweet, coaxing. “Potter? Weasley?”

“Professor Snape,” Hermione whispered before she could stop herself, for at that moment she glimpsed a familiar dark form glide through the doorway behind Narcissa.

Narcissa looked in Hermione’s eyes, her own narrowed, then spun to face the intruder, wand out. “You!” she shouted in disbelief, then jumped up and took several steps toward Snape. “You should be dead! You broke the Vow! You let Draco die!”

Snape remained calm, his voice even. “That was not my fault.”

“No!” she snapped. “It was hers! Come to rescue her, have you? Still the old man’s faithful dog, Severus? I should have listened to my sister. She knew we couldn’t trust you.”

Snape was circling slowly, moving counter to Narcissa so that he was getting closer to Hermione and Narcissa had the windows behind her. “You have larger concerns than your own vengeance, Narcissa,” he warned her, “and more than one old man to worry about.”

Before Hermione could wonder what that meant, Tonks and Lupin rushed into the room.

“Hello, Aunt Cissy,” said Tonks, never taking her eyes off Narcissa as she moved with Lupin, passing behind Snape to reach Hermione.

“That chit killed your cousin,” Narcissa growled at her.

“That chit is my friend,” Tonks replied, “and my cousin was a prat.”

Narcissa just shot a curse at her niece, which Tonks deflected easily.

“Can you walk?” Lupin whispered to Hermione, kneeling beside her. Hermione shook her head. Without another word, Lupin lifted her aloft, cradling her in his arms like a child. She knew she was still in danger, and she suddenly felt more weak than ever, but knowing she was in the arms of a friend, Hermione felt safer than she had in far too long.

Narcissa shouted and cursed them as they made their escape from the room, but Tonks covered
their retreat. When they reached a hallway, Tonks and Lupin broke into a full run. She could still hear Narcissa shouting and the sounds of a duel as they ran through the house.

“Professor Snape?” she asked. “What about—”

“He’ll be fine,” Lupin assured her.

Then they were out of the house and, with a crack, back at the gates of Hogwarts.

Hermione must have lost consciousness somewhere between the gates and the school, because the next thing she knew, she was waking up on a bed, propped up with at least three pillows, a sheet covering her. She opened her eyes slowly, annoyed to find her headache still present. Other than that, however, she felt quite comfortable.

“Madam Pomfrey!” came Ron’s voice from somewhere far too nearby to justify being that loud. “She’s waking up!”

“Shhh,” Hermione whispered, squinting at the throbbing in her head and waving an arm weakly in the direction of the voice.

She heard quick footsteps approach and opened her eyes wide enough to see that Ron had taken her hand in his and was looking at her with a worried expression. She turned her attention to the other side of the bed to see Pomfrey approach, then felt her lay a hand on her forehead.

“No fever. That’s good,” said Pomfrey. “How are you feeling, child?”

Hermione shook her head, then squinted again. “My head . . . is killing me.”

Pomfrey’s brow furrowed, and she hurried away, returning a moment later with a potion bottle. When Hermione lifted her hand weakly to take it, her fingers twitched so badly that she couldn’t hold onto it. Frowning again, Pomfrey held it to Hermione’s lips. Hermione drank it gladly, and within seconds her headache dissipated.

“How do you feel?” Pomfrey asked.

“Much better,” Hermione answered, now able to look at them properly without being dazzled by the sunlight in the room. “Really weak, though.”

“I’m not surprised,” Pomfrey said, then made a *tsk* sound. “With all you’ve been put through, it’s a wonder you survived. Thank God the teachers found you in time.”

“How did they?” Hermione wondered aloud.

Pomfrey shook her head. “I don’t know, child. I was more concerned with patching you up than questioning your rescuers about how they found you.”

“I don’t know how it happened, Hermione,” Ron told her earnestly, “but I’m sure I should have been there to save you. I’m sorry I—”

“Don’t be stupid, Ron,” Hermione chastised him. “You couldn’t have helped me. If you’d been there, she might have killed you.”

“She?” Ron asked. “Who’s she?”
“They didn’t tell you?” Hermione asked. “Narcissa Malfoy.”

“But why would—” Ron said, then stopped. “Oh.”

“She wanted revenge,” Hermione confirmed. There was a moment of awkward silence, which Hermione broke by asking, “How long was I asleep?”

“Three days,” Pomfrey answered. “It took the first ten hours just to stop your body convulsing. How many times did she use it, girl?”

“Use what?” Hermione asked.

“The Cruciatus,” Pomfrey answered, then waved off Hermione’s surprised look. “I’ve seen its effects enough times to recognize it. But I’ve never seen such extreme and lingering symptoms. She must have been cursing you off and on for over an hour.”

“Most of the night, I think,” Hermione corrected.

Pomfrey gasped. “What creature who calls herself a mother could do such a thing?”

Mother . . . The word floated through Hermione’s fogged mind until it struck a chord. “Ron,” she said suddenly, “could you find Professor Dumbledore? I need to speak with him.”

“Are you sure you feel up to it?” he asked. Hermione nodded. “All right, but don’t overdo yourself.” With a last look of concern, he took his leave.

It surprised her to have found him at her bedside, worrying over her. Maybe it was because not having Harry meant he focused more on her, or maybe he’d grown up a bit more while she wasn’t looking. He would have made a good husband, she thought wistfully.

She must have dozed off, because the next thing she knew, she was aware of someone sitting in the chair beside her bed. She opened her eyes and groaned. Whatever potions they’d given her to help with the pain in her muscles and nerve endings must have been wearing off.

“You wished to speak with me, Miss Granger?” came the soft voice of Albus Dumbledore.

Hermione nodded. Even breathing was painful. “Hurts . . .” she choked out.

Dumbledore called Pomfrey over, and the mediwitch gave her two more potions. It took a moment, but Hermione felt the pain ebb away. Muscles all over her body continued to twitch periodically, which was more annoying than painful. Once Pomfrey went back to her office, Hermione met Dumbledore’s eyes bravely.

“Did the baby survive?” she asked.

His expression gave nothing away. “Have you had news, Miss Granger?”

Hermione stared at the sheet over her legs, already supposing she knew the truth. “I’m pregnant again,” she said flatly. “Or at least I was. I can’t imagine it could have survived what I was put through.”

Dumbledore’s mouth made a thin, tight line beneath his facial hair. “I do not believe any extensive research has been done on the subject, but my guess would be that there is no need for concern.” She looked at him with surprise and hope, but found that, while his words may have been reassuring, the solemnity in his eyes betrayed his uncertainty. “An unborn child is inside of, and
dependent upon, its mother’s body,” he explained, “but, even in the earliest stages of development, it is a distinct being: physically, magically, in all ways that truly matter. And curses such as the Crucius affect only those upon whom they are placed, not anyone who might be in the vicinity of or even touching the victim. Therefore, my guess would be—and it is only a guess—that the child was not affected by the curse. At least, not directly. And if, to any degree, it was . . . given the strength I know both you and Severus to possess, I would say your offspring has the best chance of any to have survived it.”

His last statement struck Hermione in a very odd way. She hadn’t allowed herself to wonder what a child of hers and Snape’s making would be like. Somehow, it was easier to think of the child as simply hers and treat the method it came about as an entirely separate issue. But her fear for her child pushed that thought quickly aside.

“Isn’t there a way to make sure?” she asked. “Even Muggles have ways to make sure the baby’s still alive.”

“This early on?” Dumbledore asked.

*No. Of course not.* She shook her head.

“There are no appropriate diagnostic spells,” he explained kindly. “But if the Crucius did cause a miscarriage . . . you will know soon enough.”

She wondered at his discomfort and why he wouldn’t meet her eyes when he said that. But he was right. If the child was dead, her body would expel it. If not . . . it would be taken from her in a month.

Well, that would be dealt with in due course. For the time being, she was in no condition to go breaking down the doors of the Ministry.

“How did you find me?” she asked. “I had thought you must have found where I was by following the owl from Saint Mungo’s.”

Dumbledore shook his head. “Hagrid had quite a shock when he returned from the Forbidden Forest to see a wild-haired blonde woman dragging someone toward the gate. He gave chase, but couldn’t catch the intruder before she and her captive Disapparated. He returned to his cabin to find your robes and wand lying on his floor. Ah. Speaking of which . . .” Dumbledore withdrew Hermione’s wand from his robes and offered it to her. She took it gratefully and, after feeling the comforting shape of it in her hand, placed it on the table beside her. Dumbledore continued. “He recognized your wand and brought it to me at once. Hagrid was, and remains, beside himself with worry. He doesn’t know why you came to see him, but feels that if he had been there, you would not have been taken.”

Hermione felt a pang of guilt for her large friend. “Oh, Professor, that’s not true,” she insisted. “You must tell him—”

“I did, my dear,” he informed her. “But I suspect it will mean more coming from you. He has been by to visit every few hours since your return. He will likely be along again before too long.”

Hermione nodded, but her curiosity probed her into further questioning, even in her weakened state. “But how did you know where I was? How did the teachers find me so . . . well, it didn’t seem all that quickly at the time, but it really was, wasn’t it?”

“It was not difficult to surmise who your abductor was,” Dumbledore replied. “All that was
required was to discover where she had taken you. Severus was able to discover the location of a house on the Isle of Man that the Malfoys own, quite secluded and little-used.”

Hermione nodded again as she was able to fill in the blank spaces in her mental timeline.

“The one piece of the puzzle that I have yet to find, however,” he continued, “is what would cause you to leave the castle alone at that time of night.”

Hermione flushed, remembering the reason. Even though she knew that the Headmaster was aware of the circumstances, she really, really didn’t want to explain to him what had happened. Instead, she opted for deflection.

“Do you know . . .” she started, unsure how to word it without revealing something he may or may not already be aware of. “That is . . . I’ve known Professor Snape for six years now, and he’s never shown . . .” She stopped again, questioning her own doubts. Dumbledore’s raised eyebrows prompted her to continue. “There’s a Muggle saying: if you can’t be with the one you love, love the one you’re with. I . . . wonder if Professor Snape has ever heard it.”

She worried she had given too much away, and so was relieved at the look of compassion and understanding that came over Dumbledore’s features.

“I believe Severus will come around,” he assured her, “in time.”

“But . . . I think . . .” She was trying to figure out how to say it. “I believe he thinks he has loved, but I wonder if he’s the type of person that can. He’s so angry and unfeeling and selfish and cruel.” Her anger and hurt from the previous night was returning.

Dumbledore let out a soft sigh and his gaze drifted. “I would beg your patience with him, Miss Granger. Severus has undergone a great deal of suffering in his life. Much of it, sadly, at the hands of certain Gryffindors who were not so unlike you and your friends. Even more of it at his own hands. It has turned him into a difficult man to relate to. But I believe everyone—everyone with an intact soul, at least—is capable of love. I have no doubt of Severus’s abilities in this regard.” There was a strange sadness in Dumbledore’s downcast eyes.

“But he was a Death Eater,” she protested. “And he loved the dark arts ever since he was young. He may work on our side now, but you can’t deny he was a dark wizard.”

Dumbledore looked at her. “He was . . . for a time. But Severus was more fortunate than most who find that path . . . which is a terrible thing to claim, considering what it took to pull him back from it.”

At that moment, a question occurred to Hermione: one she had never before thought to ask the Headmaster, one that echoed something she had asked Snape on their wedding night, and she marveled that she was only recently beginning to wonder about such aspects of her teachers’ lives.

“Sir . . . have you ever been in love?”

Dumbledore gave no response, but she could see the answer in his eyes.

Her voice was nearly a whisper. “What happened to her?”

It was several seconds before he replied. “One thing I have learned of love . . .” he said with an air of imparting great wisdom. “A nice pair of wool socks will never disappoint.” He smiled at her and winked, and Hermione wondered if somehow Dumbledore was even less forthcoming than Snape when it came to personal questions. “Now, I have some things to attend to,” he said, rising,
“and you need to rest.”

Hermione watched him walk halfway to the door. “Professor,” she said as loudly as she could muster. He stopped and turned to her. “The curse is spreading, isn’t it? You . . . haven’t moved your right arm in some time.”

He looked at her over the top of his half-moon glasses. “Do not worry yourself over the health of an old man, Miss Granger. I daresay you have more than enough on your plate as it is.”

She let him go without pressing further, but the way he had decidedly not denied her assessment gave her a sinking feeling. She did indeed have a lot to deal with, as did Harry, and neither of them needed their counselor and strongest ally falling ill or worse any time soon.

#

Two days later, Hermione had not improved, but she had not got worse, either. Ron was nearly always at her bedside save when he was in class. He even did his homework and had his meals in the hospital wing with her. Hagrid had come and, as Dumbledore had said, expressed his deepest regret that he hadn’t been home when Hermione had come to him. She did her best to reassure him, and after a few good blows of his nose into his enormous handkerchief, he seemed to accept her forgiveness. (Not that she felt there was anything to forgive, of course.) Tonks and Lupin had stopped in, and she’d thanked them most sincerely for her rescue. Neville and Luna, as well, came to visit with some regularity. Of Snape, though, Hermione had seen neither sallow hide nor greasy hair. She tried not to think too much about that fact.

Hermione was just finishing up lunch, doing her best to chat amiably with Ron (he had just told an amusing, if somewhat obvious, joke and was laughing heartily at it while Hermione chuckled along), when she heard a very familiar and welcome voice come from the doorway.

“Looks like our absence hasn’t been too unbearable for them,” said Harry, his voice tinged with false hurt.

“Yes, they do seem to be getting along all right,” replied Ginny.

“Harry! Ginny!” Ron leapt to his feet, ran to the newcomers, and had them both in a bear hug before they could protest. Hermione felt like doing the same, but in her current condition, the best she could do was smile broadly at them and try to ignore the irritating twitching of her left eye. Finally, Ron released his sister and brother-in-law. “We hardly hear anything from you in weeks and then you just show up?”

“Well, we had to, Ron,” Harry said, looking meaningfully at Hermione. Harry made his way to her bed, followed by the two gingers. “Hermione,” he said and put his hand on hers. “How are you?”

She smiled again, her heart gladdenened enormously by the unexpected return of her other best friend. “I’ve been better,” she said, “but I’ve been worse, too.”

“Dumbledore said Narcissa Malfoy—”

“There’s nothing you could have done,” Hermione interrupted, “so please don’t feel guilty about not being there.”

Harry was silent for a few moments, then said, “No. I suppose not. But if I ever see that woman, I’ll kill her.”

One corner of Hermione’s mouth quirked in response, trying to remember how many people Harry
had said similar things about. “Naturally.”

That seemed to lighten the tone a bit. Harry drew a package wrapped in brown paper out of the bag he had slung over his shoulder. “Happy birthday,” he said, handing it to her. “Sorry it’s a bit late, but we didn’t want to risk sending it by owl.”

Hermione furrowed her brow in confusion. “What are you—” Her eyes widened. “What day is it?”

Harry and Ginny looked at her with concern. “It’s September the twenty-second,” Harry informed her.

Hermione buried her face in her hands. When her shoulders started shaking, Ginny asked her, “What’s wrong? You can’t be feeling old already. You’ve only turned eighteen.”

Hermione dropped her hands and looked at them. She was laughing. Not a joyful laugh, though; it was a helpless, overwhelmed laugh. “I completely forgot,” she told them, knowing that they must think her mad by the way they were looking at her. She did some quick mental arithmetic. “I slept through it.” She could hardly believe it. “I completely slept through my birthday, and I didn’t even realize it.”

“Well, you had good reason,” Ron said. “You were practically in a coma. My present’s been waiting for you back in your room with the others, by the way.”

Ginny elbowed her brother, then added kindly, “It hasn’t exactly been a normal week for you.”

Harry reached down and squeezed Hermione’s hand. “It’s all right, Hermione. It’s been a crazy time for everyone.”

Trying to cheer up, Hermione reminded herself that technically, by actual time lived, her birthday was somewhere in early July now, thanks to all that Time-Turner use in her third year. And that day, whichever one it had been, had been spent at the Burrow, wide-awake, safe, and surrounded by people who loved her.

Hermione looked at the distinctly book-shaped package in her lap, then back to her friend. “Thank you, Harry. And thank you for coming by. It is good to see you.” She forced herself to relax and smiled at him. “So . . . what have you two been up to?” She took her wand off the bedside table and cast the now-familiar silencing wards around the room’s doors and windows, as well as a Distracting Charm. “You said you were close to finding one of,” she whispered, “them?”

Harry looked about, and then he, Ginny and Ron took seats around her bed.

“Slytherin’s locket,” Harry said with an excited gleam in his eyes. “We’re pretty sure it’s one of the Horcruxes. Something passed down through Voldemort’s family. We think we know where it is.”

“Really?” asked Ron, impressed. “That was quick.”

“How’d you find it?” Hermione asked.

“Wasn’t all that hard, actually,” Ginny said.

Harry continued. “When we went to Grimmauld Place to hide out and research, I noticed something I hadn’t seen before.”

“How we all missed it is beyond me,” Ginny put in.
“On one of the doors, I saw a name: Regulus Arcturus Black.”

“R.A.B.!” Hermione exclaimed, immediately feeling the strain of the effort, but not caring.

“Huh?” Ron asked.

“In the locket Harry found in the potion,” Hermione told him. She felt so good to have something to exposit. She’d missed these little mystery-solving moments. “The decoy. The note inside was signed R.A.B. Of course! It all makes so much sense. Sirius had said his brother was a Death Eater, and that he’d been killed by them. He must have realized what he was into and wanted out. But what could have made him go as far as to steal a Horcrux?”


“That horrible house-elf?” Ron asked. “Hasn’t somebody killed him yet?”

“Ron,” Hermione chastised, but couldn’t give it her usual vehemence.

“He’s really not as bad as all that,” Harry said.

“Are we talking about the same elf?” Ron asked, looking like he was starting to question his friend’s sanity. “I thought you were mad to call him back from Hogwarts when you went back to that house. Now I know you are.”

“We needed information,” Ginny said. “And he can be right useful if you aren’t a total prick to him. Took us a while to figure that out, though.”

“See?” Hermione said, her back straightening in her typical posture of vindication.

“Well, what did he say?” Ron asked, slouching in annoyance.

“Apparently Voldemort tried to kill Kreacher once, so Regulus turned against him,” Harry explained. “Guess he was pretty fond of the hideous little guy.”

“Maybe too fond, sounds like,” Ron muttered. At the disapproving look from Hermione, Ron said, “So, where’s the locket now?”

“I remembered seeing it when we were cleaning out the junk from Grimmauld Place,” Harry said, “then I saw it again when Mundungus Fletcher had stolen a bunch of that junk and was trying to sell it. We tracked him down and got it out of him that he’d given it to Umbridge.”

Hermione couldn’t keep a disgusted groan from escaping at the sound of that name.

“We used the Invisibility Cloak to sneak into the Ministry,” Ginny said, “but she didn’t have it on her and it wasn’t in her office. We’re hoping she’s got it stashed somewhere in her home.”

“Now we’re just trying to find out where that is,” Harry continued.

“Be careful,” Hermione warned. “The war’s not going to go very well if you spend the rest of it in Azkaban.”

“Yes, mother,” Harry teased.

If Hermione had been drinking anything, she might have choked. “Er, Harry,” she ventured, “speaking of your mother . . . what do you know about her?”
Harry looked at Ron and Ginny in confusion, but neither of them could help him out. “It was just a figure of speech . . .”

“I know,” Hermione said, unable to think of a reason to ask him to answer the question. *I want to know what Snape saw in her* probably wouldn’t have been an appropriate thing to say.

“You’ve never asked about my mother before,” said Harry. “Why the sudden interest? You don’t think she could have known anything about the Horcruxes, do you?”

“Well, we’ve no way of knowing,” Hermione said, jumping on that explanation for her curiosity. And really, it was true. “If Sirius had been so close to one of them, there’s no telling who else could have been.”

Harry seemed to accept that as reasonable. “Not a lot, actually. She had red hair. Everyone says I have her eyes. She was the same age as my father and Sirius. She was Muggle-born. According to Slughorn, she was really good at Potions. Snape hated her. But then, Snape hates everyone. From everything I’ve heard, she was a very kind, intelligent witch. Pretty much the complete opposite of my aunt.”

Hermione nodded. She’d heard all these things before. She approached her next question cautiously. “How do you know Professor Snape hated her?”

Harry raised an eyebrow as if to say *are you kidding me?* “I saw one of Snape’s memories when he was trying to teach me Occlumency, and . . . Well, I said I wouldn’t tell anyone about it. But trust me. There wasn’t a lot of room for misinterpretation. Mum was only trying to help him, and he was horrible to her.”

“But if he hated her, why did she help him?” she asked.

“I suspect she had a soft spot for hopeless causes,” Harry suggested. “Had to try, no matter how wretched they were.”

“Sounds familiar,” Ron told Harry with a nudge.

Hermione frowned. “S.P.E.W. is not a hopeless cause,” she protested. “And house-elves are not wretched.”

Ron rolled his eyes. Harry’s brow furrowed in thought. “No, but you have defended Snape to us more than once. And you always helped Neville in Potions, even though you know he’s useless at it. And you bought that mangy cat—”

“Oh, I get it,” Hermione cut him off. “I thought helping those in need was part of what Gryffindors were supposed to be known for. And anyway, don’t you think it’s even remotely possible that your mum helped Professor Snape because she cared something for him?”

Harry, Ron and Ginny burst out laughing. “Why would anyone care for Snape?” Ron gasped between laughs.

“That man doesn’t have a single redeeming quality,” Ginny added.

Hermione sat in silence as they got their laughing out. Part of her wanted to defend Snape, but part of her agreed with them. Besides, she didn’t want to raise suspicion by saying too much in his favor . . . if she could even think of something. Yes, he did help save her from Narcissa Malfoy, but he was also a cruel, selfish bastard who chucked her out on her arse after thinking of another woman during sex with her.
“It doesn’t matter, anyway,” Harry said, adjusting his glasses. “If Snape ever knew anything about a Horcrux, and if they were anything but enemies, there’s still nothing he would have told my mum that he wouldn’t have told Dumbledore after he switched sides. And that’s if he did switch sides. If he didn’t, and he knows something, then he’s still not any more likely to tell us now.”

Hermione sunk into her pillow, starting to feel worn out from their conversation. “I suppose you’re right,” she conceded. “Too bad we don’t have any other spies in Voldemort’s ranks we could ask.”

Only Ginny seemed to pick up on her hint of sarcasm. “Maybe a more pleasant one we could talk to.”

“Yeah, and maybe You-Know-Who will give up being evil and open a tea shop,” Ron said, slathering his tone with sarcasm like a fat guy slathers mayonnaise on a sandwich. He looked helplessly at Harry. “Girls.”

Ginny looked at Hermione as if apologizing for being related to her brother.

“I’m really glad you two came,” said Hermione, suddenly feeling quite weary. “But I think all this talking has taken what little energy I had.”

Obviously picking up on his cue to leave, Harry took his wife’s hand. “Okay, we’ll let you get some rest. But... before we go, there’s something we wanted to tell you. The... secondary reason we came, you could say. We thought it would be best to tell you in person.”

Hermione and Ron looked from Harry to Ginny. “Well?” Ron asked after neither had spoken for a few seconds.

Ginny smiled nervously. “I’m pregnant.”

Ron’s jaw dropped. He opened and closed his mouth several times before sputtering, “Already?”

She shrugged. “It only takes once, and we’ve been doing it—”

“Oh! I don’t want to know,” yelped Ron, covering his ears until she stopped talking. Then he turned on Harry. “And you! Some best friend. I can’t believe you would—”

“Ron, take it easy,” said Harry, grinning. “We covered all this before the wedding, remember?”

Ron settled down. “Oh, yeah,” he grumbled. After another moment, he perked up. “I’m gonna be an uncle.” He grinned then, having finally realized the upside, and hugged Harry and Ginny. “This is gonna be great! How far along are you?”

“Only about five weeks,” said Ginny, smiling to see her brother’s reaction.

A sharp pang of jealousy shot through Hermione. Five weeks and still pregnant. Because her husband had never made a devil’s bargain with the Minister to trade their babies for a few more days of peace. “Do you have Healer Partridge?” she asked, hoping her jealousy wasn’t showing.


“Rather like Lockhart, right?”

Ginny let out a snort. “I hadn’t thought about it, but you’re right. What were we thinking to have crushes on that one, Hermione?”

“That’s what we wondered,” Ron said, and Harry murmured agreement.
They all had a chuckle about the foolishness of childhood, then Hermione said, “I can barely keep my eyes open right now. I really do need to sleep. Thank you again for coming. It’s so good to see you both. And congratulations. I’m happy for you. You two will be fantastic parents.” As she said the words, she found she really meant them.

#

Hermione’s condition improved greatly over the next two weeks. The soreness in her muscles and nerves waned to nearly nothing, and the twitching had nearly stopped entirely. Madam Pomfrey was almost at the point of discharging her from the hospital wing.

All things considered, her stay had been tolerable. Hermione had been mostly distracted by her studies, visits from her friends, trying to think of a way to help Harry and Ginny find the Horcruxes (they had managed to break into Umbridge’s house, but had found nothing; the trail of the locket was cold), and doing research for the ‘extra credit project’ she had with Snape (she really didn’t see why she had to waste her time with that when the whole purpose for it was unnecessary at present, but she kept getting deliveries of outdated and obscure potions texts, so she assumed them to be assigned reading). It was like August all over again. Only in her quiet moments alone did she remember that she was pregnant. Thanks to the potions Partridge had sent her, she felt none of the discomfort or nausea that she would have expected in the first trimester. Although she had read that not all women experience such symptoms anyway, so she wasn’t sure how much credit to give the Healer.

Of course, she still worried that the child had already been killed when Narcissa tortured her, but she chose to think positively. She wanted to research what it might look like if that had happened, how she could tell if it hadn’t, but she was unable to leave the hospital wing to go looking for books, and the only one at school (as far as she knew) who was aware of her predicament was the Headmaster, and he was far too busy to fetch books for her. It was probable that Snape knew as well, considering he hadn’t shown up for a ‘fulfill our contractual obligations’ shag, but she certainly didn’t want to ask any favors of him. From what she could remember hearing over the years (which wasn’t very much), she was almost sure that had her trauma been caused by any sort of Muggle means, the child likely would not have survived. But she lived in a world of magic, and magic did not follow the customary rules of science and medicine.

On the thirteenth of October, an owl flew through the hospital wing window and landed on Hermione’s bed. Hermione frowned, took the letter tied to its leg, and shooed the owl away without a treat.

**Miss Granger,**

*Your next appointment with Healer Partridge is set for this Saturday at ten o’clock. Please be prompt. The appointment may not be canceled, but may be rescheduled if absolutely necessary, for up to two weeks later, with a written request signed by both yourself and your husband. We look forward to seeing you.*

*L. Watson*

*Scheduling*

*St. Mungo’s*
The relief she felt at knowing that at least her baby was still alive was fleeting. Hermione crumpled the letter in her hand, threw off her blankets, grabbed her wand from the bedside table, and stormed out of the hospital wing.
The Woes of Miss Granger

Chapter by Severely Lupine (ShawnaCanon)

The look of surprise on Snape’s face when Hermione stormed into his office without knocking, still wearing the dressing gown from the hospital wing, would have made Hermione laugh if she weren’t so angry.

“I’m not letting it happen again,” she announced, slamming the crumpled paper down on the scroll Snape was in the middle of marking.

Snape had the wherewithal to erect the usual wards before scowling at her and saying, “Judging by your state of dress, Madam Pomfrey has not yet released you from the hospital wing. Return at once.”

“I will not!” she nearly squealed. “I feel fine and there are far more urgent matters that need to be addressed.”

“Such as, for instance,” he said, rising so he could look down his hooked nose at her, “why you have persisted in acting in a reckless and insolent fashion? Did it even occur to you to use the Foe-Glass? Do you have any idea what I risked to—” He stopped, then leaned over his desk at her and ground out, “Next time, I may not bother myself to come to your rescue.”

Hermione gaped in shock at his nerve. “I wouldn’t have left the castle if you hadn’t thrown me out like some cheap whore! And after you—YOU!—said a dead woman’s name while we were—”

Before she could utter another word, his hand was on her throat. Her recovering body had some difficulty processing the sensations of a constricted airway and the pressure building in her face from aborted blood flow, but she felt a rush of adrenaline and an instant panic. She looked in utter shock down the black sleeve at Snape, leaning across the desk at her. His eyes seemed blacker than ever and a vein in his forehead was pulsing wildly. She was so astonished by his long fingers squeezing her throat that she didn’t even think to fight him when he pulled her face closer to his.

“Do. Not. Speak. Of. Her.” His voice was nearly a whisper, but more deadly than Hermione had ever heard it before. “Compared to her, you are a whore.”

He shoved her away and she staggered back, rubbing her neck. Her first instinct was to run, to go to Dumbledore for help, but she was too infuriated. It wasn’t the first time she’d stood up for herself while in fear for her life.

“What kind of man are you?” she spat. He seemed surprised that she hadn’t, in fact, run out. “What kind of woman do you think I am? What kind of woman would tolerate the way you treat me? Would Lily?”

He stepped around the desk, but this time she was ready. Her wand in his face stopped him in his tracks, but his expression was challenging.

“You think I won’t hex you?” she asked, her confidence growing. “I’ve done it before.”

His eyes narrowed, but he didn’t move. “You are a child, not a woman.”

“Open your eyes, Severus. I’m not eleven anymore. Now answer the question.”
“Which one?” he sneered.

She shoved her wand closer to his face. “Would Lily have tolerated this treatment?”

“You are not—”

“Would she?”

Snape was silent for several seconds, then his eyes moved from Hermione’s face to her wand and his resolution seemed to drain. “No,” he said at last, then met her eyes. Hermione faltered to see the emptiness in them. “She would have done just what you’re doing.”

Gaping yet again, Hermione lowered her wand as Snape slunk back to his desk. He sat, picked up his quill, and resumed his marking. Just when Hermione was beginning to wonder what her next move should be, his quill paused.

“I should not have choked you,” he said, staring at his desk. “It will not happen again.”

That’s it? she thought. That’s your apology? Still, it was more than she would have hoped for. This isn’t over, she promised herself, then moved to the desk.

His head was bowed low, his lank hair scraping the parchment. Her mind conjured, once again, the image of herself as a child, which was followed by an image of pure conjecture, of a small, dark-haired boy, writing intently, hunched against the world, his greasy hair covering his eyes. Harry had mentioned to her once, surely against Snape’s wishes, the brief glimpses he’d got of Snape as a child. It wasn’t a pretty picture. Hermione wondered if he had adopted this posture as a way to shut out the cruelties of the world (his father’s shouting, the taunting of the other children . . . ), to pretend they didn’t exist, that all that mattered was him and whatever he was working on, lost in his thoughts. Then she remembered what Dumbledore had told her at her bedside, and his request.

“I forgive you,” she told Snape. His quill paused again, longer than before, but eventually resumed. She picked up the crumpled parchment from the desk. “But this still needs to be addressed.” He still wasn’t looking at her, but she continued anyway. “One week. One week before they take another child from us.” His quill stopped moving. She took some encouragement from that. “The first thing we have to do is write to them for an extension. That will give us another two weeks to think of something. Let’s write up a request—we both have to sign it—and then we can send it off right away.”

“No.”

Hermione wasn’t sure she’d heard him correctly. “Pardon?”

He looked up at her, his face unreadable. “I will sign no such thing,” he said, but his tone lacked its usual derisiveness.

A surge of anger rushed through Hermione, washing away any soft feelings she might have felt for him a moment before. “What do you mean?” she asked. “Did you think I was going to just sit back and let those bastards take my children from me time and again?”

He resumed marking. “That is the agreement.”

“Damn the agreement! I don’t care what you and that—-that Ministerial arse agreed to. I’m not going to let this continue.”

“You have no choice.”
Hermione wanted to slap him, but restrained herself. “We’ll see about that,” she said, then stormed toward the door.

“Miss Granger.” Snape’s clipped voice stopped her just as she grasped the doorknob. She looked back at him. He was still staring at the parchment. “I do not recall granting you permission to address me by my given name,” he said, his tone cold and professional.

A part of her, the proper schoolgirl, recoiled at the reprimand. Then she remembered Tonks’s words. “You didn’t have to,” she stated. “You’re my husband, after all. It’s my right.”

“But I—” he blurted out, his voice tight as if he were exercising restraint against something he wished to say but couldn’t allow himself to. She looked at him and he raised his eyes enough to peer at her from under his eyebrows. “I would . . . prefer it.”

For a moment, she thought of allowing him that, keeping their relationship strictly professional. But it hadn’t truly been that for a long time, and now that she’d opened that particular Pandora’s box, there was no closing it. “I wouldn’t,” she told him firmly, but not unkindly. “This is the way things are now . . . Severus.” He looked away from her when she said his name, but she persisted. “It’s time we face up to it.”

She waited a moment for a response, but he gave none, so she left.

#

After getting a few strange looks from her fellow students as she walked through the halls, Hermione decided to return to the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey was quick to berate her for leaving like she did, but Hermione gathered her things and told the mediwitch in no uncertain terms that she was checking out. Pomfrey insisted on giving her one last look-over, then released her, admitting that she was in no immediate danger of any sort of relapse and would probably be fine returning to classes and to her own room, provided she did not overexert herself. Hermione gathered her things and returned to her room, which she was grateful to find otherwise empty of occupants.

She was a bit surprised to find a stack of packages at the end of her bed. She smiled sadly at them, recalling what she’d forgotten about and why, but grateful that she still had friends who would bother to remember her birthday. After setting her other things down, she placed a book on rare magical creatures, which Harry and Ginny had given her, on the bed, then looked at each of the other packages before placing them on the bed beside the book. There was one from Tonks and Lupin, one from Luna, another from Neville, one from Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, as well as one each from almost all of the other Weasleys (save Percy, of course, and Charlie, who she didn’t really know all that well). Even Dumbledore had given her something. There was no present from her parents, naturally. Even though she had known better than to hope for one, it hurt a bit; it was the first birthday in her life without a present from her parents. She saw no present from Snape, but she had only had the most fleeting of wild thoughts that there might be, so that was hardly surprising.

Deciding to wait to open them until she had a few minutes to really focus on them, she changed into her school robes and headed for the Headmaster’s office, missive in hand.

By the time she arrived, lunch was just getting over, so she suspected Dumbledore would be along shortly. After only a minute or two of waiting by the gargoyle statue, she heard him approach.

“Miss Granger,” he said with a smile. “Madam Pomfrey released you, I see.”

“Yes,” she replied, shifting her weight impatiently. “Sir, if I might have a word with you in your
“Of course,” he said, then told the gargoyle statue, “Ginger snaps.”

She followed him up, barely waiting until the door was closed behind them before she accosted him.

“You’ve got to help me,” she pleaded, barely refraining from grabbing the front of his robes in desperation. “They’re going to take my child again!”

“Oh, so it survived,” he said happily, moving around her to sit at his desk. “That is good news.”

She strode to his desk and slammed her hands down on it, catching his attention more fully. “Did you hear me, sir? They want to steal my baby!” She thrust the crumpled letter toward his face. “They’ve set the appointment for this Saturday.”

He took the letter, smoothed it out on the desk with his left hand, and read it, his face passive. “You knew this was coming, of course,” he said, giving her a sympathetic look.

She stood up in shock. “That’s it? That’s all you have to say?”

“I’m unclear as to what else I should say.”

“They—they,” she sputtered. “They want to take my baby!”

Dumbledore let out a long, infuriatingly calm breath. “Miss Granger, your situation is deplorable, but nothing has changed in the past month that could be expected to change the Minister’s mind about Severus’s contract with him regarding your marriage.”

“But it was his contract!” she pointed out. “I never agreed to it at all. I shouldn’t be held to it!”

“He’s your husband,” Dumbledore said as if talking to a child. “In such matters, if one spouse enters into a contract, it’s assumed by the law that the other spouse will be in agreement and is therefore also bound by it. A naïve view, but the law is what it is.”

“I can’t believe you’re just going to do nothing—and expect me to do nothing as well!”

“Believe me, Miss Granger, I am not doing nothing. But it’s no use trying to fight the law on this. If the Minister wouldn’t change his mind for me, it’s unlikely his mind is going to change. Things must go according to Severus’s arrangement—for now. Things are far from over. Try to have a little faith.”

“Faith?” Hermione asked, throwing her head back and letting out a harsh, mocking laugh. “My parents don’t know who I am, I’ve been forced into a marriage with a man who hates me, I’m keeping secrets from my friends, and now my children are being taken from me before they’re even born. Faith doesn’t seem to be doing much for me so far.”

“Miss Granger.” Dumbledore’s voice startled her. She was surprised to see his humorless expression as he rose from his chair. “Raise your head again.”

Confused, she did so.

“That was not there when you were under Madam Pomfrey’s care,” he said, his tone darkly protective. “Who did this to you?”

Suddenly realizing what he must be referring to, she turned to the side to look into the reflective
glass of one of the office’s cabinets. Eyes wide, she put her hand to her throat, tracing the dark purple mark running across her neck. She hadn’t registered any pain from it, but now she noticed it was quite tender.

Seeing the look in Dumbledore’s eyes, Hermione caught a rare glimpse of the truly powerful wizard that lay behind the white beard and wrinkles, and she was suddenly quite positive that the Headmaster had a very good idea who had caused the mark on her neck, which was the reason he was seething so dangerously. As angry as she was at Snape, in that moment, she feared for his life. Don’t be stupid, she told herself. Dumbledore wouldn’t actually kill him.

“Professor Snape . . .” she said, reverting to his title, “. . . that is, we . . . had a row. It’s sorted, though. He apologized and said he wouldn’t do it again.”

That seemed to calm Dumbledore down somewhat, but not so much that Hermione wouldn’t mind having his ire directed at her. With his left hand he guided her back to the door. “I will procure a potion to help with the bruising,” he told her. “No need to bother Madam Pomfrey with this.” By that, she knew, he meant that the old mediwitch would ask too many uncomfortable questions. “In the meantime . . . it is getting a bit chilly, wouldn’t you say?”

“What are you going to do?” she asked as they descended the staircase.

“I am going to have a discussion with your husband,” he said, then swept out into the hall, quickly leaving her behind.

#

Hermione tied the scarf around her neck loosely enough to be comfortable, but tightly enough to hide everything. Being mid-October, the weather was such that she could get away with wearing it without arousing suspicion. Hoping she wouldn’t be expected so soon in Arithmancy or Ancient Runes (her afternoon classes for the day), she made her way from her room to the D.A.D.A. classroom, avoiding eye contact with those she passed and hoping that Tonks didn’t have an afternoon class in session.

Her hopes were dashed, however, when she approached the door and heard shouts of, “Riddikulus!” coming from within. She turned, preparing to wait until the class was over. So preoccupied with her own planning was she that she nearly ran right into Remus Lupin.

“Oh, hello, Hermione,” he said. “I wasn’t aware you’d been released from the hospital wing.”

“Just,” she replied, subtly adjusting the scarf around her neck to make sure it covered everything. If Dumbledore didn’t kill Snape for hurting her, she was fairly certain Lupin would make an earnest attempt at it.

“Is everything all right?” he asked, beginning to look worried. She wondered if it was some werewolf sense of his that he could detect people’s moods more acutely than others and was picking up on her anxiety, or if it was just his nature to be more in tune with others’ feelings.

She smiled. “Good. Good. I was just going to talk to Tonks about something.”

“You’re not good,” he told her, now clearly concerned. “Is it something I can help with?”

She was about to decline when she realized that he probably could, and that Tonks would likely have enlisted his help, anyway. “Actually . . . I hope so,” she said, dropping the façade of nonchalance. “But I don’t want to keep you from what you were doing.”
“It’s done,” he assured her. “Let’s go somewhere we can talk. Tonks won’t be through with her class for a while yet.”

Hermione nodded and allowed him to lead her outside.

“I trust this is a sensitive matter?” he asked as they walked across the grounds.

She nodded. He grunted in acknowledgment. Hermione realized where he must be taking her.

“We’re going to the Shrieking Shack, aren’t we?”

“It’s the most private place in the area I can think of,” he told her. “I know of nowhere else as safe from prying ears.” He stopped suddenly and turned to her, looking uncertain. “Is that a problem? I didn’t think . . . If that makes you uncomfortable—”

“No,” she assured him, feeling guilty that he would think she worried for her safety around him. She pushed aside a lingering feeling from her third year, before she knew the truth about Sirius: a dim foreboding about being alone with a werewolf in what amounted to his lair. She chastised herself for even entertain that feeling. “I trust you, Remus.”

He nodded and gave her a small smile, then continued on.

She followed him in silence for several seconds before adding half-sarcastically, “Just don’t let Severus find out. The last time he caught me alone with one of my male friends he got all mopey.”

Lupin barked out a laugh. “Severus, is it? I see you’ve taken my dear wife’s advice to heart.”

Hermione shrugged, hoping Lupin didn’t think her silly, but then he had allowed her to call him Remus for years already. “Under some circumstances, it just seems inappropriate to keep calling him Professor,” she said.

She saw Lupin’s cheeks tinge at that. She had meant the circumstances of a heated argument or when Snape was being immature, but when she realized what circumstances Lupin had apparently thought she meant, she blushed as well.

They walked in silence the rest of the way to the Whomping Willow. When they reached it, Lupin found a long branch and pressed the right spot on the tree. He led her into the tunnel, lighting the way with his wand.

“He didn’t like you being alone with another man?” Lupin asked suddenly, after they’d walked for some time, as if he’d just realized what she’d said before.

She wasn’t sure why he’d brought it up, but was curious to find out. “Well, it was Ron, so . . . I guess it’s understandable.”

“Understandable for a normal man who catches his wife with a former love. But for Snape . . . hmm . . .” He trailed off, and she was just about to ask him to finish his thought when he announced, “Here we are.”

He helped her out of the tunnel, into a small room. It was exactly as she remembered, if perhaps a touch smaller. The floorboards creaked where she trod on them and her mere presence seemed to stir up dust.

“This way,” said Lupin, and she followed him out of the room and into the hallway. Instead of going up the stairs, he opened another door and led her into a room she’d never been in. It was small, as well, but had a loveseat, an end table, and a bookshelf against one wall. They were all in
pieces, of course, all chewed and ripped up as they had been for many years. Lupin pointed his wand toward the loveseat and muttered, “Reparo,” and it knit itself together, good as new. He took a seat on one end and she sat beside him, leaving several inches between them.

“Now,” he said, “tell me what exactly I can do to help.”

She looked around the room for several moments, trying to figure out where to start. Finally, she decided the direct approach was best.

“I’m pregnant.”

Lupin blinked. “Again?” Hermione nodded. “That was . . . quick.”

She nodded again. “It’s the potions they give me. They’re meant to increase fertility. But that’s not what the problem is at the moment. Tonks told you what they did with my last child?” Lupin nodded grimly. “Well, they want to take this one too. On Saturday.”

Lupin frowned. “I see. Have they given any indication why they are doing this?”

“Apparently they want to get as many babies out of me as possible before I die,” she said, anger contorting her face unpleasantly. “I think they know I’m important to Harry, so they don’t expect me to survive the war. They’re forcing me to have children that I’ll never know, taking them from me nearly before I can get used to the idea of having them, using me as nothing more than breed stock.” Tears formed in her eyes, but she tried to control herself.

“Have you gone to Dumbledore for help?” Lupin asked, leaning closer to her.

She nodded. “He said there’s nothing he can do about it. And Severus won’t do anything, either.” She was losing her battle against tears. “He made an arrangement with the Ministry. He gets to be free of me for a few more days per week and he doesn’t give a damn if it means I’ll never know my own children.”

She was crying freely now. Lupin put a hand on her shoulder. “Snape’s a selfish git,” he said as if stating an unpleasant fact. “Tonks and I will help.” He leaned down to catch her eye. The tears streaming down her face seemed to make his expression more resolute. “Whatever you need. We’ll find a way to stop this. I don’t know why Dumbledore doesn’t believe he can help, but there must be something he hasn’t tried, some avenue left unexplored. We’ll find it.”

Hermione wanted to smile, but all she could do was sob. All the emotions she’d had building inside her for weeks came spilling out. She doubled over, her head nearly touching her knees as all the pain, betrayal, and loneliness she felt about the whole situation poured from her in crashing waves.

She wondered when Lupin had moved closer and put his arm around her shoulders, but when she realized it, she leaned into him, grateful for the comforting touch. Automatically, he wrapped his arms around her, rubbing her back and making soothing noises as her sobbing subsided and she became able to take two breaths consecutively without choking on her tears. He kept holding her as she tried to force her breathing back to normal, making no move to push her away and get on about his own business.

She felt so safe, just as she had when he’d carried her away from Narcissa and back to the only home she had left. Her head still resting on his chest, she moved her hand to grip his upper arm, partially returning the hug.

“He never touches me.”
The words, though barely a whisper, were out of her mouth so suddenly that she wasn’t even sure she’d said them. Lupin said nothing in response, but he tensed.

Her other hand, as if of its own accord, slipped around Lupin’s waist. She hugged him tighter, inexplicably desperate for the contact.

“Even when we have sex,” she whispered into his robes, “he won’t touch me. Not my arms . . . my hair . . .” She lifted her head slowly, her eyes grazing across Lupin’s robes, his neck . . . . They reached no higher than his mouth. “My lips . . .”

Then her lips were on his, so soft, so tender, she felt so safe, and she wished with all her heart that he would just return the kiss.

After a few moments, she drew back slowly and finally looked into his eyes.

They were wide with shock, and she realized then that the rest of his body had become completely stiff.

“Hermione . . . what are you doing?” he asked, his voice tight with a mixture of disbelief, confusion, and warning.

It was as if ice water had been dumped on her. She jerked back from him, and her hands covered her mouth in alarm. “Remus, I—I’m so sorry! I don’t know what—” She stood abruptly and backed away from him. “I didn’t mean . . . Please forgive me!”

Without giving him a chance to respond, she flew from the room, into the tunnel, and back to Hogwarts.

She cursed inwardly when she realized that classes had just got out, so the halls were filled with students, making it very difficult to pass by unnoticed. She also unwittingly passed by the D.A.D.A. classroom, where she nearly collided with a certain pink-haired teacher.

“Wotcher, Hermione,” said the witch. “So, you’re all recovered, then? What’s wrong? Have you been crying?”

“I’m sorry!” Hermione blurted out, then dashed off, leaving a very confused Tonks in her wake.
Why did I do that? Hermione asked herself over and over as she paced her room. Why on earth did I kiss Remus? I’ve never seen him in that way before, and then out of nowhere, I just . . . take advantage of him like that. I’ve betrayed him, I’ve betrayed Tonks . . . She stopped short before allowing herself to think who else she betrayed (she didn’t think Snape was worth the consideration at the moment).

She collapsed onto her bed, her head in her hands. And now I’ve lost the only two friends I had in all this, she thought and felt the tears start coming again.

The next thing she knew, she was jolted awake by Lavender and Parvati tromping into the room, giggling. Amazed that she could have fallen asleep at a time like that, she watched the other two girls dumbly.

“Oh, they let you out,” Lavender said when she saw her. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” Hermione said, hastily rubbing her face. “Yeah, I’ll . . . I’ll be all right.”

“Coming to dinner, then?” asked Parvati.

Hermione was reluctant to see certain people, but she thought she might be okay if she sat with her back to the High Table as much as possible, and she was exceedingly hungry. “Yeah, I’ll just . . . wash up first.”

When she went down to dinner, her face clean and much more presentable, she couldn’t help glancing at the High Table just quickly enough to notice that Lupin and Tonks were absent. She could only think that did not bode well, though she was glad not to have to face them yet, even from across a crowded room. She thought she’d seen Dumbledore and Snape, but didn’t want to look again and risk making eye contact with either of them. Instead, she moved quietly and quickly to the empty spot across from Ron.

“You’re out!” said Neville, excitedly. “Feeling better?”

“Much,” she replied, sitting beside him.

“I told him you were out,” Ron said, smiling. “I went to check on you and Madam Pomfrey told me you’d gone. Good to see you up and around.”

“Thank you,” Hermione said, beginning to load her plate with the food that had already appeared on the table.

“I’m sorry I didn’t visit more often,” Neville said contritely. “I wanted to, but . . . I just couldn’t bear seeing you like that.”

“It’s okay, Neville,” she told him, patting his hand. “I understand. I’m grateful for the times you did come. It was always a nice distraction.”

Satisfied, Neville tucked into his food.

Ron looked at her curiously. “What’s with the scarf? You’re not cold, are you?”
Hermione’s hand went to her scarf. “Er... a bit.”

Ron shrugged and went back to eating. Hoping that was the end of their questioning, she started on her own meal. By focusing on eating and distracting herself by talking to her friends whenever she started thinking about her current problems, Hermione found herself unusually content by the end of dinner. She’d even managed a genuine smile or two. With everything going on, with all the problems vying for her attention, she wondered if she wouldn’t go mad without the oasis of good humor and normalcy that such times provided. When they returned to Gryffindor Tower, she talked and laughed with her friends and was almost able to forget everything that had been dumped on her.

#

Hermione skipped breakfast the next day, pretending to oversleep, but in actuality she didn’t want to risk seeing Tonks or Lupin at breakfast. She had half a mind to skip D.A.D.A., her morning class, but she knew she could never skip a class for such a ridiculous reason as not wanting to see her teacher because she’d made a pass at said teacher’s husband.

As she lay in bed, determined to wait until the last possible moment to go downstairs, she groaned. What am I going to do? she asked herself. She wanted to talk to someone so badly, to find someone who could give her some advice, but the two people who she suspected would be most able to do that were the very ones she had the problem with. The thought of asking Dumbledore wasn’t much more encouraging. She’d have been humiliated for him to find out what she’d done.

She could always ask Ron. She snorted, imagining how that conversation would go. “Hey, Ron, guess what? I tried to snog Remus in the Shrieking Shack and now I think he and Tonks must hate me. Any advice?”

She didn’t fancy the idea of putting it to Harry or Ginny any better. Lupin was like an uncle to all of them, as well as being their former teacher. (Although I guess I shouldn’t feel so bad about kissing my former teacher when I’m shagging my current one.) Besides, how could she justify why she did it to them? She couldn’t even justify it to herself.

There’s always Neville or Luna. She laughed again. Because those two have loads of experience with this sort of thing, her inner voice snarked.

The door burst open, interrupting her thoughts.

“Better hurry,” Lavender said, running to a pile of clothes by her bed. She grabbed her scarf and gestured with it towards Hermione’s own (she had at least got dressed so far). “You’ve got the right idea. It’s near freezing out there this morning.”

Succumbing to a wild, crazy brainwave, Hermione sat up. “Hey, Lavender.”

Lavender stopped just before she got to the door. “Yeah?”

Hermione thought for a moment about what she was doing. Then, deciding she had few options and it was at least worth a shot, she mentally translated her predicament into teenager. “You’ve dated a lot of guys.”

“Yeah,” Lavender said impatiently, as if she didn’t appreciate Hermione taking up her time just to state the obvious.

“Have you ever... kissed one of your friends’ boyfriends?”
Lavender put her hands on her hips. “Ron was not your boyfriend, Hermione, and I thought we were past that.”

“No!” Hermione told her. “No, we are. This is something else.”

Lavender lowered her guard. “Oh. Well, in that case . . . there was that time I snogged Roger Davies in front of Cho Chang, when I knew she liked him.”

“You and Cho were friends?” Hermione asked.

“Well,” Lavender said, not sounding particularly remorseful, “we were.”

“Oh,” said Hermione glumly. She’d expected as much.

A sly smile spread across Lavender’s face. “Hermione, don’t tell me you’ve finally snogged someone and he was already taken.”

“I’ve kissed someone before!” Hermione protested. “Viktor Krum,” she added with no small degree of smugness. Then her honesty prompted her to add under her breath, “Once.”

_Merlin’s beard!_ she thought, only just coming to another disturbing realization. _I can’t believe my second kiss ever was Remus Lupin! What sort of mad Wonderland have I fallen into?

Lavender shrugged. “Well, let me know if you need any advice. You know I’m always here to help,” she said with a totally unjustified wink, then darted out.

Hermione fell back onto her pillow. _This is hopeless._

#

She arrived at her D.A.D.A. class moments before it started and slipped in as quietly as she could, taking one of the empty seats in the back. Hermione avoided meeting Tonks’s eye during her lecture on Improper Use of Patronuses. She really didn’t feel up to a lecture on Improper Use of Werewolves, as well. When the class ended, Hermione slipped back out the door while Tonks was still talking to other students.

Though she chastised herself for being so un-Gryffindor, she was incredibly anxious about the possibility of being alone with Tonks and Lupin at any point in the future and wanted to put it off as long as possible. She had planned to skip lunch so as to avoid them, but the growling of her stomach after having missed breakfast did not allow her to. Still, she hoped that if she went in with the main group of students and slouched with her back to the High Table, they might not notice her.

She had just sat down beside Ron and Neville when a large, black shadow appeared behind her. With a start, she turned to see Snape standing there, glaring down at her. His eyes darted to Ron, then Neville, then back to her.

“Miss Granger,” he said stiffly. “I require a report on the progress you’ve made on your research project.” She opened her mouth to speak, but he cut her off. “I expect you in my office at seven o’clock.” Without giving her a chance to respond, he swooped away, toward the High Table.

“What research project?” Ron asked.

“Oh,” Hermione said, pulling her eyes from Snape’s retreating back, “just some extra credit.”

Ron shook his head helplessly. “Smartest girl in the school and she still thinks she needs extra
credit,” he muttered as he took a bite of shepherd’s pie.

When Hermione arrived at Snape’s office that night, she wasn’t at all sure what to expect. Bracing herself for anything, she knocked. He beckoned her in immediately.

Snape was standing in front of his desk, his arms crossed. She took a few steps into the room. He was looking at her strangely and it took her a moment to realize where his eyes were focused.

“Remove your scarf,” he said finally.

She did so, and held her head high. She didn’t know why he wanted to see the mark he’d left, but she was happy to oblige. She hoped he choked on it . . . so to speak.

A pained look flitted across his features and she thought surely she must be reading him wrong. He stepped forward until he was within a few feet of her, then uncrossed his arms and tentatively stretched his fingers toward her neck.

Instinctively, she batted his hand away and stepped back, glaring at him, about to demand he tell her exactly what he thinks he’s doing, but the return of his scowl as he met her eyes dissuaded her. He raised his other hand to her and she saw that it held a small vial.

“Drink this,” he said. “It will help.”

Realizing what it must be, she took it with a muttered, “Thank you,” and drank it. It was only a matter of moments before she could feel the skin of her neck tingling. She was grateful to finally have her bruise healed.

Snape walked back to his desk and took a seat behind it, his manner utterly professional.

“Now, Miss Granger, your report.”

Hermione moved closer to his desk and stood with her back straight. “My research on the potion known as Wentworth’s Brew has been thus far unproductive,” she said in her best top-of-the-class voice. “I have thoroughly read and reviewed every text you sent me while I was in the hospital wing, as well as every Potions text from the past seven years and every book on potions I could find in the library. None mention anything more than what was contained in my original essay on the matter.”

She expected some sort of rebuke for having missed something, but Snape merely nodded. “And how do you intend to proceed?”

She thought for a moment, then said, “I suppose I will try to find potions books I have not read and see if any of them contain more information on Wentworth’s Brew.”

“And if they do not?” he asked.

She frowned. “One of them must.”

Snape frowned as well. “It is possible, Miss Granger, for there to exist some knowledge in the world that has yet to be recorded in a book.”

And image flashed through her mind: his face, eyes shut tight, mouth slightly open in pleasure. “Yes, sir.”

“Some experimentation may be required,” he said, and she was relieved he hadn’t been illicitly
reading her mind at that moment.

“Isn’t that dangerous, Professor?” she asked. “Especially when we know so little about it?”

“When a potion involves a riddle, Miss Granger, a degree of risk is always involved.”

“A riddle, sir?”

“When is a healing potion not a healing potion?” he asked.

The answer to that was simple. “When it causes the very thing it’s meant to heal.”

He nodded. “Then one might ask oneself, ‘When is a poison not a poison?’ ”

Intriguing. “You think the antidote to a misused healing potion might be a misused poison?” she asked.

“That, Miss Granger, is for you to find out. I merely suggest it as one possible course of study.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, her mind already racing to analyze the new idea.

With a wave of his hand, he dismissed her.

#

On Wednesday afternoon, Hermione was walking back from Charms with Ron and Neville, chatting about the homework they’d been assigned, when she turned a corner and came face-to-face with a certain werewolf and his bride.

Hermione froze where she stood.

“Hello, Ron, Neville,” Lupin said politely.

“You two wouldn’t mind us borrowing Hermione for a bit, would you?” Tonks asked. “We need to talk about . . . making up some practicals for Defense.”

Ron shrugged. “Have fun, Hermione. Come find us when you get through.”

Hermione tried to force a smile in their direction as Ron and Neville left, then looked with terrified eyes back to Tonks and Lupin.

“I think there’s something we ought to talk about,” Lupin said with a calm, professorial tone that reminded her of being in his class in third year, which only made her stomach clench unpleasantly, wondering if her fourteen-year-old self could possibly have believed she’d ever come on to him, and in such a blatant, tactless manner. She nodded, then followed them through the halls, watching their feet so as not to risk meeting their eyes.

When they reached Tonks’s office, she took a seat behind her desk, and Lupin shut the door and sat on the edge of the desk. Lupin motioned for Hermione to sit in the empty chair in front of them, which she did, still not meeting their eyes. She sat there for several seconds in silence, cursing P.E.W.S. for causing her life to be filled with painfully awkward pauses.

“Hermione,” Lupin began, but he didn’t have a chance to get any further.

“I’m so sorry!” Hermione exclaimed, throwing her hands to her head, burying her fingers in her hair and resting her elbows on her knees. “I know what I did was a horrible, shameful thing. I don’t
Hermione, unable to believe his words and the concerned tone with which he spoke them, looked to Tonks for the resentment she was sure should be there.

Tonks moved around the desk to rest on the front of it and leaned forward, her hands braced on the edge. “It’s true, Hermione. I don’t blame you. I mean, I’m the first to admit that my husband is a sexy beast,” she said in an obvious attempt to ease the tension.

Lupin released Hermione and winced, looking over his shoulder at Tonks. “Nymphadora . . . choice of words.”

Tonks smiled, clearly enjoying teasing her werewolf. She leaned further forward and said in a clandestine voice, “He’s a little sensitive about the whole . . . grr”—she made a claw with her hand—“thing.”

Any other time, Hermione would have laughed. At the moment, it only perplexed her.

“I took advantage of your kindness,” Hermione insisted, meeting Lupin’s eyes again. “You were being such a good friend, exactly what I needed, and then I had to go and do something so . . . You have to believe me; I’ve never thought of you in that way.” She looked at Tonks. “I haven’t. It just sort of . . . happened, and I don’t know why, and I’m so very, very sorry.”

“We know why,” Tonks told her, more serious now.

“What? Why?” Hermione asked hopefully. “And I promise, I don’t harbor any . . . secret feelings or anything . . .”

“I know that,” said Lupin, rising to lean on the desk beside Tonks. “If I had any thought that you did, I would have recognized what was happening sooner and stopped it, or prevented it altogether by not insisting you speak to me in private. As it was, I know you don’t see me in that way, so you sort of . . . caught me off-guard.” He looked a bit embarrassed at the admission.

“Then where did it come from?” she asked.

“Hermione, do you remember what you said to me, before . . .” Lupin trailed off.

Hermione shook her head and looked at the floor. “Not really. It was like I was in a daze or something. All I remember is crying until I couldn’t cry anymore, and then . . . feeling safe.” She blushed, but forced herself to look back at them.

Tonks and Lupin exchanged glances and Lupin shifted awkwardly. “You told me . . . he never touches you.”

Hermione felt the heat rise in her face and she knew she must be bright pink. “Oh, yeah . . .”

“Hermione, it’s really not a big mystery,” said Tonks, reaching over to put a hand on her shoulder. “A woman needs certain things from a man, whether she wants to admit it or not. To be honest, I shouldn’t be surprised it came to this, though I didn’t know how bad it was. He really doesn’t touch you at all?”

Hermione shook her head. “As little as possible, anyway.”
Tonks’s brow furrowed. “Then how do you—”

“With our clothes on,” Hermione cut her off. “In his office. As quickly as possible.”

Lupin frowned. Tonks shook her head. “Unbelievable,” she said. “Hermione, you are in an impossible situation and the one person that should be giving you unconditional compassion and comfort is . . . well, is Snape. It’s no wonder you reached out for it wherever else you could find it. You said so yourself, Remus gave you what you needed.”

Hermione glanced at Lupin and both quickly looked away, but their eyes met long enough for her to deduce that he felt as uncomfortable with the way Tonks had put that as she did.

“But I don’t want Profes—Severus to touch me,” she protested, deciding it was safest to just keep looking at Tonks. “That’s one thing I’ve been glad of from the beginning, that he wants it as little as I do, that we can just fulfill the requirements and get it over with. That it didn’t have to get . . . personal.”

“Hermione,” Tonks said, sounding as if she didn’t buy that for a second, “do you really believe that you would be satisfied with impersonal sex for the rest of your life?”

Hermione thought about it for a moment, then shook her head.

“I know I haven’t been as supportive as I could have been when it comes to Snape,” Tonks admitted. “But the fact is that, despite his many faults, he is . . . your man.”

Hermione considered that, then asked her, “What do I do?”

“First, be honest with yourself about what you really want,” Tonks replied.

“And know that if you ever need someone to talk to,” Lupin continued the thought, “or any kind of help, or even just another warm body, Dora and I will be here for you.” He looked at Tonks, who raised an eyebrow at him, and he quickly amended, “As friends.”

Hermione smiled. She could hardly believe her luck. “So you forgive me?”

Lupin nodded. “Of course.”

“That’s what we’ve been trying to tell you,” said Tonks. “I mean, don’t do it again. But yeah, we forgive you.”

Hermione almost laughed with joy. She jumped up and gave Tonks a crushing hug, then turned to Lupin, about to give him the same, before stopping herself and awkwardly starting to hold out a hand. Lupin ignored the feeble gesture and swept her into a warm hug. It felt right. It felt good. It felt . . . friendly.

When he released her, she stepped back, and her face fell as she suddenly remembered why she had gone to him in the first place.

“You will still help me, then?” she asked. “With my baby?”

The faces of the other two grew grave.

“I stand by what I said,” Lupin assured her. “We’ll do whatever we can to help.”

“It’s completely intolerable,” said Tonks. “It’s inhuman and infuriating and there has to be a way to stop it.”
“And if they’re doing it to me,” Hermione added, “there’s no guarantee they won’t find some way
to get other couples to agree to similar arrangements.”

Lupin took Tonks’s hand. “No one deserves to have their children taken from them in such a
heartless way,” he said, “whether it’s one woman or a hundred.”

Hermione nodded in acknowledgment. “Thank you. Thank you both so much.” She turned and
started toward the door. “I’d better go now. I have a lot of thinking to do.”

#

By Friday, Hermione had come up with several possible options which she thought might help her
avoid giving up her child, but none of them were particularly promising. Her first thought was to
reconsider the idea of simply running away, of joining her parents in Australia. She wouldn’t be
alone; she’d have her family. She’d have to explain about the baby, of course, but once she did, she
was certain her parents would be glad she made the choice to join them. Then she could live out
the rest of her life as a Muggle if she had to, with her parents and her child, maybe even fall in love
with a Muggle man, and pretend her education and life in the wizarding world was nothing but a
youthful dream.

But she knew her sense of duty and her loyalty to her friends simply wouldn’t allow that. Maybe a
Slytherin could cut and run, but Harry and the rest of the Order needed her. What’s more, they
needed Snape, as much as she hated to admit it. If she left, Snape could easily be forced into a
position where he would be much less use to the Order, and then Harry would be out two allies.
And especially with the way Dumbledore had been acting lately . . . Hermione thought Harry
would need to keep all the allies he had.

She wondered what would happen if the details of this law went public. The Prophet had published
only the most general and propagandistic information about it. If people knew that her babies were
being taken from her, surely there would be a public outcry, wouldn’t there?

Not if the Prophet’s still on the Ministry’s side, she thought, remembering how the wizarding
world at large managed to deny the return of Voldemort for an entire year thanks to the Ministry
and the Daily Prophet. If they could deny something as self-evident as that, there was no hope at
all that they’d buy her story of prenatal kidnapping, especially if she was the only one it was
happening to.

What if she at least told Harry and the rest of the Order? Surely they would try to do something.
But that’s exactly the problem. She was sure Harry and Ron, at least, wouldn’t rest until they found
a way to free her from Snape’s clutches. Which would quite effectively take up enough of Harry’s
time and energy to prevent him from finding and destroying the Horcruxes. She couldn’t risk the
fate of the wizarding world, and quite possibly the Muggle world as well, in order to save herself
some unpleasantness. No matter how horrible things were for her, she was still only one person,
and it wasn’t even as if her life was in danger.

She sighed. Besides, telling them would only make them hate Snape even more, and that would
mean two things: one, that things would get even more difficult between Snape and herself, and
two, that Harry would be even less inclined to trust Snape. And Harry really needed to trust Snape.
Sirius had died because Harry hadn’t trusted Snape.

She came to the conclusion that the only option she had left was also the least adroit. She’d simply
have to refuse the transfer and physically and magically protect herself from whatever anyone tried
to do to her. She dearly hoped Tonks and Lupin had been able to come up with a better idea.
Snape was in a particularly foul mood that day in class. He snapped at Michael and Blaise and took ten points from Ravenclaw when Terry failed to stir in a figure-eight motion after every seventh counterclockwise stir. He deducted fifteen points from Gryffindor after Ron accidentally sloshed a bit of his potion out of his cauldron, and even Pansy kept her head down and her eyes on her work (except for when she was throwing Hermione hateful glances) lest she inadvertently do something to incur his wrath. For Hermione’s part, she found herself on the receiving end of several disparaging remarks about her intelligence and general suitability for education, but they seemed to lack some of their usual zing.

After turning in their potion samples at the end of the period, everyone was anxious to get out of that classroom. Hermione groaned inwardly when she realized she'd taken more beetle heads than she needed and allowed Ron to wait for her in the hall while she returned the surplus to the store cupboard.

She replaced the bottle on the shelf and turned to leave when she stopped short. Snape was standing not six inches away from her, looking decidedly unhappy.

“S—sir?” she asked, startled and still in classroom-mode. The small cupboard had suddenly got quite crowded.

His arm shot out, making her jump, but he only grabbed one of the shelves behind her, effectively trapping her against them. He leaned toward her, his voice low.

“I do not appreciate being lied to, Miss Granger.”

His tone and his posture made her heart race, and not in a pleasant way. “Wh—what do you mean? I haven’t lied—”

“That set her off. “You think this is about you?” she said, too loudly, then lowered her voice to a whisper. “How dare you chastise me after you’ve done far worse?”

Snape dropped his hand and stepped back, glowering. “If you were going to run off with the first of my enemies that you saw, anyway,” he said softly, his voice somewhat strained, “you should not have bothered professing forgiveness.”

Before Hermione could answer him, he swept out of view. When she emerged from the cupboard, he was nowhere to be seen.

#

Tonks and Lupin stopped her again after lunch and pulled her aside, into an empty classroom. They were both looking unusually harried.

“What is it?” Hermione asked eagerly, remembering to keep her voice down. “Have you found something out? I haven’t been able to come up with any workable ideas at all.”
Lupin placed his hands on her shoulders. “Hermione, we’re very sorry, but we can’t help you with this. We’re still here for you, just as we said. We just . . . can’t help you stop this.”

Her heart sank and she started to feel light-headed. *Not you, too.* “You can’t . . .” she said suspiciously, “or you won’t?”

Lupin pursed his lips and exchanged a worried look with his wife.

“Dumbledore wants to see you in his office,” Tonks told her.

“Now?” Hermione asked, still trying to rein in her disappointment. “I have class.”

“We’ll let Professor Binns know where you are,” Lupin assured her. “Go now. Albus is expecting you.”

Hermione nodded, her hopes dashed, and made her way to the Headmaster’s office.

She didn’t have to worry about a password; the gargoyle statue moved aside as soon as she approached it. When she entered the office, she saw Dumbledore sitting calmly behind his desk.

“Thank you for coming, Miss Granger,” he said.

She nodded, still reeling from Tonks and Lupin mysteriously going back on their promise to help her. When she went to sit in one of the chairs in front of his desk, she realized that the one beside it was already occupied.

“Antoinette?” she asked, looking from the young Hufflepuff to the Headmaster. “Sir, I’m confused.”

“How are you, Hermione?” asked Antoinette Diggory with a sweet smile.

Hermione wrung her hands in her lap. “Not great, actually. How are you?”

“I’m quite well, thank you,” Antoinette responded. Something in her eyes and her smile reminded Hermione a great deal of Molly Weasley.

“Sir,” Hermione said, returning her attention to Dumbledore, “I was under the impression that this would be a private meeting.”

Dumbledore nodded slowly. “And so it is. Miss Diggory has something very important she would like to speak to you about.”

Completely at a loss as to what such a thing could be, Hermione looked at Antoinette expectantly.

The Hufflepuff looked around the room nervously, as if suddenly uncertain of quite how to say whatever it was she was going to. “I understand you have been going through some very difficult times of late,” she finally told her.

“Yes . . .” Hermione said cautiously.

Antoinette adjusted and smoothed the front of her robes before looking again at Hermione. “Well, I just wanted to let you know . . . it’s not quite as bad as it seems.”

Hermione’s brow furrowed. Was the other girl trying to give her a pep talk? “I don’t mean any disrespect,” she said, keeping her voice level, “and I know that what you went through after Cedric’s death must have been terrible, but my situation is nothing like that.”
“Oh, no, that’s not what I mean,” Antoinette said quickly, then looked helplessly at Dumbledore.

The Headmaster waited until Hermione had met his eyes before speaking. “She means, Miss Granger, that you need not fear your children being taken from you, for they are not so far away as you think.”

Hermione gasped, her stomach fluttering with hope as she put the pieces together. She gaped in wonder at Antoinette. “You’re the surrogate?”

Antoinette nodded demurely.

Hermione was overwhelmed with emotion. Knowing her first child, whom she had thought lost for good, was so close and in the care of such a kind girl, and under Dumbledore’s own protection, filled her with a joy she’d never known before. She started crying with relief.


“I do have some influence at the Ministry,” Dumbledore stated. “At least, enough to lead the P.E.W.S. council into choosing my suggestions for who the surrogates would be.”

Unable to stop herself, Hermione jumped up, ran around the desk, and threw her arms around Dumbledore. “Thank you,” she told him, the sincerity in her voice outweighing any need for further eloquence.

Then she went and gave Antoinette a most enthusiastic hug. “And thank you. Thank you so much.”

The startled girl was blushing when Hermione released her. “You’re welcome,” she said meekly.

“But why?” Hermione asked, returning to her own chair. “Why would you do this? You’re only sixteen. Why would you put yourself through this?”

“I’m seventeen, actually,” Antoinette replied. “My birthday’s September the second.”

“Still,” Hermione continued, inwardly relieved that the girl was of age, “you’re in school. When you start to show, there’ll be talk.”

“I will deal with any gossip,” Dumbledore chimed in. “Miss Diggory’s reputation is in little danger.”

“It’s not safe, though,” Hermione said. “There are . . . people, those who would gladly kill me if given the chance. They might try to kill you just to get to me.”

“She is adequately protected, I assure you,” Dumbledore said patiently.

Hermione looked between the two of them, all her worries being shot down as soon as brought to the surface. “You didn’t answer my question,” she told Antoinette. “Why are you doing this?”

Antoinette looked thoughtful, but sad. “After You-Know-Who killed Cedric, I swore to myself I’d do whatever I could to help bring him down. But I’m not a fighter. Not many Hufflepuffs are. That’s one thing that was special about Cedric . . .” She trailed off, staring into the space before her. After a moment, she continued. “Then Professor Dumbledore came to talk to me. I think he suspected how I felt. He told me there was a way I could help defeat my cousin’s murderer. He told me about your situation, how you’d been forced to marry some older wizard and how you’d have your kids taken from you. I know how important you are to the fight. You help Harry, and if anyone has a real shot at defeating You-Know-Who, I’d bet on him. So, if I can help you, you can
help him, and maybe . . . I won’t lose anyone else I care about.”

Hermione reached over and squeezed her hand, giving her a grateful smile. “I can’t tell you how much this means to me.” She sat back in her chair and looked at Dumbledore. “But what about after the baby’s born?”

“A great deal can happen in seven months,” Dumbledore replied. “I believe a solution can be found before your child arrives.”

Hermione placed a hand on her abdomen, contemplating it. “And what about this one? Have you found someone to keep it safe, too?”

Dumbledore merely smiled and, in a moment of suspiciously magical timing, the door opened to admit Professor McGonagall and another sixth-year girl.

“You know Miss Smith, I presume?” Dumbledore asked Hermione, the familiar twinkle back in his eye.

Hermione smiled at the newcomer. Cecilia Smith was a Gryffindor, so of course Hermione knew her. She’d never been close with the petite, effortlessly pretty girl with chocolate hair, but she knew she was one of Ginny’s friends.

Cecilia gave her a lopsided smile. “I understand you could use some help.”
“So, who did they make you marry?” Cecilia asked casually.

Hermione’s heart jumped. She had been hoping the girl wouldn’t ask that. Not that she didn’t think Cecilia deserved to know whose child she’d be carrying, but more because Hermione was afraid she’d change her mind if she found out. “Just some wizard. It doesn’t really matter, does it? All that matters is that I had no choice.”

Cecilia shrugged and watched the fire. They had waited until everyone else had gone to bed before sneaking back down to the common room to chat a bit. They were fairly sure that everyone was asleep, but to be careful they sat in chairs quite near the fireplace and spoke in soft voices.

Hermione inwardly breathed a sigh of relief. Apparently Cecilia was not so hopelessly curious as were a fair number of other Gryffindors.

“One thing I don’t understand,” Hermione said before Cecilia changed her mind about not really needing to know, “is why, if you’re so eager to help, did you not join the D.A. two years ago? I know Ginny said she’d asked all her roommates.”

Cecilia continued to watch the fire. Her voice was solemn. “My circumstances have changed since then.”

Hermione didn’t want to pry, but this answer intrigued her. She said nothing, and eventually Cecilia looked at her.

“My mother was sick at the time,” said the younger girl. “I didn’t want to add any more stress on her and Dad by taking up with a banned student organization, which could have easily got me expelled. Or, as it turns out, possibly killed. I wanted to, but I couldn’t risk it.”

“So, your mum’s well now,” Hermione supplied. “Is that why you can help?”

“My mum’s dead,” said Cecilia. Then she took a deep breath and tried to sound more cheerful. “So, I don’t have to worry about her anymore. And I know helping you now isn’t going to get me expelled and Dumbledore assures me I’m in no danger. So, I figured, why not? Ginny’s always said nice things about you, and I know you’re important to this war effort, even if I don’t know how exactly. And besides, Gryffindors should stick together, right?”

“Gryffindor indeed,” Hermione thought, wondering at the girl’s easy bravery. She may not have joined in the fight, but it took a different kind of courage to put her family first: a more mature kind than Hermione had seen in many of her Housemates, both in her own year and in others. Why have I never got to know her before?

#

It was with a renewed sense of hope that Hermione went down to breakfast the next morning. Knowing that the child was going to be safe and nearby made her feel considerably better, but far from made things all right. Chewing on her lower lip, she wished she could find some way to convince them a surrogate wasn’t needed. She wouldn’t have to keep seeing Snape, and no other girls would be asked to go through so much to help her. Then she remembered the battle in the Department of Mysteries, then the horrible one inside Hogwarts itself, and she grimaced, picturing
trying to take part in such a battle while pregnant. Not only would it make her weaker and throw off her balance, but she’d be putting her child’s life at risk as well. And she knew that, should battle come, she simply couldn’t let her friends risk death without being by their side.

She sighed hopelessly. No, better to have the children safe and protected. That was more important than her own emotional comfort.

The letter from St. Mungo’s arrived just as she was pouring syrup over the pancake she was going to force herself to eat. She read it, grimaced, and stowed it in her pocket. Just as she’d expected, it was a confirmation of her appointment for ten o’clock. It had already been decided that Professor McGonagall would take Cecilia, while Professor Snape would escort Hermione as before. It was best to keep up the façade of strict professionalism and lack of personal involvement between the parties involved. After all, Hermione was supposed to be forbidden from knowing who the surrogates were, due to certain bureaucratic rules claiming safety and propriety issues.

“What have you got there?” asked Ron, drawing her attention away from the upcoming appointment.

“Oh, nothing,” she said hastily. “Just a . . . list of selections from a book club I joined. I’ve already read them all.”

“Are you going to hang out with us today?” Neville asked hopefully.

“Yeah, are you?” Ron asked. “Luna’s been complaining that she hasn’t seen you since you got out of the hospital wing. Well, not complaining, of course, but mentioning it in that sad, wistful way she does. Besides, when’s the last time you had a nice, relaxing weekend?”

*Good question.* “I’ve got some stuff to do this morning, but maybe we can do something when I get . . . when I’m finished,” she offered.

#

After breakfast, Hermione went back to her room to get a cloak suitable for the cool weather and tidy up her room some. She arranged all of her books in the top of her trunk, organizing them by subject and author. She’d amassed a small library’s worth of potions texts, but none seemed to hold the answer to the riddle of Wentworth’s Brew. Closing the lid of her trunk, she pursed her lips in thought, knowing she would need access to more books than she had found so far.

When she went down into the common room, she was surprised to see McGonagall standing by the fireplace, stiff and stern.

“Hello, Professor,” Hermione greeted her.

McGonagall, her lips a thin line, looked on Hermione with a sort of disapproving sadness. “Ludicrously inappropriate,” she said softly, as if to herself.

Her tone and worried look made Hermione even more nervous than she had been. She approached her Head of House. “You’re waiting for Cecilia?” Hermione asked. McGonagall merely gave her a curt nod. “Professor,” Hermione ventured, “how much do you know about . . . my situation?”

If possible, McGonagall looked even more disapproving. “I know everything the Headmaster knows,” she said in a clipped voice.

Hermione blushed to realize the implications of that, but moved even closer. “Then can it not be stopped?”
McGonagall seemed to be fighting an inner battle between giving Hermione a hug and looking for someone to throttle. Finally, she simply gave her head a quick shake.

“Oh,” Hermione said, dejected. “Well, if you say so, then . . . I think that means something.” McGonagall said nothing, but it looked like the battle still raged inside her. “I’ll be on my way, then. Professor Snape is probably waiting by now.”

Just as Hermione turned to leave, McGonagall swept toward her and pulled her into a hug, burying Hermione’s face in her shoulder. “I am so sorry, child,” she told her as Hermione could only hug her back—feeling a bit strange about it—and struggle to breathe. “Professor Dumbledore only told me the details this week. I insisted he at least give you the assurance of knowing where your children were. He had his reasons for keeping it from you, of course, but . . .” The hesitance in McGonagall’s voice caused Hermione a small shock of panic. “. . . he didn’t know what it would mean.”

“Thank you,” Hermione said, looking around uncertainly at the fireplace behind McGonagall and feeling immensely uncomfortable to be witnessing this break in the woman’s composure, but genuinely grateful for what she’d done. “Thank you.”

McGonagall collected herself, released Hermione, and resumed her usual stiff posture. “We’ll be along,” she said in what sounded like it was trying to be a reassuring tone but didn’t quite succeed.

Hermione nodded, took a steadying breath, then went through the portrait hole.

#

When Hermione reached the Entrance Hall, Snape was already standing by the door, scowling at her. It was apparently not so cold out that he felt the need for a cloak, or else he didn’t expect to be out long. She approached him steadily, making an effort to keep her face impassive. He made no greeting, but only continued to look at her, even after she had stopped just two feet in front of him. Without a word, he turned to lead her through the door.

He came up short just as he passed over the threshold, as Luna had suddenly appeared right before them.

“Hello, Professor,” she said airily, smiling at them like she didn’t have a care in the world. “Hi, Hermione. Where are you off to?”

It was a simple, casual inquiry, but it required an answer. “Research,” Hermione said quickly. “For the extra project I’m doing for Potions. I’m afraid I’ve tapped out the Hogwarts library already.”

Luna smiled, her eyes flickering to Snape’s cold, irritated gaze, then back to Hermione. “Okay,” she said simply. “See you when you get back.” With that, she traipsed inside.

Hermione looked at Snape, who arched an eyebrow at her before they made their way to the Hogwarts gates.

Once they reached them, Hermione narrowed her eyes at him and asked, “Why is this necessary?” After unlatching the gate, he paused and turned to her. “This deal you made to let them force us to make babies and then have them taken straight out of my body . . .” He winced slightly, but said nothing. “All the other Order members who know about it seem too scared to do anything to stop it, as if they’re absolutely positive it’s a lost cause. Why?”

He looked at her unblinkingly for a long moment, before finally asking, “Do you trust me?”
She almost laughed, but he was clearly not making a joke. “Not in the ways I should be able to,” she said, meeting his penetrating gaze with equal force. “Not with my heart, certainly. Not with my health, either,” she told him, remembering the feel of his hand on her throat. His head tilted slightly, but he let her continue. “But in the same way I have ever since I found out you were spying on the other side for us . . . yes, I trust you. I trust you not to let me get killed, anyway, if you could stop it.”

Snape gave her an appraising look and nodded once. She waited for him to say something, but he simply ushered her through the gate and closed it once they were on the other side.

Again, he looked at her, his face inscrutable. “This was not my idea. But I did not expect you to be anything but relieved at not having to bear children while in school.”

“Then what about the surrogates?” she asked. “They’re still in school, too, and they’re even younger than I am.”

Snape frowned. “I had no say in who would carry the children.”

“Our children, Severus, not the children,” Hermione corrected him, not allowing herself to look away from the irritated scowl he sent her at that. “And would it have made a difference if you had known who it would be?”

He held her gaze for a moment, then his eyes shifted to the ground. “No.”

She could tell he had not like making the admission. Thinking about the rest of what he had just said, she made an uncomfortable admission of her own. “I don’t know why I want to keep the babies in me,” she said, looking at the grass at her feet. “By all rights, I suppose I should be glad not to have to bear them, especially since I hadn’t wanted them to begin with. But . . . I’m not. I suppose it’s some sort of instinct. It’s not something I would have counted on.”

“No,” he agreed, his voice strangely quiet.

When she raised her head to look at him, he was gone. She looked where he had been and sighed, then Disapparated after him.

#

The wait in the lobby of St. Mungo’s was uneventful. Snape stood nearby, but not so close that she felt required to talk to him, nor even so close that she could have done so easily, had she wanted to.

The mediwitch called her name, and Hermione got up and went to meet her. Snape followed her, but before she reached the witch, Hermione stopped and turned to Snape. “Unless you plan on holding my hand, I don’t think there’s much you can do in there.”

His eyebrows went up slightly, then his frown returned and he stepped back.

That was surprisingly easy, she thought as she followed the mediwitch down the hall.

The witch left her in a small room and gave her a robe to change into. As she did so, she felt her stomach turning with unpleasant nervousness. She knew it wouldn’t be as bad as it could be, but now that the moment had come, she had the urge to run from the building and Apparate to the most distant and remote place she could just to escape it all. As she sat there, waiting to be fetched, her resentment and anger about being forced into such a situation began bubbling to the surface. She tried to push it down, to remind herself that she had no choice, so getting angry wasn’t going to help anything. It wasn’t working. Which was unfortunate for Healer Partridge.
The handsome wizard gave a short knock, then entered, smiling welcomingly at her. “Well, Hermione, are we all ready, then?”

Before she knew what she was doing, Hermione had jumped to her feet, crossed the room, and slapped Partridge hard across the face.

She was instantly ashamed of herself, and for a moment the two of them just stood there looking at one another in shock.

Before she could think of anything to say as a follow-up, Partridge rubbed his face and looked at her sympathetically. “My apologies,” he told her, and she felt even worse about slapping him. “I should have realized this would not be easy on you. I’ve been insensitive.”

“No, I’m—” Hermione started, feeling something needed to be said, but not honestly feeling sorry for slapping the man who was about to take her baby. But then, she doubted he had much choice in the matter, either. “I shouldn’t have done that. It’s just . . . no, it’s not easy.”

Partridge nodded and had the grace to look regretful as he ushered her from the exam room. She followed silently, wishing she could calm the fluttering in her stomach by sheer force of will.

A short time later, Hermione returned to the waiting room, feeling a strangely obscure sense of loss. She glared at Snape as she approached the darkened corner he had appropriated. She was glad to see that at least he did not appear as impatient as he had last time, though he was still a long way from offering comfort.

“Aren’t you ready to return?” he asked.

She almost bit out a harsh yes before realizing that there was one thing he might condescend to do for her, but she doubted he’d be likely to if she said it in anything but a respectful tone.

“Actually, Professor,” she said, not allowing her frustration to show in her voice, “perhaps we could stop by Diagon Alley.” He raised an eyebrow, and she thought he was sure to refuse, so she quickly added, “For my research project. Perhaps we can find some books at Flourish and Blotts that I haven’t already read.”

His eyebrow dropped and he said nothing for a few seconds. Finally, he grumbled, “Very well,” and made his exit.

Following him out through the department store window that served as St. Mungo’s hidden entrance, Hermione had to jog a bit to catch up to him. Attempting to keep up with his fast pace, she still couldn’t help notice the odd looks they were getting from passersby as they strode through the streets of Muggle London in their wizard robes.

“Sir,” she whispered as loudly as she dared, “we seem to be attracting some attention.”

Snape stopped suddenly and looked at her as if perplexed, then down at his own clothes, then at a young mother with a toddler, who had slowed to watch them as if they were some sort of street performers. He glared at the woman, then at her child, and ducked into a nearby alley.

Hermione followed him into the shade, wondering what he was planning. Looking to make sure no one else was watching them, Snape quickly transfigured his robes, then turned to her, looking irritated.
“Satisfactory?” he asked.

Hermione had always assumed that Snape was a pure-blood, given his role as Head of Slytherin. When she looked at the comically oversized trench coat he was now wearing, her suspicions were confirmed. Anyone with even a modicum of Muggle-world experience would never conjure something so ill-fitting. She supposed she should be grateful it wasn’t more conspicuous than it was. Holding her tongue to keep from starting an argument over such a non-issue, she nodded.

He nodded back in terse acknowledgment and pointed his wand at her. She flinched involuntarily, immediately regretting it. She knew what he was about to do, after all. The momentary pursing of his lips confirmed what her mind knew but her self-protective reflexes had not yet accepted.

Before she could say anything, she found herself wearing a black, wool coat that came to her knees but was a size or two too small. It was a bit closer to normal than what he had made for himself and certainly wasn’t anything particularly attractive or impressive, but it did the job, and under the transfigured cloak her robes looked like a long skirt, so she nodded. The next instant he was charging out onto the street again and she continued her fight to keep up.

They made no conversation on their trek to the Leaky Cauldron, and the moment they stepped through the magical wall into Diagon Alley, Snape transfigured their coats back to their original forms. He led her directly to the doorway of Flourish and Blotts, then stopped and turned to her.

“Find what you require,” he told her. “Do not leave until I return.”

“Where are you—” she started to ask, but he had already slipped off into the crowds.

Half an hour later, Hermione was sitting in a chair at the back of the store, a stack of at least a dozen books on the table beside her. She had another in her lap and was eagerly flipping through it when Snape appeared in front of her.

He picked up the book on the top of the pile and examined the cover with disinterest. “Have you found anything which you think will be of use?”

“Er, I haven’t quite decided,” Hermione admitted, then hurriedly added, “This one talks about some very rare potions ingredients from Egypt that I’ve never heard of, and this one discusses the history of potions on common Muggle ailments, and this one—”

“Enough,” Snape cut her off. “You think these will be helpful?” He sounded dubious.

“Well, it’s hard to tell until I read them all, of course,” she said, “but I think it’s likely.”

He set the book he was holding back on the pile. “As we do not have time for you to leisurely absorb every book in the store,” he said, his tone barely more courteous than a sneer, “you shall have to hope you have chosen wisely.”

In the moment it took her to wonder what exactly that meant, he had brought out his wand and Levitated the stack of books.

“But I can’t afford all of them,” she protested, following him as he moved toward the counter. Then she stood by, utterly ignored, as Snape set the books on the counter and removed a small purse from his robes. While the young man behind the counter tallied the total, Snape looked pointedly at the book she still held in her hand. In complete disbelief that he would willingly buy her anything, she quickly added the last book to the stack.

It occurred to her that Snape might have been attempting to buy her compliance, to placate her with
books so that she’d let herself be used as a baby factory. She wondered if he would use this as further fodder the next time he became unreasonably upset and called her a whore. She almost refused the books . . . but she knew that she needed more research material for her project, and she really didn’t have the money for it. She decided she would simply return the books to him when she was through with them. That’s probably his intention, anyway, she decided. A satisfied grin flashed across her face as she finally made sense of this seemingly out-of-character charity he’d suddenly acquired, then disappeared as she realized she had allowed herself to hope, ever so briefly, that he really had meant to simply buy them for her.

The young man bagged the books and accepted the coins Snape handed him, looking from Snape to Hermione curiously.

Snape thrust the bag of books into Hermione’s arms and rushed her out the door. “Now?” he asked, clearly losing his patience.

She nodded and Apparated after him back to the gates of Hogwarts. As they walked across the grass toward the castle, Snape withdrew two other books from somewhere inside his robes. They were large enough that she wondered how he had managed to hide them so well. He gave no explanation as he simply slipped them into the bag along with the others.

Not wanting to press her luck, she stopped herself from asking about them, content to wait until she got them back to her room, when he hissed, “Do not let them be seen. By anyone.”

She had to bite her tongue to keep from asking why not, and they walked the rest of the way in silence, parting ways in the Entrance Hall. When she got back to her room, which was fortunately empty of any other girls, she pulled the two books from her bag and gasped.

Snape had given her Dark Arts books.

#

Saturday afternoon was a blessed relief. Hermione was able to be around her friends and get the much-needed infusion of normalness that she had begun to rely on as her life continued to spiral out of control. That is, out of her control, anyway. She couldn’t shake the feeling that to someone, somewhere, this mess all made perfect sense, even though it seemed absolutely mad to her. She really didn’t care for that feeling.

After dinner, she was walking out of the Great Hall with Ron, Luna and Neville when she saw that she was about to pass Cecilia at the end of the Gryffindor table. She slowed down just enough to let Ron and Neville get ahead of her, then paused and put a hand on Cecilia’s shoulder.

The other students seated around Cecilia were absorbed in their own conversations, so Hermione leaned over and said softly, “How are you feeling?”


Hermione forced a smile of her own. “Surviving.”

Cecilia nodded in understanding and went back to her food. When Hermione stood straight again, she involuntarily glanced back at the High Table, only to see Snape glaring at her as if he wished to swoop down and do something unpleasant. She turned quickly away from him, heading back toward the door, and saw Luna standing there, watching her. Suddenly Hermione wondered how much she’d heard and what she’d thought of it if she had. She felt a pang of shame, recognizing
why Snape was likely mad at her, then hurried off toward Luna and the door.

Luna said nothing, merely smiled and walked with her, and Hermione thought she must not have heard anything. She figured she should make some explanation for talking to a girl she’d never had reason to single out before, but she just couldn’t think of one. Soon they caught up with Ron and Neville and the four of them decided to go visit Hagrid, and Hermione put it from her mind.

#

Sunday was spent, as she expected, in bed and in the bathroom. Hermione tried to get a start on her new books, but even when she wasn’t doubled-over in pain, she couldn’t keep her mind focused enough to read. In the afternoon, Tonks came to check on her, but it was small comfort from such agony. Tonks invited her to take tea in her office with Lupin and herself the next day, which Hermione gratefully agreed to before finally falling asleep.

She awoke with some surprise to find herself nearly late for Potions. If she was less participatory in class than usual, Snape made no mention of it, to her relief. In fact, after giving them a page number and telling them to get to work, he spent most of the class at his desk, watching them all from that vantage point rather than weaving among them to check their progress. Had he not duly insulted Ron and taken ten points from Hufflepuff for Terry’s sloppy stirring, she would have thought Snape was sulking—though why, she couldn’t say.

She arrived in Tonks’s office Monday afternoon with a question already on her lips, but as Lupin had not yet arrived, she held her tongue and took the proffered seat across from Tonks. The tea the young woman gave her was hot and soothing, and her sympathy calmed Hermione's nerves.

“I know I can’t say anything that will make this any easier,” said Tonks, pouring herself a cup, “but I’m glad you came, anyway.”

“You know why this is happening to me,” Hermione observed. The bitterness that previously would have infused such a statement was missing, replaced by curiosity and a faint sense of despair. “Professor Dumbledore knows why, too, but he won’t tell me, either. Professor McGonagall says there’s no way around it, which in itself is enough to cause me a great deal of worry, and Profes—Severus . . . wants me to trust him.”

“He’s right,” Tonks said matter-of-factly. “You should.”

“Trust him?”

“Trust us. All of us.”

Hermione opened her mouth to protest, but couldn’t quite think what to say.

“Have we ever given you reason not to?” Tonks asked.

Hermione sighed.

Tonks pursed her lips, her brows knit, then said, “You’ll find out, Hermione. I don’t know when, but you won’t be left in the dark forever. If you don’t feel like you can trust Snape, then trust me. Trust Remus. Trust McGonagall and Dumbledore. We won’t abandon you.”

Taking another sip of tea, Hermione realized she’d been holding the cup nearly tightly enough to break it. Just as she forced her grip to ease, Lupin entered. He greeted them politely, took the last empty chair, and accepted the cup of tea his wife handed him. He had just turned as if to speak to Hermione when she spoke first.
“You told him about what happened, didn’t you?” Hermione asked, unable to hold back the accusing tone in her voice.

Lupin looked from Hermione to Tonks, then back again, apparently trying to make sense of her words. But he was sharp enough that the confusion was not convincing for long.

Settling back in his chair as if deflating, Lupin looked at her pointedly. “Would you have?”

Hermione opened her mouth, stopped, then, ashamed, shook her head.

“One of us had to,” Lupin continued, his voice utterly lacking in harshness. “If I had not, when he found out—and he would have eventually—he would have been suspicious of why we hid it and would have assumed the worst.”

Hermione reddened. “He’d think that we actually . . . ?”

Lupin nodded, grimacing slightly. “Despite how you may feel about each other, I can’t imagine any man not having some fear for his wife’s . . . well, for the security of his own position, in such a circumstance. In fact, it’s because of how you feel about each other that would make the possibility of . . . straying . . . far more likely, in his mind. Although, I imagine the fact that anything happened at all would prove that point.”

Hermione looked at her teacup and hunched in her seat, willing herself to shrink but failing miserably.

“And even after all these years,” Lupin continued softly, half to himself, “Severus would believe me capable of anything.”

There was a long silence between them before Hermione said softly, “Don’t take this the wrong way, but . . . all things considered, if I was going to lose my mind like that anyway, I’m glad it was you. It would have only complicated things if it had been Ron, and I doubt Harry and Ginny would have handled it so maturely. And I don’t even want to contemplate some of the other people it might have been.”

Lupin let out a soft, self-conscious chuckle, but Tonks barked a laugh. “Although I would have paid a hundred Galleons to see the look on Dumbledore’s face,” she said, still laughing, then added, “or Hagrid’s.”

“Nymphadora,” Lupin chastised, but Hermione was grinning shyly.

“So you see my point,” she said, allowing herself a chuckle. It felt good to chuckle, and being able to laugh about the whole thing made it somewhat less mortifying to talk about. After Tonks’s laughter subsided, Hermione turned to Lupin again and asked, “What did he say?”

“We had a nice little chat,” Lupin said, and Hermione doubted it was either nice, little, or a simple chat. “I do not believe too much damage was done. He was actually . . . remarkably understanding about the whole incident.”

Hermione raised an eyebrow at him, remembering how Snape had cornered her the previous Friday after class.

“Well,” Lupin shrugged, “as understanding as Severus gets. I also suggested it might prevent further recurrences if he were a bit nicer to you in future.”

Hermione’s jaw dropped a fraction. “You didn’t tell him about . . . what I said?”
Lupin appeared to have suddenly taken up divination, for he was studying the dregs in the bottom of his cup with unusual focus. “I had a discussion with him, one married man to another. There were some things he needed to hear and, under the circumstances, I found myself in the unenviable position of being the logical choice to tell him.”

Hermione sunk further into her chair and decided that tea-reading may not be such a bad pastime, after all. The thought of Snape discussing what little sex life they had with Lupin was not a particularly comforting one, though she did wonder what sort of information Lupin thought critical to pass on to him.

Before the awkward silence could stretch on long enough to be truly impossible to recover from, she heard Lupin’s gentle voice.

“You’re still trying to think of a way out, aren’t you?”

She nodded, then glanced at Tonks, feeling as if she’d insulted her by the admission, and added, “I can’t help it.”

Lupin shook his head sadly. “No. No, of course you can’t. Nor would I be able to. Nor would any Gryffindor. There is an arrogance in us. Have you seen that yet? It’s one of many traits we share with Slytherins, as much as we all might deny it. The fact is there’s as much spitefulness, arrogance and even cruelty in our House as in theirs. I, more than almost anyone, should know that . . . considering who my friends were. Not that the other Houses are free of those things, of course. But I’ve never seen a Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff master them as completely as certain Gryffindors and Slytherins.”

“You can’t be comparing my reaction to the way Pansy and the rest of—” She was going to say Malfoy’s lot, but couldn’t seem to get the name out. “. . . the Slytherins act, especially toward Muggle-borns,” Hermione protested, trying not to be offended.

Lupin shook his head. “Oh, ours may not be the cold, heartless egotism that leads them to follow Voldemort, but our own brand of arrogance is just as strong.”

“And what brand is that?” she asked, wondering how many types of arrogance there could be.

“The same that Harry felt when he finally found out about the Order,” Lupin said simply. “How did he react when you told him you’d known for months and hadn’t told him?”

Hermione shifted in her seat. She could see where he was going. “He was really mad. He wanted to know why we hadn’t told him, why he’d been kept in the dark.”

“And what did you tell him?”

“That we’d been sworn to secrecy.”

“So you were. And do you understand why? Do you believe it to have been the right decision to keep it from him until he had joined us?”

The memory of that summer was fresh enough that she could still recall with perfect clarity the look of betrayal that had crossed Harry’s face. She nodded.

He visibly relaxed at that, as if he’d been afraid she wouldn’t understand what he was getting at
and her admission was a relief.

“But it’s hardly the same thing!” she protested. “Harry wasn’t being forced into marriage and having his children stolen.”

“You’re not the first to lose people, Hermione,” Tonks said grimly, her voice low, “to lose family. . . nor will you be the last before this war is—”

“Dora!” Lupin snapped, giving his wife a warning look. Tonks’s eyes went wide and she blanched. Nothing that happened in those few seconds made any sense to Hermione.

Lupin sighed and looked at Hermione wearily, continuing as if the interruption hadn’t happened. “Our arrogance is in wanting to know everything. Not for the sake of knowledge, nor to help others, nor to further our own purposes, but simply because we feel we deserve to know. That it’s our right to know everything, to be the one who decides what should and shouldn’t happen. What secrets should and shouldn’t be kept. That only we—each, individually—can make the best possible decision. With the exceptions of Tonks and Severus, each of us who knows the details of your situation is a Gryffindor, so don’t think that we don’t know how desperately you want answers. Each of us would feel the same, were our positions reversed.”

“We all wish we could tell you everything,” Tonks said. “Believe me, we really do. But we can’t. Not yet. Please, for your own sake, for Snape’s sake, for the sake of your children, will you trust us?”

Hermione looked from Tonks to Lupin and realized that what he had said was true. And what Tonks had said was also true. After all Lupin and Tonks and Dumbledore and McGonagall had done for her in her life, she owed it to them to trust them. If she was going to spend her time and effort trying to solve an impossible problem, there were probably better problems for her to work on, anyway.

Hermione nodded, setting aside all remaining hope of thinking of some way out of the hell she’d been sent to by a ministerial decree. But maybe, her inner voice offered hopefully, with a few throw pillows and a bit of paint, hell won’t seem quite so bad. She set her empty cup on the desk, preparing to take her leave, when the fireplace sprang to life and Dumbledore’s head appeared.

“Oh, Remus, good,” he said, then his eyes fell on Hermione. “Miss Granger. How are you?”

“As well as can be expected, I suppose,” she answered.

“My apologies if I am interrupting,” he continued, “but, Remus, I need to see you in my office immediately.”

Suddenly alert, Lupin set his cup down. “Of course.” He shared a glance with his wife as he stood, then walked to the fireplace. Dumbledore’s head disappeared, allowing Lupin to step through.

The next moment, Hermione was alone with Tonks. “Order business, I guess,” she said to fill the silence.

“Yes, probably,” replied Tonks distractedly.

Another moment of silence, then, “Well, I should be going. Thank you for the tea.”

“You’re welcome,” said Tonks, but she was staring at the fireplace.

#
Hermione began to seriously worry about her teacher-friend when she arrived at D.A.D.A. on Tuesday morning to find that Tonks’s hair had reverted to the mousy brown it had been most of the previous year. Besides that, she had not been at breakfast and didn’t greet the class with her usual cheerful smiles and salutations. The rest of the students seemed to notice as well, and there was a good deal of murmuring, but no one said anything directly. Tonks gave instructions with a strange professional detachment that wasn’t inappropriate or ineffective, but oddly out of her usual character.

Hermione, Ron and Neville hung back after the rest of the class filed out, and after packing up her things, Tonks looked surprised to notice them still in the room.

“Is everything all right, Professor?” asked Neville.

“Yeah,” added Ron. “You look”—he gestured vaguely at his own hair—“not exactly yourself.”

She tried to wave away their concerns. “It’s nothing. I’m fine. Thank you for asking.”

Ron and Neville exchanged an uncertain look, clearly having no idea what to do next. Hermione leaned close and whispered for them to go on, she’d see if Tonks would talk to her. They nodded, appearing grateful that Hermione would handle it, and left.

When they were gone and Hermione again looked at Tonks, the young woman was sitting at her desk with her head in her hands. She approached carefully, stopping when she was standing directly in front of the desk.

“Tonks,” she said softly, and Tonks jumped, obviously so preoccupied with her own thoughts that Hermione had still managed to startle her. “It’s something to do with Remus getting called to Professor Dumbledore’s office, isn’t it?”

Tonks looked at her for a moment as if deciding how much to say. “Yes,” she finally muttered. “He’s been sent on another mission.”

Hermione nodded, wanting to ask what sort of mission but knowing Tonks wouldn’t be allowed to tell her. “He knows how to take care of himself,” she said, trying to offer some comfort. “He’ll be okay.”

Tonks grunted noncommittally. Then quite another thought struck Hermione.

“But Tonks,” she started, not sure quite how to broach the question, “I don’t mean to pry, but . . . the P.E.W.S. regulations . . .” Tonks looked like she didn’t understand what she was getting at, so Hermione continued. “I mean, the original requirements. Living together, the . . . frequency . . .” Hermione trailed off, hoping that Tonks could figure out what she meant because she was even less comfortable with discussing someone else’s sex life than she was her own.

“Oh,” Tonks finally said, nodding sadly. “Daily sex. Yes, there was that.”

“Then—”

“Doesn’t matter anymore.”

“Did you get an exception?”

Tonks shook her head. “Those requirements were only for until I got pregnant.”

Hermione’s eyes widened. “You’re . . . you’re pregnant?”
Tonks nodded, staring at her desk.

“Congratulations. That’s good news. Right?”

Tonks shrugged.

“He will be okay,” Hermione told her again. “Whatever it is, whatever the mission, he’ll be all right.” Then, realizing what part of Tonks’s fears might be, she added, “You won’t have to raise the baby on your own. Remus wouldn’t let that happen. And until he comes back, you know . . . if you ever need to talk . . .”

Tonks forced a smile. “Thank you, Hermione.”

On impulse, Hermione set her bag down, moved around the desk, and opened her arms. Before she could even lean over, Tonks had stood and welcomed the hug, holding onto her and shaking slightly. Hermione gave herself over to the embrace, realizing it had been as much for her benefit as Tonks’s.

#

“So, what was the problem?” Ron asked Hermione as soon as she sat down at the Gryffindor table for lunch. To be sure she understood what he was getting at, he nodded toward the High Table, where Tonks was gloomily pushing food around her plate with her fork.

Hermione waited until she was settled and no one but Ron and Neville were listening before she whispered, “It’s Remus. He’s been sent on another mission.”

Ron grew serious with understanding. Neville looked confused.

“Mission?” he asked. “What do you mean mission?”

“For the Order,” Hermione whispered as softly as she could, her eyes darting around to see if anyone else was listening.

“Ohhh,” said Neville, looking up at Tonks, his eyes full of sympathy and worry. “I hope he’s all right. He’s one of the best teachers we ever had.”

Not thinking it was wise to discuss it any more than necessary, Hermione said nothing, but tucked into her meal. She had barely got through one chicken leg before one of the school’s owls swooped down and dropped a small parcel in front of her. Quickly moving it to her lap, she covertly untied the string that held it together and found a note wrapped around a vial of potion.

Seven o’clock, said the note, in the familiar spidery scrawl. Hermione groaned inwardly. Back to this already.

“What’s that?” Ron asked, trying to look at what she held in her lap.

She stuffed the vial and note into her robes. “Nothing.”

Ron frowned. “You’ve been getting an awful lot of mysterious notes lately.”

“It’s . . . from my husband,” she said, when she realized that the truth wouldn’t actually be giving anything away. Then she kicked herself the next moment, when she realized that if Ron ever intercepted one of the notes and recognized the script, she’d be done for. But it was too late to take it back now.
Neville was now determinedly shoveling mashed potatoes into his mouth, and Ron’s ears had gone pink.

“What does he, er, want?” Ron asked.

Hermione could feel herself blush. “It’s just . . . marriage stuff.”

“Oh,” Ron said, then, in an obvious grasp to change the subject, asked, “Do you want to help us with our Charms essays before Astronomy tonight?”

“I can’t,” Hermione answered, searching desperately for a way to give her excuse without leading Ron to connecting it to the last thing she’d said. “I have to work on that extra credit project I’m doing for Potions.”

Ron frowned again. “Really, Hermione, why are you bothering? You know you’re already getting better marks than anyone else.”

She shrugged, hoping it was convincing enough. “You never know what little extra bit might help, especially when it comes to getting the right apprenticeship or job.”

“You want to go into Potions?” Ron asked dubiously.

Hermione shrugged again. “Potions crosses over into a lot of other disciplines, and . . . I haven’t quite decided what I want to focus on yet.”

She caught Neville’s eyes as he peeked up from his plate, and said, “Sorry,” then started eating again. They ate the rest of the meal in silence.

#

Hermione arrived at Snape’s office precisely on schedule, her body ready for sex but her mind wanting to be just about anywhere else. But as she had little choice, she knocked on the door and went inside.

Snape was sitting at his paper-strewn desk, waiting for her. She met his vaguely hostile gaze as she approached him, her steps getting smaller as she got nearer. His eyes were boring into her, and he seemed to be growing more disgusted the longer he looked.

“There is no need to quail like a terrified kitten,” he growled. “As I said before, I will not hurt you. If you insist on withholding forgiveness, you could at least believe me when I give you my word. Or do you not hold even that much respect for me?”

“No!” Hermione protested, releasing a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. “I mean, of course I—What do you mean? I did forgive you. I told you so.” Her alarm quickly turned into annoyance. “It’s you that’s not believing me.”

“How can I,” Snape scoffed cruelly, “when the next moment you throw yourself at another man, and him of all people?”

Hermione felt the heat rise in her cheeks. “He is a good man, a kind and gentle man—”

“He is an animal!” Snape spat, rising to his feet. “One who would gladly rip out your delicate throat, gorge himself on your flesh and lap up your blood if you were not careful!”

Before she could stop herself, her hand flew out and slapped Snape hard on the face, just as she had
done to Partridge only days before. But unlike Partridge, Snape didn’t apologize. He grabbed her wrist from where it still hung in the air and shot daggers at her with his eyes.

“Do you have any idea how close it was to the full moon when you decided to follow the wolf to its lair?” he snarled.

She yanked her hand away from him, surprised that he released it so easily. “He wouldn’t have led me out there if he thought it would be dangerous,” she retorted.

“Of course,” Snape sneered, “because he’s so very responsible. He would never allow himself to get carried away and forget when the full moon was.”

Hermione rubbed her wrist (though it didn’t really hurt; he hadn’t been squeezing it that hard), unable to think of a rebuttal, keenly remembering when she very nearly had become an unwitting Lupin’s hapless victim, along with Harry, Ron and Sirius.

“I didn’t kiss him because I was mad with you,” she said quietly, not meeting Snape’s eyes. “And I didn’t mean to do it. I just . . .” She trailed off, her pride not allowing her to tell her unwilling husband that it was because he refused her the tenderness she was almost certain he was entirely incapable of giving.

Silence filled the room as Snape allowed her comments to hang in the air without response. He sat back down and picked up his quill, his movements stiff. Hermione could tell he was still furious, but at least making an effort to calm himself down. Finally, he managed to speak to her in a tone that at least lacked blatant hostility.

“Have the new books proven to be of any use?” he asked.

“I don’t know yet,” she answered. “I haven’t had much time to read them.”

“By all means, at your leisure,” he sneered.

She bristled. “So sorry if I couldn’t read around the gut-wrenching pain, sir,” she said, matching his sarcasm. “I’ll do my best to have them back to you as soon as possible.”

“I don’t want them back, you stupid girl,” he snapped, then seemed to make an effort to speak more civilly. “I purchased them for you.”

Hermione’s jaw hung open a moment as she processed that information. Then it snapped shut and she scowled. “So, you pay your whores in books, do you?”

He winced as if struck and Hermione couldn’t help but falter at seeing the effect her words had on him. “You are not a whore,” he said softly. “I should not have called you such.”

Her anger drained in an instant. Still . . . “You did mean them to placate me, didn’t you?”

Snape studied her for a moment, then said, “I hoped it would help calm you enough that you would do what needed to be done without skulking and whinging like a spoilt child, yes.”

Her anger flared back to life. “How dare you call me that? And how can you expect me not to have any negative feelings about having children ripped from my body?”

“There is no need for theatrics,” he stated, unimpressed by her sudden agitation. “And I expect you to at least control yourself and your emotions for the simple reason that there are no other options, as you are, by now, well aware. Making my life even more hellish than it already is will not change
“Your life?” Hermione screeched. “You think your life is hellish? You haven’t been forced to have sex with your teacher! You haven’t been forced to conceive children then had them taken from you against your will! You haven’t been cut off from your closest friends by a wall of secrets! You haven’t been forced to live seeing the man you wanted to marry, day in and day out, knowing that any future you might have had is absolutely impossible!”

Snape stalked to her, stopping less than two feet from her, and glared down at her, his voice dangerously low. “I have been forced to have sex with my student. I have been forced to impregnate her against my will, and I have had my offspring taken and used for another’s purpose. I have never had any close friends, save one—who cut herself off from me because she knew my secrets. And I have been forced to live day in and day out knowing that the woman I wanted to marry has no future at all—” He stopped suddenly, as if he had almost said too much, or perhaps realized that he already had.

Hermione’s anger had, once again, disappeared. Instead, she felt tears welling in her eyes, and she turned away from him so that he wouldn’t see. She wanted so badly to blame him for everything, to allow herself to hate him. But how could she when he was as much a victim of their circumstances as she?

“You’re right,” she said over her shoulder. “But that . . . it doesn’t make this any easier.”

She heard him move back to his desk, though he didn’t sit. She glanced at him and saw that he was leaning on it, his head bowed.

“No,” he agreed. “It does not.” Then he turned his head enough to look at her. “But what would?”

His tone sounded like he meant it hypothetically, but she answered it. “Open up to me.” He raised a dubious, questioning eyebrow, but said nothing, so she elaborated. “Tell me about your life. If I knew you better, perhaps I would be more comfortable with you.”

He snorted. “There is little of my life you would care to know, and even less that would comfort you.”

She chewed on her lip. He wasn’t denying her outright, which was more than she would have hoped for, so she wanted to keep him talking. There was only one thing she could think of to ask him about, and as much as part of her didn’t want to know, she also thought it might be the only way to see a side of Snape which she could hold onto in her mind when everything seemed horrible.

“Tell me about Harry’s mum,” she said, and his eyes widened. “Tell me about Lily.”

“You . . .” He faltered, then stood straight and looked at her directly. “Why?”

“Because,” Hermione explained, keeping her tone gentle, “from what little I do know of your life, she seems to have been the only good thing in it.”

He was silent then, and she thought he would remain so, but finally he said softly, “Not the only . . . but the best.” Then he sighed in a resigned way and moved around his desk, staring at his walls. “She was perfect. Beautiful, kind, powerful, brilliant . . . Nothing at all like Potter”—his tone grew thick with resentment—“or his son.” After another moment, he continued, sounding far off, but his bitterness returned when he spoke of anyone but Lily. “I saw her first. I loved her before any of them even met her. Before Potter, before Black and Lupin. Even before Albus. But she never loved
me. I did everything I knew of to make myself worthy of her love, but all of it only drove her further from me, and in the end she chose Potter.”

When he ended, his lip was curled in a snarl and Hermione thought it best not to press for more information. What she had got out of him was enough to send her to St. Mungo’s for shock as it was. She’d had no idea that Snape knew Lily before Hogwarts, nor could she entirely believe the depth of feeling she heard in his voice when he spoke of her. Her heart broke for him, and for herself, and for their marriage. She was competing with the memory of a childhood crush and teenage love, one which had had decades to weed out any imperfections the real Lily may have had and to grow from a simple infatuation into full-blown heart-stopping, life-altering love, and it was probably well on its way before Hermione had even been born.

A sense of calm swept over Hermione then, though she couldn’t entirely understand it. She knew at that moment, with absolute certainty, that Snape would never—and could never—love her. His heart had been carved with Lily’s name while it was still growing in his chest. But she also knew, with equal certainty, that Snape was a good man. A man who could feel such love, who could still be true to it so long after its object had passed into memory, could never be truly evil, nor would he be likely to go back on his word or renounce his obligations, once given. And so she quietly stepped back, understanding that the best she could ever hope for was that Snape would allocate for her a small fraction of what he held for Lily, and resolved to content herself with the fact that Snape was not quite so horrible as so many people thought. And that maybe, if she treated him with kindness and didn’t challenge him at every turn, they might one day reach at least a certain cordial understanding, and maybe, if they were very lucky, some sort of mutual affection.

“Thank you,” she said softly.

Snape looked at her, his eyes wide, as if he’d forgotten she was there. His face became a mask once more and he said, “Is that sufficient to your request?”

She nodded. “Quite.”

“Good,” he said, his tone sharp again. “Then perhaps we can continue with the business at hand.”

Suddenly she realized that, in listening to Snape, she had completely forgotten the primary purpose for her being in his office. Then she noticed something else and shifted her thighs. A quick glance at Snape’s groin confirmed her suspicion.

“Sir . . . I think the potion’s worn off.”

Glancing down, Snape swore loudly, then strode toward the door hissing, “Stay here,” as he left.

He returned a few minutes later, holding two small bottles. He drank one immediately and thrust the other into Hermione’s hands. She drank it and set the bottle aside as he walked back to his desk.

She jumped when she heard a loud bang and another curse from the direction of the desk and looked in time to see Snape limping around it to sit in his chair.

“Are you all right?” she asked without thinking.

He simply grunted in annoyance and picked up his quill to mark papers. He scribbled on one, then looked at her and growled, “In future, there will be no talking beforehand. The potion must not be allowed to lapse again.”

She couldn’t help the corner of her mouth from quirking upward as she said, “I thought it was worth it.”
He glared at her and moved a hand under his desk. She thought he must be rubbing his thigh. “Next time, no talking,” he repeated.

She knew they had several minutes before their bodies would be ready, so she asked, “Are you sure we couldn’t go somewhere else to do this?”

“Yes,” was his curt reply.

And so she stood silently, watching his eyes graze over scrolls, until she felt the potion working on her body. “Sir . . .” she ventured.

He shuffled the scrolls to the side of the desk and stood. The potion had worked as fast on him. “Bend over,” he commanded.

She let out a soft sigh, something inside her saddened that he still did not even want to look at her, but decided that she didn’t really feel up to fighting him on it. Perhaps, this once, she would obey him without complaint. Perhaps, this once, she would obey him any more kindly for it. She stepped closer until she was standing only a few inches in front of the desk.

Gliding like a shadow, he moved behind her. “Miss Granger,” he warned as she continued to hesitate, “do not waste my time.”

“Um . . .” she faltered, remembering the marks his hands had left the last time they’d tried this position. “Your grip is . . . strong. The last time, I bruised quite badly.”

She heard him make a sort of impatient, uncomfortable sound behind her, then she felt his hand between her shoulder blades, pushing her firmly, but not harshly, down to the desk. Her hands went out to stop her and she naturally resisted, about to criticize him for manhandling her, when she heard his voice close to her ear.

“Lie forward,” he said, his voice tight, as if getting the words out were a strain, “and I will not have to touch you.”

Understanding, she did as he suggested. But she didn’t feel him coming any closer right away or making any attempt to adjust her clothing. Finally, she turned her head to look at him, only to see him gazing at her solemnly. “Say it again,” he said softly. She had no idea what he was talking about, so she said nothing. His voice was a whisper, laced with such desperation she could scarcely believe it, when he added, “If you mean it, say it again. I . . . need to hear it.”

With a flash of inspiration, she remembered the first accusation he’d made of her when she’d come into the room.

“I forgive you.”

He arranged her clothes without touching her skin and got on to the task at hand without another word, his hands braced beside hers on the desk so that, as he’d said, he didn’t have to touch her. He moved with a languid gentleness that was entirely new, and it brought the strange pleasure to her more quickly than before.

She felt disgusted at the knowledge that it wasn’t her he was thinking of. He was, no doubt, imagining it was Lily. Perhaps that explained this new tack he seemed to be taking. His movements were smooth, gentle, and surprisingly sensual.

Well, if he can imagine he’s shagging a redhead, so can I, Hermione thought rebelliously, even as
that small voice deep inside her remarked that, if this was how Snape would have shagged Lily, maybe it didn’t matter so much that he was thinking of her. After all, Hermione was the one reaping the benefits of his strange experimentation in lovemaking. *He thinks of her no how matter rough or gentle he is with me, she shot back at the voice, so shut up.*

With that, she allowed her mind to wander. She had been so steadfast in her conviction not to think of Ron before that now that she wanted to, it was like prying open a window that hadn’t been opened in a very long time. But gradually the vision formed in her head, and she had to admit to herself that it was a strange one. If she’d ever imagined what it would be like to shag Ron, she certainly hadn’t pictured it at all like this. But this was her situation, so she did her best, and soon, if she kept her eyes closed, she could believe that it was him . . . as it should have been. And yet, for some reason, she couldn’t entirely rid herself of the obscure feeling of wrongness of that thought.

When she realized that she was moaning, the part of her mind that was aware that it was actually Snape with her was surprised he didn’t freeze up as he had before. Instead, his speed seemed to be increasing, bringing sudden and unexpected shocks of pleasure. She bit her lower lip to keep from crying out as she could feel her pleasure mounting, but a soft, needful moan escaped her throat.

In response to her utterance, she heard a low, growling groan from the man behind her. It shattered her mental image of Ron. No, she realized with a fit of annoyance, this was Snape. And it could never have been anyone else. She mentally cursed him for being able to picture another woman while making it impossible for her to think of another man, but conscious thought soon fled as the man inside her brought out the woman inside her.

Without any kind of direction from her mind, her body began to move in time with his. Some part of her wondered if Snape was aware of what she was doing, or if he was so far gone himself that it escaped his notice.

Finally, it was too much for her. A jolt of pleasure so intense it was almost painful surged through her, and she clenched the desk with her fingers, gritting her teeth. When it subsided, Snape was still going. Her mind told her, now that she could think again, that she should be disgusted, as she had been before. But she could no longer summon up the revulsion that had once been so natural. For that, she felt dirty. *But, she reminded herself, he is my husband, and maybe if I can learn to enjoy sex with him, there might be some other things we might enjoy together, as well.*

This time, no name came from Snape’s lips. She was grateful she had at least been spared that, though she felt a guilty pang as she wondered if he had indeed been thinking of Lily at all. She waited as he stood leaning over her, catching his breath. After several seconds, he removed his hands from the desk and stepped back, adjusting his robes.

Her hands slid over the smooth wood of the desktop as she raised herself back into a standing position. When she was almost up and had used her left hand to smooth down her robes and skirt to cover herself, the fingers of her right hand grazed across small indentations in the wood. She leaned over to look at them and saw the grooves her own fingernails had made previously. Then she saw, right beside them, a fresher, more widely-spaced set of matching gouge marks. Despite herself, she smirked, and wondered whether he would finally notice them.

When she turned around, Snape was perfectly still, staring at the ground between them.

*What is he thinking?* She wished that he would invite her into his mind, as she once had, but knew that would never happen. So, she offered what she considered to be an olive branch of sorts, a step toward the goal of an at least amicable relationship.
“Severus . . .” she said softly, and his eyes met hers. “That was . . . not so bad. Thank you for . . .
trying.” She felt herself blushing furiously and saw his mouth fall open and his eyebrows knit in
disbelief. Then his frown returned, and she felt his eyes boring into hers and realized a moment too
late that he was using Legilimency on her. She broke the eye contact immediately, looking at the
lines of potions on the wall, trusting he had seen enough to at least satisfy himself that she was
being honest, and hoping desperately that he hadn’t seen that she’d been trying to think of Ron.

When she looked back at him, he seemed to be studying her as if she were a particularly rare form
of vegetation that he was calculating the uses of as a potion ingredient. She waited, but he said
nothing, so she excused herself and brushed past him, out of his office.
As Hermione walked through the halls back to Gryffindor Tower, she could still feel the heat in her cheeks. She’d done it. She’d actually admitted to Snape, right to his face, that she derived pleasure from being bent over his desk and shagged senseless by him—something that, not too long ago, she would never have thought she’d admit to herself, much less to him. It had been . . . deeply surprising.

The common room was full of kids as she wound her way through, attempting to avoid the need to speak to anyone. She managed to reach her room in peace and decided straightaway that a bath was in order. There was at least an hour before she would need to leave for Astronomy, so she decided she needed to relax and attempt to avoid thinking about anything.

Her roommates were out, luckily, so she had the place to herself. She ran the bath, tied her hair up, and as she slipped into the deliciously hot, bubbly water, she sighed in contentment. She didn’t know if it was some post-coital mind-numbing or if her brain was just under so much stress that it finally gave up, but with almost no effort at all, she was able to think of absolutely nothing.

She woke up half an hour later with water in her nose. Sputtering furiously and bolting upright, she rubbed her face and tried to clear her burning sinuses of the soapy water. When she regained herself, she started shivering as the cool air of the bathroom hit her wet skin and the cold water she was sitting in froze her lower half. Grumbling absently, she scrubbed down one last time, rinsed off, and got out.

Her mood was moderately improved by the time she trudged down the stairs to the common room, where Ron and Neville were waiting for her.

Neville’s smiling greeting cheered her up, and she smiled back. “Hello, Neville. Sorry if I kept you guys waiting.”

“Nah,” said Ron. “We were just playing chess. Neville was getting tired of losing.”

Neville shrugged self-consciously and Hermione opened her mouth to make some response, but when she looked at Ron’s playful grin, all she could think of was how she’d thought of him when she and Snape were shagging, how she’d tried to picture his face, how he’d look if it was him shagging her, and how she’d briefly imagined it was. She recalled how she’d tried so desperately to believe it was him . . . and wished just as desperately that she could forget she’d done so.

“Hermione, you okay? Why are you looking at me like that?” Ron asked. “I haven’t got a bogey, have I?” He wiped his nose to be sure.

Hermione smiled stiffly and said, “I’m fine. Shall we go?”

Bloody hell, she thought as she walked with them toward the Astronomy tower. Nice work, Hermione. A bit of Ministry-mandated intercourse and suddenly every man you know is a sex object. You might have learned your lesson with Remus. She sighed to herself. As if I need any more awkwardness in my life.

“The git’s losing it, I’m telling you,” Ron was saying, breaking Hermione out of her self-reproach. “All these years teaching, when it’s clear he hates kids. He’s finally starting to crack.”
“What?” Hermione asked. “Who are you talking about?”

Ron looked at her oddly. “Where were you just now?”

“Just . . . thinking. What are you talking about?”

“Snape,” said Neville.

“Professor Snape,” Hermione corrected.

“Professor Snape,” Neville amended. “People have been talking. They say he’s been a bit strange lately.”

“You must have noticed something,” Ron said. “After all, you’ve been in the dungeons more than any of us.”

Hermione thought for a moment, then shrugged. Her perspective of Snape’s behavior had become significantly skewed of late. For example, she didn’t think his normal behavior included shagging seventh-years in his office or waxing poetic about lost loves.

“Like yesterday in class,” Ron was saying. “Taking points from Hufflepuff when Terry got sloppy.” Hermione waited for him to continue. “Terry’s in Ravenclaw.”

Hermione’s eyes widened. Of course. How could she have missed that? There weren’t any Hufflepuffs at all in their Potions class. But then, with all that had been going on this year, it was hardly surprising she missed a House-affiliation slipup, and only slightly more surprising that Snape had made one.

She shrugged again. “Professor Snape has a lot on his mind. Not just teaching, but with the war going on . . . besides, after so many years and so many students, it’s bound to happen once in a while. He is only human, after all.”

“Maybe,” Ron muttered vaguely.

Hermione wondered whether Ron was questioning her assessment or whether he considered that Snape might not be human. She stifled a snort. Oh, no, Ron, she thought to herself. He’s human, all right. Believe me.

“I heard Conner, one of the third-years, say he saw something in Professor Snape’s office,” Neville said. “Claw marks. In his desk.” Hermione nearly choked on her own tongue, but neither boy seemed to notice. “No one can quite make out what it means, but now others that have had to go to his office say they’ve seen the same thing.”

“Seamus figures he’s been torturing first-years,” Ron said conversationally, “but no one’s admitting to having been tortured. I think maybe he got his hands on one of Umbridge’s quills and uses it on the ones too stubborn to complain, like Harry was, and makes them do lines at his desk so he gets a good look at their pain.”

Hermione was aghast, completely unsure what to do. She wanted to correct them and at least say that Snape was not as cruel as Umbridge, but if they believed her, they’d only try to think up more explanations, and one might actually hit near the mark. Fortunately, they reached the Astronomy tower just in time to change the subject before she had to say anything.
By the time Hermione returned to her room, it was very late and she was very tired. Lavender and Parvati went straight to the bathroom, and Hermione knew it would be at least half an hour before they emerged, so she immediately gave up the thought of brushing her teeth and washing her face. She did, however, want to at least brush her hair out so that it would be marginally less of a bird’s nest in the morning. She dumped her books by her bed and quickly changed into her sleepwear, then picked up her brush—and immediately dropped it.

She huffed in annoyance, cursing her tired coordination, and knelt down to reach under the bed, to where the brush had bounced and rolled after hitting the floor. Her hand landed on something hard and covered in paper. Pulling it out, she couldn’t help a small smile coming to her face. It was a present. She must have missed it when she’d finally got around to unwrapping her birthday presents, and somehow it had got kicked under the bed. Hermione sat on the mattress and looked at the tag.

*Miss Granger,*

*I hope you will find this an informative diversion.*

*Professor Dumbledore*

Curious as to what book he’d given her (judging by the shape and feel of the package, it was most certainly a book of some sort), Hermione tore the wrapping off and looked at the title: *The Tales of Beedle the Bard.*

Hermione frowned in confusion. She had no idea what sort of book it was, but it seemed to be fictional. Definitely a potential for diversion (and there were certainly days she needed one desperately), but how could it be informative? She thought about flipping through it and reading a bit, but she felt the weight of the day in her eyelids and knew that she had other books she needed to read first, anyway.

It was a strange choice for a present, but Dumbledore always had his reasons. Setting the book down, she thought she might simply ask him for a more specific explanation the next time she saw him. She already had more than enough mysteries to deal with.

#

“I found something last night,” she said at breakfast, in an attempt to forestall the concerned inquiry as to why she looked so worn out which she knew was coming, if Neville’s expression was any basis for judgment. She couldn’t quite bring herself to look Ron in the eyes, still conscious as she was of her attempted sexual fantasies of him, but she assumed he looked at least half as worried as Neville did. “A birthday present I’d missed.”

“No mine, I hope,” Ron said, allowing himself be distracted with his food.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “No, Ron,” she said around a bite of muffin. “And I already told you thank-you for the chocolate frogs and sugar quills, so you can stop fishing.”

“Who was it from, Hermione?” asked Neville, who appeared genuinely interested.

“From Dumbledore,” she replied. “He gave me a book by someone called Beedle the Bard.”
“I love those stories,” said Neville, his tone fond and familiar.

“Mum used to read them to us when we were kids,” said Ron.

“You know what they are?” Hermione asked.


Hermione shrugged. “I don’t know.” But in her mind, she began to form a hypothesis. *Maybe it’s his way of giving me hope that I won’t lose my children. Maybe he’s telling me that I’ll have someone to read the stories to.*

Encouraged by the thought, she continued eating until a great horned owl bearing a parcel landed smoothly in front of her. The letter accompanying it bore the crossed wand and bone of St. Mungo’s. She felt the blood drain from her face. Numbly, she gave the owl a bit of sausage and paid it no attention as it flew away.

“What’s that, Hermione?” Ron asked excitedly. “Open it and let’s see.”

But Neville’s eyes had fallen on the seal, and Hermione was instantly self-conscious, but grateful, when she saw him elbow Ron and whisper something to him. She was nearly certain she heard the word *pews.* Ron turned red and looked at his plate. Neville gave Hermione what she supposed he meant to be a reassuring, if tentative, smile.

“Excuse me,” she said, barely hearing the words herself, then took the parcel and letter and left the table.

No one stopped her as she made her way through the halls, nor did anyone try to speak to her. She was halfway to Gryffindor tower when she remembered that Lavender and Parvati had not yet gone to breakfast when she left and may still be there. Being absolutely certain what the message and package were, she was equally certain that she did not desire an audience. Nor did she feel like attempting to explain the package without showing them its contents or making an excuse to hide in the bathroom. Then she realized a far better place for this sort of thing. After all, if anyone heard sobbing as they passed by, they would only assume it was Moaning Myrtle. She turned and headed for the second floor.

By the time she reached the girls’ bathroom, she could hardly keep herself from ripping the letter open. She charged through the door, sparing only an instant to wistfully glance at the sink under which she knew the Chamber of Secrets lay, wondering where those carefree and innocent times went.

“Is anyone in here?” she called out.

A ghostly voice answered her. “Of course there’s someone in here!”

Hermione rolled her eyes impatiently. “Besides you, Myrtle.”

The transparent form of a girl rose out of one of the stalls. The moment Myrtle laid eyes on her, she screamed, “You!” Hermione was so startled by the rage in Myrtle’s look that she didn’t know what to say. The ghost swooped down, nose to nose with Hermione. “You killed him! You made him go away!” Myrtle sniffled a few times, then said nastily, “He was nice! He talked to me! All you ever do is barge your way in and pretend I’m not here!”

Hermione felt her heart in her throat. Her guilt about Draco came up like bile, mingling with all the
other emotions roiling around in her head and heart and throat, and she felt she might very well vomit at any moment.

“Get out!” Myrtle screamed in her face, pointing a finger commandingly toward the door. “Leave me alone! Murderer!”

Hermione staggered back out into the hall, barely aware of what she was doing. When the door shut and she found herself alone, Myrtle’s accusing screams still echoing down the hall, she couldn’t take any more. Her legs buckled under her and she slid down the wall to sit on the cold stone. Tears already streaming down her face, she tore open the letter.

Miss Granger,

Congratulations on your third success in becoming pregnant. Please take these potions at once, as they will—

Hermione crumpled the note, not needing to read any further. Her suspicions had been confirmed, and where only minutes ago there had been hope that she’d get her two children back and be allowed to raise them herself, there was despair that there was now yet another life hanging in the balance. Unaware of the footsteps swiftly approaching her, she began to sob.

“What is this?” a voice hissed above her, and she raised her head to see her husband standing over her. “Is it your intent to bring our affairs to the attention of every twittering gossip in the school?”

He put a hand under her arm, and she did not fight him as he raised her to her feet.

“Explain yourself,” he demanded, his voice still a harsh whisper.

She didn’t look him in the eyes, but stared at the front of his robes, her vision blurred by her tears, her thoughts still on the new life inside her. Snape released her arm, but she didn’t step away from him. Instead she reached up, very hesitantly, and grazed the front of his robes with one finger. He stiffened but didn’t pull away or stop her. She fiddled with the fabric lightly, first with one hand, then both, her throat closed with the effort of restraining her tears.

“Miss Granger,” Snape said softly, his tone carrying a warning.

Just put your arms around me, damn you! she thought, startling herself into looking at his face. His hard look repelled her enough to pull back and compose herself, regaining a modicum of dignity. She looked back at him nearly as hard and said, her voice breaking only a little, “Congratulations, Severus. You’re a father. Again.”

If Snape was surprised by this news, Hermione could see no sign of it. But she did see anger flare up in his eyes. “Do not call me by that name where you might be heard!” he hissed. “Have you taken complete leave of your senses, you foolish—”

He turned his head suddenly to look down the hall. Hermione listened for a moment and could hear the soft shuffling of feet. Snape gave her a sharp look, then swept toward the sound. He turned a corner and his voice carried back to Hermione.

“Miss Lovegood? What are you—Never mind. Miss Granger is through there. She appears to be . . . unwell. Go help your friend.”
“Of course I will, Professor,” came Luna’s airy tones.

*Lousy git,* Hermione thought as she heard Snape continue down the other hallway, away from her, then found a smile for Luna as she came into view. Hastily stuffing the hospital’s letter in her pocket, she collected the package and tried to wave Luna away.

“Are you all right, Hermione?” Luna asked.

“I’m fine,” she lied, then decided that she could at least give her friend a partial explanation. “Just had a little run-in with Moaning Myrtle. I guess she doesn’t like me much anymore.” She tried to laugh it off while she wiped the tears from her cheeks with the hand that wasn’t holding the parcel.

Luna looked from Hermione to the bathroom door, then back at Hermione. “It’s about Draco, isn’t it? I heard him talking to her in there once or twice last year. I couldn’t tell what they were saying, but he sounded worried about something.”

“Voldemort had ordered him to kill Professor Dumbledore,” Hermione said as they began to walk in the direction of Gryffindor tower. “He had reason to be worried.”

“It’s too bad he became a Death Eater,” Luna observed thoughtfully. “I wonder what he might have become if he hadn’t thrown his life away and forced you to kill him.” Her matter-of-fact statement, putting full blame for Draco’s death on his own shoulders, caused an indescribable warm swell in Hermione’s breast, though she felt guilty for it, not being able to fully agree with Luna’s assessment, at least not on anything more than an intellectual level. She was, however, quite surprised when Luna continued musing. “I wonder . . .” Luna said softly, “if there is now some child that will never be born, and if he would have been a Death Eater like Draco, and what his name might have been . . .”

Hermione was sure it was not Luna’s intent, but the Ravenclaw’s words were like a dagger of ice in her heart.

#

Hermione went back to her room, which was empty by that time, washed her face, and drank the potions the Healer had sent. The one labeled *Fortifying Potion* actually did what it said, and she immediately felt at least strong enough to face her morning classes.

However, about halfway through Arithmancy, while Professor Sinistra was explaining how the multiplication of integers on the first day of the month affected the probability of deciphering the outcome of sporting events (or something), Hermione’s mind kept wandering back to Luna’s question.

Hermione knew she had had no choice, that if she hadn’t attempted to stop Draco, Dumbledore might very well be dead. She’d never have been able to physically fight him, being as he had been both a good deal taller and stronger than she was. She contemplated other spells she might have used, playing them through in her mind, but Expelliarmus was always the obvious choice. Most witches in her place would have used the same. *Maybe a Stunning Spell,* she thought, and had to acknowledge that that would have been a feasible alternative. But really, there was no way to know her spell would send Draco off the tower. There simply wasn’t anything else she could reasonably have done.

*But who’s left to suffer for Draco’s mistakes?* The hateful face of Narcissa Malfoy swam in front of her mind. She had seen the woman before, once or twice, and thought that she was quite beautiful, if snobbish. These days, her beauty was as faded as Bellatrix’s. She imagined Lucius, now free of
Azkaban, wondering if the prison had been as hard on him as it had been on Sirius, and wondering if he was as furious about Draco’s death as his wife was. She touched the Foe-Glass through her robes and promised herself she’d keep a closer eye on it. Then another face formed in her mind’s eye, though hazy and indistinct. She thought for a moment it was Draco, as he was the first time she met him in first year, but she noticed some things were different. The hair was longer than Draco had ever worn it, more like Lucius’s. The eyes kept shifting between grey, blue, brown, even green. At times she wasn’t even sure whether the child was a boy or girl. Then she imagined the child smiled, and her breath caught. It was not a mocking smile, nor a smug smile. It was, more than anything, a self-conscious, hopeful smile, far more suited to a Longbottom than a Malfoy. Hermione wondered if such a child ever really could have come from Draco, or if her imagination had just taken a turn for the utterly insane.

“Miss Granger!”

Hermione jerked to attention. Professor Sinistra was looking at her sternly, the rest of the class was watching her, and Hermione guessed she must have been zoned out for several minutes. She moved her hand from where it had at some point come to rest on her lower abdomen, and said, “I’m sorry, Professor.”

Sinistra’s expression softened slightly and she asked, “What day is it?”

“Monday,” Hermione said automatically, then quickly corrected, “No, Wednesday.”

Sinistra sighed. “It is the twenty-second.” She gave up on Hermione and continued addressing the rest of the class. “Can someone tell me why today would be a poor day to attempt to predict the outcome of the next Quidditch match?”

#

Hermione managed to stay more focused through Ancient Runes, but by the time she walked up behind Ron and Neville at the Gryffindor table for lunch, the idea of what future children she might have snuffed out before they were conceived was still hanging in the back of her mind.

Evidently, Luna, who had joined the boys already, felt the same way.

“Are you kidding?” Ron said, not yet having noticed Hermione’s arrival. “We’re talking about Malfoy here. Kid wouldn’t have had a chance. Unless he married a Hufflepuff or something, any kid of his would have been as evil as him and dear old Grandpa Lucius.” Neville snorted his pumpkin juice at that. Encouraged, Ron continued. “And as for a name, he’d probably have given it something completely pathetic but meant to sound intimidating, like Falco or Scorpius or Viperia.”

Hermione couldn’t help but giggle at Ron’s animated explanation and his not-incorrect insight into Malfoy naming practice.

“Hermione! Oh!” Ron looked sheepish as he scooted over so she could sit down. “Sorry about that. Luna was just wondering—”

“I know,” Hermione said, still grinning.

Neville shared Ron’s look. “We didn’t mean to bring up any bad . . . memories.”

“It’s all right,” she said, and she really did feel better for having overheard them. Somehow, having Ron make fun of the situation made it seem less serious. It normalized things, and the awkwardness of last night melted away. “It’s pointless to think about things like that. What’s done
is done. For all we know, there’s as much chance we saved the world from the machinations of the nefarious Viperia Malfoy as deprived it of the contributions of the great Falco Malfoy.”

Luna smiled at her, looking very much as if Hermione’s words had set her own mind at ease. “You’re right,” she said calmly. “For that matter, there may well be children now who wouldn’t have been born if Draco had lived.”

“Good point,” Neville agreed. “There’s no telling.”

Hermione merely nodded and wondered just how perceptive Luna really was.

#

That night, Hermione went to her room early, not hanging around in the common room for as long as she normally did. She wanted a bit of time to herself, to relax and do some reading . . . maybe even make some headway on her Potions project (it would look suspicious if she weren’t making any progress, after all). After ensuring her work for all her classes was done through the next two weeks, she opened her trunk to go through the newer of her books.

At the top of the pile were the ones that she’d got from Flourish and Blotts. She’d just picked one up when her curiosity got the better of her. Laying the books carefully aside, she dug through them until she found the two that Snape had given her.

Grimacing, she looked at the first, which had a worn leather cover so red it was nearly black, and bore the title *Blood Poisons*. Unsurprised, she set it down and looked at the next. This book was even older. It was surely not an original, but looked to be at least two centuries old, even still. The title was written in runes. She flipped through it. The entire book was written in runes.

Hermione felt a strange pleasure at that. Snape had given her a book written in a complex and dead language, knowing that secrecy meant she could get no help in translating it. That he would show such unthinking confidence in her academic abilities, even in a subject he had no reason to expect much from her in, brought a small smile to her lips.

Putting the rest of the books back in the trunk, she took a quill and scrap of parchment from her bag. She could, of course, work out the title in her head, but she preferred to put her thoughts down on paper, to make certain that there was no room for getting jumbled. She could always burn the paper later, after all. She worked through the runes, one at a time, very careful to ensure each was correct before moving on to the next. After a minute or so, the translation was complete. Once translated, the title was remarkably unpoetic and forthright. Chillingly so, in fact. Hermione read what she had written, and gasped.

*Healing Draughts Made With the Human Foetus.*
Hermione checked her translation, hoping that she had mistaken ‘for’ for ‘with’. Discovering that it was completely correct, she was overcome with the desire to vomit. Questions rolled through her mind, each bringing up a possibility more horrifying than the last. Finally, feeling light-headed and sick to her stomach, she knew she’d never get to sleep or get any work done until she found out just what the hell Snape meant in giving her a book like that.

She composed herself as best she could, put the other books away, tucked the rune book under her arm, covered by the sleeve of her robe, and made her way to the dungeons. The common room and hallways were populated, but she was able to slip by most of them without stammering too many lame excuses. She got some odd looks from the Slytherins she passed once she reached their part of the castle, and she took her Foe-Glass out to make sure she didn’t run into Pansy and the others.

Once she was in sight of Snape’s office door, the emotions that she had shoved inside started raging to the surface again. She tucked the Foe-Glass back under her robes and pounded on the door with her fist.

“Do not disturb me!” was the sharp command from the other side.

“Professor!” she shouted, her tone lacking any sort of respect, full of barely-concealed rage. “It’s Hermione Granger! I need to speak with you imme—”

The door was flung open, and she was pulled inside before she could finish. Snape glanced down the hall to make sure it was empty, then slammed the door and turned on her, full of fury to match her own.

“You insolent chit!” he hissed, casting the usual silencing spell on the door.

She didn’t give him a chance to continue. She brandished the book at him, demanding, “What the hell is this?”

He glanced at the book, and his demeanor cooled to something much more like his usual. “As I explained,” he said evenly, “it is merely one avenue to explore. I do not know what the antidote to Wentworth’s Brew is. If I did, I would hardly be wasting both of our times looking for it.”

She sneered in his face. “How can you be so cold? Even you, Severus? Even with all I know about you being a Death Eater, about the people you’ve tortured and doubtless killed, I still can’t believe you would consider something so heartless.”
He gave her an unblinking, scrutinizing look. “How little you know me.”

She called his bluff. “But of course this is all purely theoretical, isn’t it? Just a school assignment, nothing serious. But how do you expect me to test it? If I did find something in this book, something which might lead to a solution, I’d have to actually try it out, wouldn’t I? Dumbledore would never allow that.” This thought seemed to calm her only slightly. She stopped pacing and looked at him. “You know there’s nothing in here. You only gave me this book to scare me, because of some . . . some twisted game or test.”

“That book was not cheap,” he said, his voice betraying his growing impatience. “And I do not waste money on games.”

She stared at him, trying to see what he was hiding, but he was inscrutable. Then a thought flashed through her mind, and terror gripped her heart.

“Is this . . . oh Merlin,” she murmured, putting a hand to her stomach. “Unless this isn’t about the project at all. Is it a warning—about our babies? About what the Ministry—” Hermione was shocked silent by the last sound in the world she’d expected to hear.

Snape laughed at her. It was a harsh, mocking laugh, but it was full and loud. He apparently found that horrifying thought hysterical. He even had to brace his hand against the wall to keep from doubling over. Hermione thought she must be hallucinating.

When he collected himself, she was still standing there with her eyes wide and mouth agape. “For such a clever girl, you’re remarkably stupid,” he said, still smiling condescendingly.

Her eyes narrowed at him, her anger so fierce she could barely speak.

“Bastard,” she ground out, then slammed the book onto his desk. “Keep the bloody book. I would never even consider such an inhuman solution. Not even if my grade—not even if my life—depended on it.”

His smile disappeared and he looked ready to berate her again, but she didn’t give him the chance. She marched out the door and slammed it behind her.

#

“Expelliarmus!” Hermione shouted, and Draco went flying off of the tower. She ran to the edge and looked down, gaping in horror at his broken body as it lay on the ground below. But it wasn’t alone. There were other bodies with it. They were indistinct, almost flickering, but they were mangled and bloody.

Lucius and Narcissa lay beside Draco, their blonde hair stained with dirt and blood. Then there were children, too. All blonde and beautiful like the others, and all just as dead. A boy, a girl, then another boy. They blinked in and out of existence, mocking her with their cold, unmoving eyes.

She turned away from the carnage to find Dumbledore lying on the floor, just as he had been before, weak from the poison.

“Professor,” she started, unsure where she was going, “I . . . he was going to kill you, wasn’t he?” Dumbledore looked at her under heavy eyelids. His voice was hardly there. “It was unnecessary.”

“What do you—” she started, but stopped when she realized Dumbledore couldn’t hear her. His eyes had fallen empty.
She staggered back from Dumbledore’s body, slumped awkwardly against the wall of the tower. She turned to the doorway, calling out to Harry, but he was nowhere to be seen.

She ran down the stairs into the castle, calling out for her friends, one after the other, but none appeared. Then she turned a corner and nearly trampled over Snape, lying on the ground. He wasn’t twitching. He wasn’t moving at all.

“Professor?” she said uncertainly, moving around to look at his face.

He was dead. She didn’t know how, but she was certain of it. Only then did she notice other bodies around him. More children. Three more, to be exact. All looked just like her. One, inexplicably, had red hair.

She fell away from them, her knees weak. Then she felt a weight in her hand and saw that she was still holding her wand. There was a green glow at the tip, like the fading of a spell.

She gasped, knowing instinctively what spell it had been, and that it wasn’t the Expelliarmus she had just cast.

She looked up to see Tonks and Lupin standing down the corridor, staring at her with hateful expressions.

“And they say I’m the monster,” Lupin said bitterly.

“No . . .” she protested, holding out her hands in supplication. “No, I . . .” But she had no way to end her sentence. No excuse. Instead, she found the tip of her wand pointing at Tonks.

“Avada Kedavra!”

Hermione awoke panting and covered with sweat.

#

By the time she bathed, got dressed, and met Ron and Neville in the common room, Hermione had pushed the nightmare to the back of her mind, but she still felt rattled by it. She briefly entertained the idea of asking someone what it might mean, but the meaning was clear enough. Apparently she still hadn’t got over the discovery that she could kill, and she wondered exactly where her line was drawn in that regard. She felt dangerous, a killer walking amongst innocents . . . Now I think I know what Remus feels like, she thought. Except that she actually had killed and, as far as she knew, Lupin had only nearly killed.

She didn’t say much during the walk to the Great Hall and started eating as soon as the food appeared.

“Look at this!” squealed Lavender from a few seats down, shoving her copy of the Prophet toward Parvati.

An owl arrived with Hermione’s copy a moment later and she hurried to pay the bird and find out what was so exciting. She hoped that it was just a new line of magical cosmetics that had got Lavender so worked up, but her hopes were dashed when she saw the headline on the front page.

P.E.W.S. WORKS! MORE WONDER CHILDREN ON THE WAY!
My goodness, Hermione thought. She’s got the world thinking our kids are going to solve all their problems, when they’ve already caused far more than most children, and they’re not even born yet. Preparing herself for the worst, she kept reading. It was mostly just more rah-rah propaganda, but one line caught her attention.

A source at the Ministry of Magic has disclosed that the P.E.W.S. program has so far resulted in six children being conceived, including the one we have already reported.

It gave no names or other identifying information, and concluded with a recap of the program and how brilliant the Minister was for thinking it up.

Six? Hermione did a mental tally to make sure she hadn’t miscounted. Then who else . . . ? Barely-subdued tittering drew her attention back to Lavender and Parvati.

“When do you think she’ll start to show?”

“Not for several months. By then they may have revealed her, anyway.”

“This is so exciting! I can hardly believe it’s actually happening.”

Hermione couldn’t stand it any longer. “Who do you mean?” she asked them, keeping her voice low. “Do you know who one of the mothers is?”

Parvati and Lavender shared a conspiratorial smile and both looked about ready to burst.

“Okay, but you can’t tell anyone,” whispered Parvati. Hermione nodded.

Lavender leaned close and whispered, “It’s Professor Trelawney.”

Hermione’s jaw dropped. “Professor Trelawney’s pregnant?” she squeaked. She hadn’t even known—but then she remembered hearing someone at an Order meeting say that Trelawney had been pulled into P.E.W.S. as well. She was so concerned with her own predicament at the time, she had barely registered the information.

She looked to the Head Table. Trelawney wasn’t there, as usual. She turned back to the other girls, confused. “But, then where’s her husband?”

“Oh, he’s here,” Parvati answered. “But he’s even more reclusive than she is. Spends all his time in their rooms, focusing his inner eye.”

“He’s brilliant,” Lavender said, her voice dripping with admiration.

“And those eyes . . .” Parvati purred.

“That voice . . .” Lavender added. Hermione thought she might gag on her own vomit if they kept going. Fortunately, Lavender regained herself quickly. “We met him once. He could tell what House I’m in just by looking at me.”

Hermione tried not to look too doubtful, but she had to wonder if that had been a chilly day. The school robes may not distinguish between Houses, but the scarves are a dead giveaway.
“Do you know how far along she is?” Hermione asked.

“Not long,” said Lavender. “A few weeks, I think. I wonder if the baby will be a Seer, too.”

Hermione couldn’t stop her eyes from rolling.

“Tiresias says I’ve got the Sight,” Lavender said proudly, oblivious to Hermione’s disregard.

“Tiresias?” Hermione asked.

“Professor Trelawney’s husband,” Parvati supplied, then addressed Lavender. “And he would have said I have, too, if I’d had more time with him. You took so long he was worn out by the time I got to him.”

“Fortune-telling that taxing, is it?” Hermione asked, not trying to contain the sarcasm in her tone.

Before either of them could respond, a snowy owl flapped down and landed in front of Ron. Excitedly, he took the letter, gave Hedwig a bit of bacon, and tore open the seal. Hermione read over his shoulder.

_Dear Hermione and Ron,_

_Not much progress. Could use help with research. Baby doing well. Heard about Tonks and Lupin. Congratulate them for us, would you?_

_Harry and Ginny_

“Should we write something back?” asked Ron.

Hermione thought for a moment. Harry wanted them to help with researching the Horcruxes, but she was swamped. She had so many things on her plate that she was often on the verge of a breakdown as it was. But then, Harry and Ron didn’t know that. And what was more important than finding and destroying the Horcruxes?

She sighed, took out a scrap of paper and quill, and wrote, _Harry and Ginny, thanks for the note. Happy to help. Keep in touch._ Then she signed her name and handed it to Ron for him to sign.

“They want help,” she said simply. “What else can we do?”

#

Tonks was acting downright mopey in D.A.D.A. that day, and the other students were starting to notice. Whispers were beginning to circulate.

“What’s wrong with her?”

“Maybe she’s just ill.”

“Maybe it’s a family problem.”

“Haven’t seen Lupin lately. Maybe he left her.”
“Ha! Him leave her? Does he think there are a lot of women clamoring to get themselves a werewolf? Ouch!”

Ron tucked his wand away before Morag MacDougal could see where the jinx had come from. Already beginning to sprout fur, Morag tried to puzzle out who’d hit her, but Ron’s nonchalance was flawless. Five minutes later, she had to be led to the hospital wing by one of her classmates, as she had begun to resemble a lhasa apso.

After class was over and everyone else was rushing to pack their things and get to lunch, Ron and Hermione went to Tonks, who was sitting dolefully at her desk in the front of the class. The image from her dream flashed through Hermione’s mind, of her wand pointed at Tonks, those words coming from her mouth . . . . She shook it away and buried it as deeply as she could.

“Sorry about Morag,” Ron said, with questionable sincerity. “She was saying things about Remus . . .”

Tonks’s eye twitched. “It’s okay. She’ll be fine.”

Hermione looked at Ron, then back to Tonks, trying to figure out what to say that would help.

“We’re going to have tea with Hagrid,” she finally offered. “Would you like to join us?”

Tonks looked at her with a spark of interest and seemed to perk up a bit. “Right now?” she asked. Hermione nodded. “Okay, then. Yeah. That might be nice.”

“Are Neville and Luna coming?” Tonks asked as they walked to Hagrid’s hut.

“They had other things to do,” Ron said with a shrug. Then he added in a slightly wistful tone, “I wish Harry was here. This kind of thing’s not the same with”—he looked at Tonks—“out him.”

Tonks forced a smile, then changed her face into Harry’s with what seemed excessive effort. Ron laughed, and Hermione was glad to see that Tonks’s worry hadn’t completely taken away her morphing abilities like it had last year. Tonks changed back to normal, but her smile stayed, and it seemed more genuine, if sad.

Her eyes drifted absently to the tree line as the smile slowly fell. “You know, I never actually went into the Forbidden Forest when I was in school,” she commented, breaking the lull in conversation. “I always thought there were far too many interesting things going on in the school or in Hogsmeade; why would anyone want to go tromping around in a dirty, empty forest?”

“Ha!” Ron said. “The forest is anything but empty.”

“I know that now,” Tonks said. “Sirius told me once about what they used to do as the Marauders, the strange things they saw when they went charging off into the night . . .”

Now Hermione saw where this topic had come from. She wondered what that was like, to be so consumed with worry for the man you love that everything reminds you of him.

“That’s all well and good for a bunch of large, powerful animals,” Hermione said, “but it’s still best for people to stay out of there. The centaurs aren’t too friendly, for one. We thought for a while that they’d killed Umbridge, and at the time, Harry and I weren’t at all sure they wouldn’t kill us.”
“And there’s spiders,” Ron piped up. “Don’t forget the spiders.”

“Right,” said Hermione. “Acromantulas. One of the most dangerous creatures in the world.”—Ron squeaked his agreement with that.—“And Voldemort hid out there part-time during our first year, before he got his body back. Really, it’s best to stay out altogether if you can.”

Tonks nodded and watched the ground in front of her, not looking at all cheered by Hermione’s warning.

Very soon, Hermione was relieved to see that they’d arrived at Hagrid’s. She knocked on the door, and they heard some clumsy movement from the inside, then the door opened and Hagrid himself appeared.

“Ron! Hermione! Come in, come in. I’ve jus’ got the kettle on.” He moved aside to let them through, then started a bit when he saw Tonks. “Tonks, too? I didn’ expect—never mind. Come in, make yerself comfortable.”

Hermione moved a brown, furry bag from one of the chairs, trying not to notice its squeak of protest when she set it on the floor. As they all settled in, Hagrid brought out a plate of what were probably meant to be muffins.

“Yeh hungry? I made these yesterday, so they’ve gone a bit stale—but they’re blueberry!” He added the last with a wide, hopeful smile. No one rushed to take one, so his smile fell and he set the plate on the table. “Haven’ had much time for bakin’, I’m afraid, what with—never mind. Tea’s nearly ready.”

Hermione took a muffin to be polite, but didn’t try to eat it, as Hagrid got the tea from the fire and poured them each a cup. He looked a bit more haggard than usual, with bits of twigs and a few small leaves stuck in his hair and to his jacket. When he finally sat down, he immediately pulled a flask from an inner pocket and added a dollop of its contents to his tea. He nearly put it away before holding it up and asking, “Would yeh like some?”

“No, thanks,” Hermione and Tonks said in unison.

Ron just looked at Hagrid as if he’d gone a bit mental. “Blimey, Hagrid, it’s barely past noon.”

Hagrid shuffled the flask back into his pocket, looking chastised. “Yeh’re righ’, I know. I’ve jus’ bin having a rough—never mind,” he said, looking at Tonks, who was staring sullenly into her tea. “No need to bother yeh with my problems.”

Strange as it was, Hermione thought she’d much rather hear about Hagrid’s problems than think of her own. “It’s all right, Hagrid,” she offered. “How are things for you?”

But now Hagrid seemed reluctant to talk about it. “No worse than they are fer anyone else, I suppose.”

“But, is everything going all right?” asked Tonks, making an admirable attempt to join the conversation.

He looked at her as if loath to say anything that might depress her further. “Well enough. Still early, o’ course.”

“What do you mean?” asked Hermione.

Hagrid took a hasty drink of his tea, then replied, “Like Ron said, it’s barely pas’ noon. Maybe my
afternoon classes’ll go well enough to put a good turn on the day. I’ve got nifflers fer the fourth years today!” The thought seemed to cheer him. “Speakin’ o’ little bundles o’ joy, I hear congratulations are in order.” He raised his cup in a toast. “Our own sweet Tonks, goin’ to be a mum! And Remus a daddy, too. The tyke couldn’ ask fer two better parents.”

Hermione and Ron were pleased to raise their own cups (though Hermione felt a bit silly toasting with tea), and Tonks gave them an appreciative smile.

“Harry says congrats, too,” Ron said. “He sent us a letter to tell you.”

“How about Ron?” Ron suggested. “Good, strong name. Short, easy to remember. Ronald Lupin. Kind of has a flow.”

They all laughed and spent the rest of the time in easy, pleasant conversation.

When they finally said good-bye to Hagrid and made their way back to the castle, Hermione was greatly encouraged to see that their attempt to cheer Tonks had worked, at least for a little while. She knew the worry would set in again soon, but Tonks deserved a break now and then. And, truth be told, Hermione was glad to have it, as well.

“Harry and Ginny,” Hermione clarified. “It really is wonderful news, Tonks. We’re all very happy for you.” And she really was. It was nice to know that, even if her own child situation was a nightmare, at least someone else’s was going as it ought to.

Tonks’s smile grew, and a bit of her hair in the front turned from mousey brown to light pink. “Thank you,” she told them, and took a thoughtful sip of her tea. “I suppose I should start thinking of names.”

“How about Ron?” Ron suggested. “Good, strong name. Short, easy to remember. Ronald Lupin. Kind of has a flow.”

Unease twisted around in Hermione’s gut at that news, but Tonks was gone before she could get any more information from her.

When Hermione arrived in Dumbledore’s office on Friday, Cecilia and Antoinette were there, as were McGonagall and the Headmaster himself. They’d been having a conversation which stopped when she walked in.

“Am I too early?” she asked.

“Not at all,” said Dumbledore from his desk.

There were more chairs in the room than normal. Hermione took one of the empty ones and looked at Dumbledore. “Shall I guess what you wanted to see me about?”

He smiled kindly. “It is my understanding that you are once again with child.”

“Do they send you a letter at the same time they send me one?” she asked, irrationally annoyed at his seeming omniscience.

“They’re quite enthusiastic about it.”

“They’re not the ones—” She stopped herself. If she started, it would turn into a rant and this
wasn’t the time or place. Everyone in the room was only trying to help her. They weren’t the ones she wanted to give a taste of her bile.

“I thought,” said Dumbledore, as if she hadn’t spoken at all, “that this time I might at least save you the mental anguish of wondering for the next few weeks if another volunteer will be found.”

“You have, then? Found someone?” she asked. The thought did fill her with some relief.

Dumbledore nodded again. “She should arrive shortly.”

Hermione sighed and ran her fingers through her hair. “Thank you, Professor, but . . . what about the next one? And the one after that? How many volunteers will you be able to find? Five? Ten? How long can this go on?”

“There will always be help for those who need it,” he said obscurely. “You have more friends than you know, Miss Granger. And Voldemort has more enemies than he counts on.”

A chill ran through her. “What does he have to do with this?” she asked.

“As Miss Diggory and Miss Smith have already explained to you,” he said, “you are important to the war effort. Harry is critical if we are to defeat Voldemort, and he relies heavily on you for support and assistance. He’ll need you, Miss Granger, particularly now, with his own new responsibilities to distract him. I suspect”—he inclined his head to look at her over his glasses—“he has already requested such assistance of you, has he not?”

Does he know everything? she wondered. She glanced sidelong at the others, wary of saying too much in company. “To be honest, Professor, I don’t even know where to start to help him at this point.”

“Perhaps a bit of light reading before bed will help to focus your mind,” he offered, then looked past her to the door as it opened. “Ah, Severus, good. Miss Rosier, please take a seat.”

Hermione started when she heard Snape’s name. She hadn’t expected to see him, and seeing Snape was something best prepared for. When she turned to look at him, he was glancing at the two other girls disdainfully, then bestowed the same look on her.

“If there is nothing else, Headmaster . . .” he said, turning to leave.

“No quite yet, Severus,” Dumbledore said, stopping Snape in his tracks. “As Miss Rosier’s Head of House, it would be prudent for you to be present.”

Snape, though looking deeply put-out, said nothing, but merely stood back against the wall in silence.

A Slytherin? Hermione looked at the new girl who had taken a seat beside Antoinette. She was average-looking in every way, aside from short ginger hair that was almost exactly the color of a pumpkin. Despite her unimpressive genetics, her immaculate personal appearance and haughty bearing spoke of money and society. She would never be mistaken for a Weasley.

Hermione wondered if this girl had been a transfer student. She couldn’t recall ever seeing her before. Or, at least, she couldn’t put a first name to her. She held out her hand. “Hello. I’m Hermione Granger.”

The girl looked at her and chuckled. Her laugh had a patronizing quality that Hermione immediately disliked. “Yes, I know,” the redhead said then took Hermione’s hand and gave it a
firm, polite shake. “Evelyn Rosier.”

When she got her hand back, Hermione squinted at the other girl. Why does that name sound familiar? “Are you new?”

Evelyn chuckled again. “No. I’m in my sixth year here.”

Hermione looked at Antoinette and Cecilia, but neither of them seemed to recognize her either. “I’m sorry, but I just can’t recall seeing you before.”

“You’d keep a low profile, too,” Evelyn said casually, “if your father was a Death Eater.”

Antoinette gasped. “Your father’s a Death Eater?”

“Was,” Evelyn corrected.

“Did he switch sides?” Cecilia asked.

“I wish,” said Evelyn. “He was killed by Aurors shortly after I was born.”

An awkward silence settled over the room. No one knew quite how to respond to that. Hermione expected one of the other girls to protest bringing a potential spy into their midst, but neither did. Finally, she said to Dumbledore, “Sir, I don’t want to sound ungrateful . . . but are you sure it’s a good idea—”

“How disappointingly close-minded of you, Miss Granger,” said Snape. “Do you never look past the surface? Or is it that you find a Slytherin unworthy to harbor your spawn?”

“Severus!” McGonagall scolded sharply.

Hermione barely controlled the impulse to remind him that it was his spawn, too, but then she realized that was probably his point exactly.

“It’s all right, Professor,” Evelyn said evenly. “No less than I’d expect from a Gryffindor—er, no offense.” She looked at Hermione. “The offer is there. Take it or leave it.”

Hermione looked again to the other two girls. This did, after all, involve them as well now. Antoinette merely shrugged. Cecilia shifted in her seat and said, “None of us can help who our families are.”

“Why do you want to help me?” Hermione asked.

“For the same reason as they do,” Evelyn said. “I want to see the Dark Lord put down, and you seem to be an important part of making that happen.”

“But if your father . . .” Antoinette began.

Evelyn rounded on her. “I don’t have a father because of the Dark Lord. I know others can say that, but people take pity on them. How many people do you think feel sorry for the child of a Death Eater? No one knows me outside of Slytherin because no one outside of Slytherin would accept me. But I can’t even speak out against the Death Eaters in my own House because half of them aspire to be one.” She stopped, and her voice softened. “I’ve got to do something if I ever want my name to mean anything other than ignorance, bigotry, and bad choices.”

She looked again at Antoinette, who had nearly disappeared into the cushions of her chair. “Sorry,” she told the Hufflepuff, forcing a smile.
“It’s okay,” squeaked Antoinette.

“Well, you’re good in my book,” said Cecilia, as if that settled the matter.

No one else was looking at Snape, so no one else saw the gleam of approval in his eye as he watched the young Slytherin, but to Hermione, it was just another baffling thing to add to the many she had been discovering about her nasty Potions master ever since marrying him. She had always found his preferential treatment of those in his own House annoying and unfair, but the notion that he genuinely cared for them was not one she had much considered. She found it surprisingly touching.

But Evelyn’s tirade had brought another thought to Hermione’s mind. The child of a Death Eater . . . If they all survived this, even if she succeeded in getting her babies back and raised them to be good, responsible adults, they would always carry that same stigma. If their hopes were realized and Voldemort was vanquished, what would that mean for anyone with a connection to a Death Eater, even a reformed one?

She shook her head to clear her thoughts. There would be plenty of time to worry about that later. Much later. She got up and went to stand in front of Evelyn.

“Thank you. I would be glad for your help.” She offered her hand again. Evelyn took it with a small smile and nod. “And maybe,” Hermione continued, “I could introduce you to some of my friends. I may know a person or two who could empathize with your situation.”

“Maybe I’ll take you up on that,” Evelyn replied. “So . . . who’s the father?”

Hermione’s stomach jumped. “Um . . . my husband.” She very nearly looked at Snape. Her eyes were already in motion before she was able to catch herself and redirect them to McGonagall, who saw her panic and came to her defense.

“Miss Granger’s husband is a non-issue, Miss Rosier,” she said calmly but firmly.

“How can I know that?” Evelyn asked, turning to look at McGonagall. “With due respect, Professor, I need to know that I’m not putting myself at risk just by the simple fact of letting part of this man’s body into mine.”

That’s an odd way to put that, Hermione thought, and began to wonder herself if there was such a danger.

“The man in question has no communicable diseases,” Dumbledore said calmly. There was a hint of amusement in his voice that Hermione found totally inappropriate.

“That’s not what I mean,” Evelyn said, shaking her head. “Not entirely, anyway.” She looked knowingly at Snape, as if sharing some deep, unspoken Slytherin secret.

“That is not a danger, Miss Rosier,” he told her.

Cecilia voiced Hermione’s thoughts. “What are you talking about?”

“Dark curses,” Evelyn said, still locking eyes with Snape as if wondering if she could believe him. “There are certain curses which cling to a person’s very being, inhabit their body like an incurable disease. They can be passed to children, sometimes even to anyone who comes into contact with their flesh or bodily fluids.”

“That is not a danger,” Snape repeated. “You have my word.”
“Then you know who it is,” she said, her eyes narrowed.

“Those who need to know do,” Dumbledore interjected, “and those who do not—do not. If you have any second thoughts, Miss Rosier, any desire to change your mind, please do so now.”

Evelyn looked at him for a moment, then said, “No. If you say I’m safe, then I’ll believe you. And anyway, what that’s worth doing doesn’t entail a little risk?”
The next day, Hermione awoke to the sound of birds fighting outside her window, loudly chirping and flapping. She groaned, wishing they’d leave her alone and go kill each other somewhere else. A few moments later, she was fully awake and berating herself for that thought, but the birds moved off quickly. The room was bathed in sunlight, making her bed, with its soft comforter, behind its red curtains, feel like a womb. She cracked the curtains, peering out and squinting at the light. The other girls were still in their beds, asleep as far as she could tell. It was obviously quite early, and being Saturday, she had no classes to prepare for, and yet she knew she was too much awake to get any more rest.

She propped her pillow up and sank back onto it, wondering how to pass the time until it was a more decent hour to get up. Dumbledore’s words came back to her, and she reached under her bed, pulling out the strange book of fairy stories. It was certainly too early for anything as heavy as the Potions books. She settled in, snuggling under the blankets, the book in her lap. Perhaps there was a nice story about a farmer’s daughter swept off her feet by a charming prince. She could use a bit of escapism.

By the time Neville and Ron joined her at the Gryffindor table, three hours later, she was on her second read through the book. She muttered a greeting to them as she ate a piece of toast and tried to avoid getting jam on the pages. Ron knew well enough not to try to talk to her when she was reading, but Neville hadn’t quite caught on to that.

“What do you think?” he asked pleasantly as he filled his plate.

Hermione held up a finger for him to wait, finished a paragraph, then looked at him. “Fascinating,” she said. “I mean, massively disturbing most of the time, but fascinating. Though I suppose it’s not surprising that wizards would come up with morality tales to teach their children in the same way Muggles do. It makes me wonder what I would have thought of them as a child. Things often don’t seem as creepy when you’re a kid as they do when you’re older.”

“What do you mean ‘creepy’?” asked Ron.

Hermione cocked an eyebrow at him and opened the book to one of the stories. “Well, there’s one where a wizard rips out his own heart only to find it’s got wrinkly and hairy from disuse. Don’t you think that’s a horrifying image?”

Ron shrugged. “Well, yeah, but that’s the fun of them.”

Hermione turned to another. “At least there’s one happy tale. ‘The Fountain of Fair Fortune’. It actually reminds me a bit of this Muggle story called *The Wizard of Oz*. I wonder if L. Frank Baum was a wizard.”

“Well, if he was, he probably wouldn’t have been writing stories about us for Muggles,” said Ron through a mouthful of kipper.

Hermione laughed. “The Wizard of Oz wasn’t a real wizard. Just . . . a man with a few tricks the locals hadn’t seen.” She tried to find a way to explain it without recounting the entire story to them. “There were witches in the story, but only a few. They at least were a bit closer to real witches.
Though the good one was beautiful and the wicked one was ugly and green. At least, according to the film version.”

“That’d be handy,” Ron commented. “Things’d be a lot easier if we could tell who was evil because they were green.” Then he added under his breath, “...’stead of just wearing it.”

Hermione gave him a sharp look, but Neville hadn’t heard, as he laughed and added, “That would have made Umbridge look even more like Trevor’s mum.”

“Why, yes,” Hermione snapped, still miffed at Ron for the Slytherin comment. “Wouldn’t the world be so much simpler if we could judge people based solely on their skin color?”

When Dean, Parvati, and Seamus gave her surprised looks from where they sat a short way down the table, Hermione realized she’d spoken too loudly. She winced and shook her head, unable to think of any brief way to explain what she meant, and the next moment her classmates had returned to their conversation. Hermione, Ron, and Neville kept eating, none of them coming up with anything to break the awkward silence that suddenly descended.

They were soon relieved when Luna joined them, oblivious to tension in the air. “What book have you got?” she asked Hermione, who showed her. “Oh, those are great stories,” Luna said cheerily. “I particularly like the one about the Deathly Hallows.”

She got three confused looks in response, and Hermione flipped through the book, saying, “What are Deathly Hallows? I don’t remember anything about that.”

“Oh, sure,” Luna said, holding out her hand. When Hermione gave her the book, she flipped to one of the stories. “It’s called ‘The Tale of the Three Brothers’, but really it’s about the Deathly Hallows. See, someone’s even drawn their symbol in for you.”

Hermione looked at the page she meant, and sure enough, there was a strange little symbol hand-drawn by the title. She hadn’t thought it meant anything, just a bit of doodling.

“What does that mean?” Hermione asked.

“It’s the three gifts the Peverell brothers got from Death.” Luna pointed at the symbol. “A triangle for the Invisibility Cloak, a circle for the Resurrection Stone, and a line for the Elder Wand. My dad has a necklace of it.”

“Why would a grown wizard have jewelry about children’s stories?” asked Ron.

“Because he’s on the Quest,” Luna replied, as if that cleared everything up. When all she got were blank stares in return, she continued. “The Quest for the Hallows.”

“You can’t mean they’re real?” said Neville.

“Oh, of course.” Luna blinked. “It would be silly to look for things that weren’t real.”

“Do you mean there really is a wand more powerful than any other?” Hermione asked. “Or a stone that can bring back the dead? That’s impossible.”

“Or a cloak that can make people invisible,” added Ron, his tone heavy with sarcasm. “Why, that’s sheer madness.”

Hermione did not appreciate his cheekiness. After all, Harry’s Invisibility Cloak was something entirely different than a stone which could bring someone back from the dead.
“Ron, you can’t be suggesting this fairy tale is true,” she whispered to him, hoping Luna wouldn’t hear.

Ron shrugged. “Just saying.”

“But if they were real,” said Neville, “where do you suppose they’d be?”

“I don’t know,” Luna replied. “My father might know better, though. Would you like me to ask him?”

Hermione sighed. “Yeah, Luna, why don’t you do that,” she said, mostly to avoid offending her friend.

#

“Hermione, do we really have to do this now?” Ron protested as Hermione dragged him into the library. “It’s Saturday.”

“Exactly,” she replied, already searching the stacks. “We’ve got all weekend to work on this and we’ve got the place to ourselves, at least until tomorrow night.” She gave Ron a challenging look. “Or did you not want to help Harry destroy the most evil wizard in the world?”

Ron despondently walked over to take the books she handed him from the shelf. “Of course I do, but I thought it would entail more actually fighting evil wizards and less skulking around in the library. This feels a lot like homework.”

“Well, the—” She stopped herself. “They would be easier to find if Harry and Ginny actually knew what they were looking for.”

Ron put the books on a table and picked one up carelessly. “Oh, brilliant. So all we have to do is find the one labeled ‘My Horcruxes and Where I’ve Hidden Them, by T. M. Riddle’.”

“Ronald!” Hermione hissed, looking around the room frantically. “There’s no one here, Hermione,” he said. “Remember, it’s Saturday.”

Hermione did a sweep of the library, but didn’t see anyone else. She cast homenum revelio, which also revealed nothing. Only then did she turn back to Ron. “Don’t be so quick to think it’s safe, Ron. Voldemort has spies everywhere. If he knew that we know about his . . .” she tried to think of an adequate pseudonym, and blurted out, “lucky charms, don’t you think protecting them would become his top priority? Our only hope is if we can find them before he realizes they’re in dan—” She stopped when she noticed that Ron was trying not to laugh.

“Lucky charms?” he squeaked, then he couldn’t hold back the laugh any longer. Suddenly Hermione recalled a type of Muggle cereal her parents would never let her have as a kid, and she imagined a green-clad Voldemort on a box with pictures of marshmallow diaries and lockets, and completely lost her train of thought as she burst out laughing as well.

After several seconds, she calmed down enough to ask, “Wait, what are you laughing at?” Surely he knew nothing of Muggle breakfast foods.

His laugh trailed off to a weak chuckle. “I’m picturing his face if he heard someone calling them that, like they were something you could by at Fred and George’s shop for a Knut. Why? What are you laughing at?”
Hermione laughed again and didn’t try to explain. She took a seat at the table and pushed a few of the books toward him. “Here. These are all about the founders of Hogwarts. Harry said that Helga Hufflepuff’s cup may be a”—she snickered—“charm . . . and that another may be something of Ravenclaw’s. But it’s possible that he got hold of something of Gryffindor’s, or even used something else of Slytherin’s.”

“So?”

“So look for mentions of anything that might be an heirloom. Anything important or valuable, and probably easily carried. He’d want it to be portable.”

“Right,” Ron said, cracking the first book. “So, Ravenclaw’s diamond handbag, Gryffindor’s ivory toothbrush, Slytherin’s silver-plated Walkman . . .”

Hermione looked up sharply to find Ron grinning, apparently quite proud of himself for the reference.

“Dad read about it in a Muggle magazine,” he explained.

She got down to her work, the shadow of a smile tickling the corners of her mouth.

#

Hermione and Ron spent virtually the entire weekend in the library, but in the end had nothing to show for it but a few highly unlikely possibilities, all of which, upon further research, proved to be accounted for or confirmed destroyed. By the time classes resumed on Monday, they were both thoroughly discouraged.

“On the bright side,” said Ron as they took their seat in Potions, “at least we know the answer’s not in the library.”

Hermione looked at him wearily. Well, yes, at least there was that.

The class went along normally for the most part. They were making a potion that required the use of live tadpoles, which only reminded her of the row she’d had with Snape about the book he’d given her. She knew it was silly that tadpoles would remind her of unborn children, but still . . . she was reluctant to put them into the cauldron. They were swimming around in their jar, their little tales moving through the greenish water like they didn’t have any idea they were about to become potion ingredients. Of course they have no idea, she thought, berating herself. They’re tadpoles. They’re not sentient.

And yet there she was, not scooping them up and throwing them in the cauldron with the beetle legs and gilly water.

“Miss Granger.”

She jumped at the sound of Snape’s voice right behind her.

“Is there a problem?”

She looked at him. His eyes flicked from her face to the jar in her hand and back. His lip curled slightly and her anger flared. He knew what was on her mind.

“I don’t recall squeamishness ever stopping you from completing a task before,” he observed.
“Well, sir—” she started, but couldn’t come up with a retort. Not one that wouldn’t obviously be about what they were obviously talking about, anyway. Ron was already giving her an odd look. She drooped. “No, sir.” She scooped out six tadpoles and dropped them into the boiling cauldron, carefully not watching as they submerged.

Snape hadn’t moved off yet. “Miss Granger, come to my office at seven o’clock. I require a report on the progress you’ve made for your independent project. Assuming, that is, that you’ve made any progress.”

Hearing the derision in his tone, she turned to glare at him, but he was already striding off toward the Slytherins’ table.

#

When Hermione arrived at Snape’s office that night, she found him, as usual, hunched over his dimly-lit desk, scribbling notes on scrolls in red ink.

“Well, Miss Granger,” he asked, not even looking up from his scrutiny of the scrolls, “what progress have you made?”

Hermione wondered how he could even read with his nose so close to the parchment. His hunching made him look smaller—somehow both uglier and more fragile.

“To be honest, sir,” she said in her usual report-giving voice, “I haven’t had all that much time to work on it.” He glared at her from under his eyebrows, and her voice grew hard with defensiveness. “I’ve been a little distracted with other things.”

“Such as?” he asked slowly.

As if you can’t very well guess. “Oh, just the usual. Homework, classes, helping Harry find—” She stopped herself.

He raised an inquiring eyebrow.

“—being pregnant with your spawn.” She threw the word in his face, and his lip curled.

“Do not anger me, Miss Granger,” he warned. “That situation has been seen to. Unless you’re having second thoughts about allowing a lowly Slytherin carry your child.”

“No, I . . .” She let out a puff of breath. She wondered what she was even angry about this time, and if it might have had anything to do with the pregnancy causing a hormonal imbalance. Then she registered the strange protectiveness in his tone, recalled the way he’d looked at Evelyn on Friday, and she began to wonder if it was something more than his usual House preference. She felt a sharp pang of jealousy, which confused her more than she would have liked. She had to know.

“No,” she said carefully. “Evelyn’s actually . . . surprising. I wouldn’t have thought . . . that is, I’m glad she chose to help me.” Snape relaxed a fraction, which encouraged her. “Sir . . . Severus . . . there’s something else about her, isn’t there? Something more than her just being in your House.”

He looked at her sharply, but not in anger: in surprise.

“You just seem to be a bit more protective of her for some reason,” she explained.

He looked for a moment as if he were debating with himself, then looked back to the parchment
and resumed marking. Hermione thought he was ignoring her, until he said, “Her father and I were friends in school.”

*Snape had friends?* she thought, then instantly regretted it. She was glad he wasn’t looking at her, or he’d have seen the surprise on her face before she could recover.

To her further surprise, he continued. “We joined the Death Eaters together.” His voice was tight. His quill stopped moving, but he still stared at the parchment. “He was, in the end, not a very good friend.” He didn’t expound on that, but his voice got soft, nearly a whisper, and Hermione was sure he wasn’t speaking to her anymore. “I should have listened to . . .” He trailed off and was silent for a moment, then snapped back to himself and looked at her. “Evelyn’s mother didn’t approve of Evan’s—”

He stopped suddenly, as if his throat had closed in mid-sentence. Hermione had never known Snape to have trouble speaking before, but then she remembered . . . *Lily’s maiden name. He really had it bad.*

Snape looked angry—at himself, she thought—but continued. “Miss Rosier’s mother didn’t approve of her husband’s extracurricular activities, but, like so many *women*, she thought she could change him.” He offered a sneer for Hermione on behalf of her gender, but Hermione thought it seemed forced. “She was mistaken. By the time the first war was over, her heart was broken and her child was fatherless. I could . . . sympathize. Due to her husband’s choices, she had a limited social circle. Her situation in general society is much the same as Evelyn’s is in school. Thanks to the Headmaster’s testimony, she, like the rest of the world, believed me to have switched sides. I was perhaps the only one who could understand.”

“You’re friends with her?” Hermione asked tentatively.

“I haven’t had any friends since the war,” he snapped. “We had tea on occasion and she asked me to look after Evelyn when she came to Hogwarts.” He was rushing now, and Hermione knew he’d clam up at any moment. She regretted interrupting his flow. “However,” he said, giving her a warning look, “since the Dark Lord’s return, Evelyn’s mother can only believe I was truly loyal all along. She knows the Death Eaters too well to believe anyone can escape. But Evelyn still trusts me, so I think she has not told her, which means some part of her still hopes she’s wrong about my loyalties.”

“Evelyn doesn’t know you were a Death Eater?” Hermione asked, her eyes wide with surprise.

He swooped around the desk and landed in front of her so quickly she jumped. “There is no past tense about it, Miss Granger,” he said darkly, and she was suddenly aware of the heat radiating off his body. “I *am* a Death Eater. Do not forget that.”

Then he was taking his seat again, and Hermione was trying to figure out why she felt so flushed.

“Miss Rosier knows that I was a Death Eater in the first war,” he said, resuming his marking. “She has almost certainly heard rumors within Slytherin House that I still am. But as she still trusts me, I must assume that she believes those rumors to be false. What I think her mother has not told her is that they are true.” His eyes flicked up at her from the marking. “Miss Diggory and Miss Smith know nothing of my being a Death Eater. I recommend not informing them. Now, have you made any progress at all on your assignment?” He sounded irritated at even having to ask.

“I’ve read some of the books you bought me,” she admitted. “They were fascinating. There were quite a few potions I’d like to try.” His irritation only seemed to grow, so she skipped the enthusiasm. “I didn’t find anything particularly useful to this project, though.”
He nodded gruffly, unsurprised. “Continue your research. Inform me immediately if anything does look promising.”

He pointed his wand at the door and it opened, which she took as a dismissal. She left without another word.

#

A few days later, Hermione went down for breakfast to discover that the house-elves had vomited Halloween all over the Great Hall. Jack-o-lanterns hung suspended below the ceiling, orange and black banners hung from the walls, and the pumpkin juice was extra pumpkiny. Hermione had always been amused by Halloween at Hogwarts. Something about it just seemed redundant. She recalled her childhood Halloween celebrations, before she found out about magic, when she used to dress up and watch the specials on TV. But now the classic symbols of Muggle Halloween—ghosts and goblins, snakes and spiders, pointed hats and flying brooms . . . people swooping around like bats—were just another part of her everyday life. She wondered what wizards and witches raised in magical families would think of the Halloween costume parade from when she was eight (she remembered fondly how she’d gone dressed as the White Witch from *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*: a look she hadn’t very convincingly pulled off).

A letter came with the morning post. Hedwig narrowly avoided landing in Hermione’s porridge and was flustered enough by the experience to peck at Hermione’s hand when she reached for the letter.

“Hedwig!” Hermione chastised. Hedwig gave her a look of owlish annoyance, so Hermione offered the owl some bacon and was then allowed to remove the letter.

“Ron!” she whispered, drawing his attention from a conversation about Quidditch with Seamus. “Harry wants to meet us tonight,” she continued, once she was sure she had his attention. “He says it’s about time he checked out Godric’s Hollow.”

Ron beamed with excitement at the news. “Finally! Time for some actual hunting.”

Hermione frowned at the letter. Something wasn’t right. Then she realized . . . “Harry’s parents were killed on Halloween,” she said softly, and Ron’s smile fell. “Ron, I don’t think we’re really going there to hunt.”

That put a damper on Ron’s good mood, but he cheered up by the time they got to Potions, deciding that he was just excited to be seeing Harry and Ginny, even if it was going to be dead depressing.

Snape seemed more irritable than usual in class, and Ron and Hermione managed to lose Gryffindor fifteen points between them by the time it ended and they rushed out. The rest of their classes were a blur as the evening crept closer and their excitement to see their best friend mounted.

Harry had contacted Hagrid, who’d agreed to let them through the gate. Hagrid, like other Order members, knew Harry was on a special, secret mission, which he thought warranted a bit of leeway when he needed help from his friends. The fact that Hermione had her doubts about their true reason for leaving made her uneasy, like they were tricking Hagrid into breaking the rules, but . . . well, she didn’t know they weren’t going Horcrux-hunting.

Harry met them in the Entrance Hall with the Invisibility Cloak. They waited until no one else was around before getting under it and slipping out. (They may have had permission, but they didn’t think it was prudent for the other students to know they were being allowed out.) It was good that
it was dark, because the three of them didn’t fit under the Cloak nearly as well as they had when they were eleven. Hermione was sure it wouldn’t take too impressive a power of observation to notice three pairs of feet making their way across the lawn.

Ginny was waiting for them outside the gate.

“How will we get there?” Ron asked. “I’ve never been to Godric’s Hollow, and—no offense, guys—I don’t really want to Side-Along Apparate with someone who hasn’t even passed the test.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Honestly, Ron, haven’t you ever heard of a map?” She pulled out a map she’d found in the library and pointed to the town’s location.

Ron wavered. “Er... I’ve never Apparated based on a point on a map.”

Hermione figured as much. She held out her arm for Ron to take. “I trust you two know where we’re going?” she asked Harry and Ginny, who nodded. Ginny was grinning knowingly at Hermione’s exasperation.

Once Ron had a firm grip on her arm, Hermione turned on the spot, and the next moment they were standing beneath some trees just outside a town. A moment later, Harry and Ginny joined them.

“Well...” Harry said, looking toward the town. “Home sweet home, I guess.”

#

The town was much like many others Hermione had seen. Houses, shops, streets. Hardly anything special about it. That is, until they came upon the ruin of a house, magically disguised so that Muggles wouldn’t see it. There was a sign out front, declaring it the former home of the Potters, where James and Lily Potter had made their last stand.

Hermione frowned at the graffiti littering the sign, then looked to Harry. He was staring at the house in a sort of horrified awe. Ginny took his hand.

“Blimey,” was all Ron could say.

They stood for several minutes like that, taking in the site which had had such an influence over not only their own lives, but the wizarding world as a whole. Occasionally one of them would make a comment and another would mutter a response, but later no one could remember what was said.

After making sure that Harry was okay (Ginny seemed to have any comforting under control), Hermione’s thoughts turned unintentionally in another direction. Her eyes went back to the wooden sign, searching for a name amongst the signatures, a certain spidery scrawl amongst the scribblings. Finding nothing, she shook her head, feeling foolish. After all, even if he had visited this place, Snape wasn’t exactly the type to leave condolences.

Soon Harry walked away, and the others followed. There were iron gates a short way off. That’s where they were going.

When they were close enough for her to make out tombstones behind the gate and realize it was a graveyard, a swift movement caught her eye. A black figure flashed in the moonlight for just a moment, then disappeared into the shadows.

Hermione’s heart raced. “Did you see—” She turned to the others, but no one looked like they’d seen anything.
“What?” asked Ginny.

Hermione looked in the direction the figure had gone. She squinted, but couldn’t make anything out. She pulled the Foe-Glass from under her robe, but none of the figures in it were even close to distinct. *I wonder . . .*

“What?” she said, still watching the shadows, her ears straining for any sound from them.

The graveyard, when they finally passed through the gates, held many revelations and as many mysteries.

“Hey, look!” Ron said a bit too loudly, pointing to a tombstone. “Dumbledore!”

“What?” Harry asked, just as loudly, panic in his voice. He raced to the grave.


Hermione looked at the stone, distracted for the moment from the figure that may or may not have still been lurking close by. “It’s not a terribly common name, Ron.”

Ginny suddenly gasped. “You don’t suppose it could be his wife and child?”

Hermione shook her head before anyone could get too carried away with the idea (*Though it would explain his cryptic response when I asked him if he’d ever been in love*). “Look at the dates. It’s too long ago. He’d have only been a teenager when they died.”

“If they were related, though,” Harry said, his brow furrowed, “why didn’t Dumbledore ever tell me he’d lived in the same town as I did?”

Ron shrugged. “Maybe it never came up. ‘Good job stopping Quirrell, Harry, and by the way, we’re from the same hometown.’ ‘Nice work with the basilisk, Harry, and have I mentioned that our families are buried in the same cemetery?’ That would have been like Lupin saving you from the Dementor on the train, then saying, ‘Here, Harry, have some chocolate, and guess what, I used to change your nappies.’ Some things just don’t come up in conversation.”

Harry scowled at him, not finding his effort to lighten the mood particularly amusing. Given the fact that they were standing in a graveyard, Hermione couldn’t blame him, though she did appreciate what Ron was trying to do, in his own way.

“He should have brought it up,” Harry insisted. His mood was growing dark. “I’ll have to ask him. What does he have to hide, especially from me?”

Hermione walked further down the rows, looking at headstones. They were mostly names that weren’t familiar, and a few that were. Stewart, McClaren, Abbott, Monk . . . She stopped short in front of a very old grave. The carvings in the stone were difficult to make out, but when she looked closely, she saw it was the grave of Ignotus Peverell.

It wasn’t the name that caught her attention—it was the symbol on the tombstone. The symbol from her book. The symbol that Luna had explained was that of the Deathly Hallows. Then she remembered the name, Peverell, was the same that Luna had claimed was that of the brothers from the story.

*It can’t be. It must have been added later, after the connection to the old legend developed.* She looked closer. It certainly didn’t look like an afterthought or piece of graffiti. *No . . . . Even if it was*
true, that’s just too much of a coincidence.

Hermione was so busy trying to convince herself it was a hoax that she barely heard when Ginny finally announced that she’d found what they’d come here for. She hurried over to them, and joined them in looking down at the large gravestone that marked the resting place of Harry’s parents.

It said their names, the dates of their births and deaths (Too young, too young, was all she could think), then under that, a single line. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death. She recognized it immediately as a Bible passage. First Corinthians 15:26, if she wasn’t mistaken. It was a message of hope, a promise that good will triumph over evil, that there is an end to pain. It was a promise she dearly wanted to believe. She wondered who had decided to put it on the grave.

#

By the time they returned to Hogwarts, it was nearly midnight. They thought it would be late enough to sneak in without risking anyone spotting Harry and his cloak, so Hermione and Ron said their goodbyes at the gate, Harry sent his Patronus to Hagrid to let them in.

“Someone taught you to send messages with your Patronus?” Hermione gasped.

Harry nodded. “Since I was going to be away from the rest of the Order, Dumbledore said I’d need a safe way to contact them in case something happened. I’ll show you at Christmas if you want. Takes a bit of practice, but it’s not all that hard once you get it.”

Hermione and Ron said they’d hold him to that, and soon Hagrid appeared to unlock the gate. They slipped through the night as stealthily as they could, hoping they’d get back to Gryffindor Tower with no one the wiser.

“Hurry, Ron,” Hermione whispered as Ron pulled open the huge door to the Entrance Hall. “Before someone catches us.”

“What’s going to catch us?” he asked as the door began to move. “Besides, we’re still prefects, aren’t we?” (This was technically true, but little enough was made of it that they usually forgot.) “That means we’re allowed to be out after hours.”

“I’m afraid it doesn’t, Mister Weasley,” said a cold voice, and Hermione looked up to see her husband standing in the now-open doorway, his face set in a scowl. “Twenty points from Gryffindor, Weasley. I suggest you get back to your dormitory before my lenience wears out.” Ron didn’t move, but looked at Hermione. “Now!” Snape snarled, and Ron scurried away.

Snape looked at Hermione, then stood aside to let her in, closing the door behind her.

“Aren’t you going to ask us where we were?” she asked.

He looked at her darkly. “If I believed you and Weasley were up to what it would appear you would be up to, sneaking in alone in the middle of the night, I would render him incapable of getting up to it again.”

It took Hermione a moment to translate that, then her eyes widened as she wondered if Snape would literally hex Ron’s bollocks off if he thought she was cheating on him. She looked in his eyes. Yes. Yes, he would.

“You were spying on us?” she asked, trying to make it sound like she’d just figured it out, when in reality he had only confirmed her suspicion.
“Better I do it than someone else. Mrs. Malfoy, perhaps? Or have you already forgotten about the lovely evening you two spent together?”

“I had my Foe-Glass!” she protested. “And I wasn’t alone.”

“No. I’m certain Mr. Potter would have left his wife and child in an instant to run to your rescue,” he sneered.

Hermione blinked. *Is he . . . taunting me with Harry’s love for his family?* But his voice was slightly strained.

She looked in his eyes again, more closely this time, and saw that they were tinged with red. She decided to show her hand. “Do you go there every Halloween?” she asked softly.

He looked away from her, but didn’t deny it. After a moment, he said, “Unless a more pressing issue distracts me.” He turned to her again. “Like making sure a little girl isn’t eaten by a troll.” Hermione thought she saw the barest trace of amusement in his eyes . . . though it could have as easily been annoyance.

Seeing how quickly this could become an argument, she decided against a retort and simply said, “I’d better get back to my room.”

He nodded, and she turned to go. After a few steps, she thought she’d got away.

“Miss Granger.”

Hermione stopped and look back at him. He hadn’t yet moved from where he stood.

“Twenty points from Gryffindor.”

She turned and hurried back to Gryffindor Tower, promising herself she’d talk to Dumbledore about those points as soon as possible. They shouldn’t be punished for being there for Harry when he needed support, least of all by an Order member, who knew better.

#

Hermione didn’t see Dumbledore at any meals the next day, nor the day after that. This didn’t help her worries about the Headmaster.

At breakfast on Tuesday, Luna came over to their table with a letter in her hand. She plunked herself down beside Hermione and offered the parchment to her.

“What’s this?”

“It’s from my father,” Luna said, perplexity creasing her brow. “You said to ask him about the Deathly Hallows.”

*Oh. Right.* Hermione smiled. “Thanks, Luna.” She started to put it in her bag, but Luna continued to look at her expectantly. She sighed and began to read.

*My dear Luna,*

*How pleased I am that your friends are taking an interest in the Quest! To think that a new generation of Questers will carry on the tradition, should the Hallows not be found in my lifetime,*
gives me untold joy. I assume they are familiar with the legend in its original form, and from your
letter it sounds as if you've told them some of the basics, so let me skip right to the details that are
generally not known by any but true Questers.

The three brothers to whom the Hallows were given were, as you have said, the Peverell brothers
—at least, such is the belief of many, including myself. The Elder Wand was given to Antioch, the
Resurrection Stone to Cadmus, and the Invisibility Cloak to Ignotus.

Hermione’s breath caught. Her thoughts came in an inarticulate rush: Ignotus Peverell—buried
near the Potters—Invisibility Cloak—Harry’s ancestor? She continued reading with greater
enthusiasm.

It is said that whoever could possess all three Hallows at once would become the master of Death.
The location of the Hallows, unfortunately, is altogether mysterious. The Resurrection Stone and
the Cloak of Invisibility have been lost since the brothers they were given to died. The Cloak
naturally fell to Ignotus’s son, but as there are no Peverells currently alive (that we are aware of),
there’s no telling what name the current owner goes by. Some say that the Stone was also passed
to Cadmus’s descendants, but again, the names of those descendants is wholly unknown. There
have been rumors that the Stone was set into a ring for easier portability, but that is probably only
blind conjecture.
The Elder Wand, of course, has left a trail of blood splattered across the pages of wizarding history
that is simple to follow if one knows what to look for. It passes from one hand to another when its
previous owner is defeated. Wands have a mind of their own, as you know, and the Elder Wand
more so than any other. It cannot abide weakness.
It has been known by many names: the Deathstick, the Wand of Destiny, le Baton de Mordre, and
many more. Its power has drawn many Dark and evil wizards to seek it out, including Emeric the
Evil, Egbert the Egregious, Godelot, Hereward, and Loxias. Alas, the trail goes cold after Loxias .
. . though it has been claimed (and again, this is only rumor; I mention it now not because I
personally believe it, but for the sake of completion, and because you have asked so sweetly, my
darling) that it was even owned by Gellert Grindelwald.

Hermione stopped breathing.

I consider this sheer fantasy, however. If Grindelwald had owned the wand, then it would have
passed to Albus Dumbledore after their historic duel, and Dumbledore has acted in no way akin to
the other terrible and corrupt wizards who have owned the Wand. No, I believe that the Wand, too,
has been lost to time, lying, perhaps, in a grave somewhere alongside its last owner.
It was wonderful to hear from you, Luna, and—

The rest was meaningless salutation. Hermione folded the letter, her mind reeling with the
possibilities. After a moment, she tried to get a hold of herself. It’s just a fairy tale, just another of
Mr. Lovegood’s ridiculous theories. And even if they are real, it doesn’t matter. Our priority is the Horcruxes, not these so-called Hallows . . . . But then, why did Dumbledore give me the book? She couldn’t be as sure as she’d have liked that Lovegood’s story was complete fiction.

“Thank you, Luna,” she said, smiling. “Can I keep this?” Luna nodded, and Hermione put the letter in her bag . . . just in case it wasn’t utter nonsense.

#

By the following Friday, there was still no sign of Dumbledore, and Hermione was not the only one who was starting to get worried. There were whispers among the students that he wasn’t really even at school, that he had left on some trip, or even that he had died and McGonagall was covering it up. But all the teachers said merely that he was very busy and not to worry, which was enough for most students. For the moment, at least.

Hermione had been burning to ask Dumbledore some very pointed questions about why he’d given her the Beedle the Bard book. She’d finally given in and written to Harry, but he hadn’t been able to speak to Dumbledore either. Well, not exactly. He’d sent his Patronus to request a meeting, and Dumbledore’s Patronus had returned saying that he couldn’t see him just yet. So at least they knew he was alive, though his persistent absence was somewhat infuriating.

Hermione had spent most of her time recently busy with research. She was, as usual, ahead in all her classes, but she was also trying to find some way to help Harry find the Horcruxes and working steadily on the Potions project for Snape, having got through nearly all of the non-Dark books he’d bought her, but still no closer to an answer. It was incredibly frustrating to her to be failing so thoroughly at two projects at once. So it was with great relief that she arrived at Tonks’s office that afternoon, hoping for even an hour or so to take her mind off her work.

“How are you, Hermione?” asked Antoinette, already sipping her tea.

Hermione gratefully accepted the cup Tonks handed her. “Physically fine,” she answered. “Mentally exhausted. How are you all?”

“How are you, Hermione?” asked Antoinette, already sipping her tea.

Hermione took a seat in front of Tonks’s desk. The surrogates were already there. She tried not to think of them as ‘the surrogates’ in her mind, but she couldn’t help it. That was the only real reason they were important to her, though she knew they were individuals with more to contribute to the world than their uteruses. And if she ever slipped up and called them that to her friends, she’d have some uncomfortable explaining to do. Nevertheless, she wouldn’t be here having tea with them if it weren’t for that particular function they served, so she couldn’t help but think of them that way, when taken as a group at least.

“How are you, Hermione?” asked Antoinette, already sipping her tea.

Hermione gratefully accepted the cup Tonks handed her. “Physically fine,” she answered. “Mentally exhausted. How are you all?”

“Well enough,” said Cecilia. “No complaints.”

“Just wait until your feet swell to the size of small melons,” Hermione said humorlessly. “You’ll be cursing yourself for agreeing to this.” The surrogates looked at each other uncomfortably, and Hermione felt a pang of remorse. “Sorry. I just . . . it’s been a crazy time lately.”

For several seconds, no one had anything to say. Finally, Tonks broke the silence. “I’m so pleased to get to sit down with you all. I’ve been dying for some girl talk that doesn’t revolve around lesson plans and support hose.” The girls chuckled softly at that, but Hermione could see that the smile the mousy-haired woman gave them didn’t reach her eyes. Tonks met her concerned look and
continued on quickly. “Evelyn, I heard about your situation with the other Slytherins.”

Evelyn’s spine straightened. “Oh?” she said warily.

Tonks’s mouth curled in a half-smile, with a sort of fond amusement. “Slytherins: always afraid someone’s going to come around and stab you in the back.” That didn’t help calm Evelyn, so she continued. “My mum was in Slytherin. I’m immune to that suspicious look.”

Evelyn’s eyebrows shot up. “Your mother was a Slytherin? But you’re . . .”

“A Hufflepuff,” Tonks supplied, and then her half-smile disappeared. “Though the term ‘half-blood freak of nature’ may be more familiar to you. That’s what my mum’s family liked to call me.”

“They were pure-bloods?” Evelyn asked, surprised.

“The Blacks,” Tonks explained, and Evelyn nodded in understanding. “My maternal grandmother was a Rosier,” Tonks mused. “I wonder how close a relation we are.” Hermione wasn’t surprised she didn’t wonder if there was a relation. When dealing with pure-bloods, that’s pretty much a given.

“What was her name?” Evelyn asked.

“Druella, I think. To be honest, I never paid much attention to the family tree.”

“Druella was my grandfather’s sister,” Evelyn said with a start. “That makes us second cousins. I didn’t know I had any family who weren’t . . .”

“Nasty, bigoted, and potentially evil?” Tonks offered. “Yeah, I know the feeling. You’ll have to meet my mum. Maybe I’ll invite her to one of these lunches some time.”

“I’d like that,” Evelyn said sincerely.

“Though there’s plenty of other family if you don’t mind associating with half-bloods and blood traitors.” Her voice faded as she continued. “It’s too bad my cousin Sirius isn’t still around, though. He was always my favorite.” Suddenly, she looked at the girls as if realizing she’d just been somewhere else. “Well, ‘always’, not counting the thirteen years we thought he was evil, anyway.”

There was a lull in the conversation then. Hermione tried to think of something to say that wouldn’t be totally depressing or reveal secret Order information, but she couldn’t. She was thankful when Tonks spoke again.

“So, Antoinette, how are things in Hufflepuff these days? Do they still have game night in the common room on Fridays?”

A spark seemed to shoot through the quiet girl and she sat up in her seat, her eyes bright. “Oh, yes! Hannah said she’d teach us a Muggle game tonight called charades. You should join us.”

Tonks made a valiant effort at a smile. In fact, it might have even been real. “I may take you up on that, if the others don’t mind. Though I think I may have an unfair advantage at that particular game.”

“Then you can be on my team,” Antoinette said with a grin.

“Did you say Hannah?” Hermione asked. “Hannah Abbott? I thought she’d left school.”

Antoinette shook her head. “After she turned seventeen, she said it was her decision if she wanted
to go back, and she was tired of hiding. Said just because her mum was killed didn’t mean someone
would be coming after her, and she wasn’t going to put off finishing school forever.”

Hermione nodded, impressed. She had to admit, people really didn’t give Hufflepuffs the credit
they deserved.

“So, Cecilia,” Tonks said, turning to the pretty Gryffindor, “What about you? Any hobbies,
interests, deep dark secrets?”

Cecilia just shrugged, looking uncomfortable. After a moment, she said, “Well . . . I like Defense
Against the Dark Arts.”

#

The following Wednesday, Hermione was to meet Snape in the dungeons to discuss her progress
on the cure for Wentworth’s Brew again. She had finally got through every single book he’d
bought her at Flourish and Blotts and combed through most of them twice looking for anything
useful. There was a great deal of fascinating data and theory, but she didn’t see anything which
would appear relevant to what she was doing. She hoped she was wrong, which was why she
intended to give a full report to Snape, detailing every last piece of information covered in the
books, in hopes that something might stand out to him where it didn’t to her. The fact that such a
thorough and long-winded report would surely annoy him while also being exactly what he asked
for (so he couldn’t complain) was a bonus.

She arrived at his office door at eight p.m. exactly, knocked once, and waited.

There was no answer.

She waited another moment, then knocked again. Still nothing.

“Professor Snape?” she called through the door. “It’s Hermione Granger, here to give my report!”

Only the echo of her own voice through the corridors returned to her. She pressed her ear against
the door, listening for any sounds of movement, any scratching of a quill on parchment, but still she
heard only silence.

Her brow creased in a frown and she walked to his classroom. It, too, was completely empty. She
left the classroom and stood looking back and forth down the hallway, at a loss. Beginning to get
worried, she took out her Foe-Glass and, flitting glances to it every few seconds, made her way to
Snape’s private quarters, deeper in the dungeons. She knocked, but there was no answer here
either, nor light showing under the door.

He was the one who set the meeting. Where is he?

She could search the entire school, but that would take hours and may lead to nothing. It was a
longshot, but she knew where she had to go.

#

“I don’t know the bloody password!” Hermione shouted at the gargoyle statue, her anger rising.
This was the third time it had asked, with the same result. “This is important! Just let me see him!”

To her astonishment, the statue cocked its head slightly as if listening to something, then moved
aside to let her pass. She rushed up the stairs and burst through the door to Dumbledore’s office.
McGonagall and Tonks looked up in surprise from where they sat, but Hermione ignored them.

“Headmaster, please,” Hermione puffed, momentarily winded from racing up the stairs. “I need your help.”

The Headmaster’s chair was turned around, facing the window, but she could see his white hair beyond the back of the chair.

“How can I help you, Miss Granger?” Dumbledore asked.

“It’s Professor Snape, sir,” Hermione answered. She felt strange talking to the back of someone’s head. “We had an appointment, but he wasn’t there.”

Dumbledore’s chair turned slightly in her direction. She could see the sleeve of his robes and a bit of his hair and beard, but that was all.

“Severus was summoned by Voldemort,” Dumbledore explained. “He had to leave quite suddenly.”

Hermione wasn’t sure how to react to that. She found herself filled with a no-doubt unreasonable fear that somehow Voldemort had found out about their marriage and was greatly displeased. She looked at McGonagall and Tonks, then asked, “Voldemort doesn’t know about . . . us, does he sir? I mean, he wouldn’t punish Professor Snape for something he couldn’t control, would he?”

Dumbledore’s chair finally turned enough so that she could see one side of his face and he peered at her out of the corner of his eye. Before he could answer her question, though, a bright, glowing figure appeared outside, like a star racing toward them. She recognized it as a Patronus a few seconds before it ran through the window with a silver glow. Hermione couldn’t quite make out what sort of animal it was, but it was small. In fact, it appeared to be some sort of bird—which made the fact that it was running instead of flying rather odd.

Tonks leapt from her chair, and the others watched the strange bird intently as it looked straight at Dumbledore and spoke in Lupin’s voice.

“Severus is gravely injured. Hagrid is bringing him.”

Even before the bird had completely faded, Tonks had flown from the room and down the staircase. McGonagall and Dumbledore were looking out the window onto the grounds. Hermione ran to their side and looked out to see, far across the lawn, the great, lumbering figure of Hagrid running toward the castle with a large bundle of billowing robes in his arms.

Shocked and terrified, Hermione looked to Dumbledore for some sort of reassurance or instruction, but when she saw his face, words left her.

Much of the right side of Dumbledore’s face was grotesquely black and withered. The hair of his beard had fallen out of the black flesh and his right eye was dull and milky.

“Miss Granger,” McGonagall said suddenly, snapping Hermione out of her gaping horror. “Go to the hospital wing. Tell Madam Pomfrey she’s got a patient on the way.”

Her mind refocused now that she had a purpose, Hermione ran out, sudden, stark fear coiling around her heart like a two-headed serpent.
“Madam Pomfrey!” Hermione burst through the door of the hospital wing, her side sore from running.

Pomfrey came out of her office in a hurry, instantly on alert. “Yes? What is it, child?”

Hermione stopped in the middle of the room and bent over, gasping for breath. “Profess—Snape—coming—”

Pomfrey lightly shook Hermione by the shoulders. “Full sentences, girl. What about Professor Snape?”

Hermione looked into her eyes and forced herself to slow down enough to make sense. “Hagrid’s bringing Professor Snape. He’s been badly hurt.”

Pomfrey leapt into action, preparing a bed, Summoning various potions, and otherwise getting ready for his arrival.

Hardly a minute later, the door flew open again, and Hagrid barreled in with Tonks and McGonagall in his wake and Snape in his arms.

“Lay him here,” Pomfrey ordered, standing by the prepared bed, and Hagrid obeyed, then stood back.

Hermione gasped. Snape looked horrible, worse than she’d ever seen him, including the night the Death Eaters attacked Hogwarts. He was unconscious, and mercifully so. His right arm was bent at a very odd angle. His robes were slashed in places, revealing deep cuts underneath, oozing blood. No major arteries, Hermione noted with relief. The skin of his face, neck, and hands was red and blistered, no doubt by some Dark curse Hermione was unfamiliar with, and his left eye was swollen shut.

“How is he?” McGonagall asked as Pomfrey went to work and the rest stood out of her way.

The mediwitch did several diagnostic charms, then let out a puff of air as if she’d been holding her breath. “Not quite as bad as he looks, but still very bad.” She continued working as she talked. “What did he do to displease You-Know-Who this time?”

McGonagall and Tonks exchanged a surprised look, then McGonagall said, “We don’t know. He hasn’t woken yet.”

“And he won’t for a while,” Pomfrey said as she poured a potion down Snape’s throat. “This is the worst off you’ve ever brought him to me. I can heal him, yes, but it won’t be quick. I’d find someone to cover his classes for at least a week if I were you.”

As they talked, Hermione’s eyes kept going back to the broken, beaten form of her unchosen husband lying prone on the bed. It was bad enough seeing Dumbledore, seeing just how far the curse in his hand had spread, but at least he was able to retain his dignity, to keep that same calm, reassuring bearing he always had. But this . . . Snape, usually so stiff and in-control, sometimes wild with rage, rarely (as Hermione had come to learn) hesitant and quiet, but never this. He looked so fragile, limbs akimbo, head lolled to one side, mouth hanging open slightly. Like a
child’s broken doll.

“I need to cut off his clothing,” Pomfrey said, and Hermione looked at her with a start.

The others seemed to get the message before Hermione did, and she followed them out of the room as Pomfrey raised a privacy curtain around Snape’s bed.

In the hallway, McGonagall put her hand on Hermione’s shoulder and gave it a squeeze. She looked like she wanted to say something, but glanced at Hagrid, closed her mouth, and walked off down the corridor.

Before Hermione could think of anything to say, or even properly know what to think, she was distracted by Tonks whirling on Hagrid.

“Will you answer me now?” Tonks demanded. “Where’s Remus?”

Hagrid shifted his weight away from her. “He didn’ come,” he explained unhelpfully. “Said he didn’ want yeh to see him like”—he glanced at Hermione—“He didn’ feel fit to be seen by fairer company.”

“Fit to be”—Tonks sputtered. “He’s my husband, not my suitor! I don’t care what he looks like!”

“Tha’s what I told him,” Hagrid said, then he pulled something from his pocket and handed it to her. “He said to give yeh this, though.”

Hermione watched in confusion as Tonks took what Hagrid offered. It was a stick. Just a simple, Y-shaped stick. There must have been thousands like it within a square mile. But, inexplicably, it calmed her. Tonks held the stick gently, stroked one of the branches with her finger, and her desperation faded. Hermione wanted to ask what was so special about that stick, but she knew this was one of those secrets no one else but Tonks and Lupin were supposed to know.

*That must be nice*, Hermione thought, a pang of jealousy flitting wantonly through her heart.

Hagrid looked uncomfortably between the women. “I should go. Dumbledore’ll be needin’ a report.” With that, he was gone.

Tonks looked ashamedly at Hermione. “I’m sorry. That was very rude. I shouldn’t have—”

“It’s all right,” Hermione assured her. “You have every right to be worried about your husband.”

Tonks took Hermione’s hand and gave her a weak smile. “So do you.”

Hermione pulled her hand back with a start. Tonks didn’t look offended, as the pale smile hadn’t disappeared.

“Remus’s Patronus . . .” Hermione said, deliberately changing the subject. “I know a fair bit about animals, but I didn’t recognize that one.”

Tonks chuckled. “He . . . heh. He’d be embarrassed that you saw that.”

“I saw it once before, on the train, but I didn’t get a good look at it and didn’t even know what I was seeing . . .” Then she realized what Tonks had said. Hermione blinked. “Embarrassed? Why?”

Tonks started walking slowly down the corridor, and Hermione followed. “You know he taught Harry the Charm?”
“Of course. Third year.” Hermione had been more than a bit jealous of Harry at the time, to be perfectly honest.

“How did Harry say he taught him?”

Hermione frowned. Where was Tonks going with this? “He said he told him how to do it and kept encouraging him as he got better at it.”

“He never showed him.”

“No . . .”

“Seems a bit odd, doesn’t it?” Tonks asked. “Isn’t the best way to teach a new spell a demonstration?”

“What are you getting at?” Hermione finally asked.

Tonks smiled again—a strange, sad smile. “Remus has always been a little embarrassed about his Patronus.”

“Why on earth would anyone be embarrassed about being able to cast a Patronus?” Hermione asked, taken aback. That didn’t sound much like Lupin.

“Oh, it’s not the ability that embarrasses him,” Tonks said. “It’s the Patronus itself. He doesn’t feel it’s a very impressive one. Never has. Compared to Sirius’s dog, James’s stag, Lily’s doe, Dumbledore’s phoenix, Frank’s hippopotamus, and most of the others from the first Order . . . he always felt his roadrunner was a bit anticlimactic.”

Hermione stifled a snort, immediately chastising herself for proving Lupin had good reason for how he felt. “Roadrunner?” she asked. “As in the mostly flightless bird native to the southwest United States?”

Tonks was frowning. “It’s not as silly as it sounds.”

“No, it’s just—” Hermione gestured feebly with her hands in the air, trying to find some way to make her reaction sound less insulting. “When I think of Remus, that’s not the first animal that leaps to mind.”

“What would you expect it to be?” Tonks asked. “The same as mine?”

“No,” Hermione answered automatically, realizing the truth of it as she spoke. No, of course not. She couldn’t think of a particularly better option. “If you don’t mind my asking, why . . .”

“You know that some people’s Patronuses reflect themselves,” Tonks explained. “Like James’s and Sirius’s.”

Hermione nodded. She’d never actually seen Sirius’s Patronus, but it didn’t surprise her that it was the same as his Animagus form. “And mine and Ron’s?”

“Likely enough,” Tonks agreed. “And others reflect the happy memory that they use to conjure the Patronus.”

Hermione nodded again. “Like Harry’s and yours.”

The corner of Tonks’s mouth turned up in a crooked smile. “Exactly. I don’t think Remus will mind me telling you this. When he was a little boy—very little, even before he became a werewolf
—he used to get up early on Saturday mornings and watch cartoons with his parents. One of the few distinct memories he has of his life before Greyback bit him was sitting between his parents in their bed, watching a cartoon about a roadrunner outsmarting a coyote.”

“I know that one!” Hermione interjected. “But... he’s not a Muggle-born. Why would his parents have a TV?”

“He’s a half-blood,” Tonks explained. “His mother was a Muggle. It was one of the few Muggle conveniences she’d insisted upon keeping when she married his father.”

Hermione tried to imagine it, a happy, carefree child named Remus Lupin, watching TV with his parents, completely oblivious to how drastically his world would soon be changed.

“That’s a lovely picture,” she mused.

Tonks smiled sadly. She was staring at the floor in front of them. “He said it was the last time he could remember being completely happy.”

Hermione didn’t miss the hurt in her tone, though she knew Tonks wouldn’t mean for it to be so evident. “What’s Pr—Severus’s Patronus?”

“Don’t know. I’ve never seen it,” Tonks answered. “I’d be surprised if he even has a happy enough memory to make one.”

*I wouldn’t be too sure about that*, Hermione thought, causing her mood to fall. She continued walking beside Tonks in silence.

#

By Saturday, Hermione still didn’t know why Snape had been so horribly punished, though she knew he had regained consciousness. Snape would not consent to see her, and Dumbledore was conveniently indisposed every time she went looking for him. Somehow, though, it had been decided that Tonks would escort her to her appointment at St. Mungo’s while McGonagall took Evelyn. Hermione had to admit, she preferred this to the previous arrangement.

“It’ll be all right, Hermione,” Tonks assured her, holding her hand firmly, while Hermione sat on the table in the small exam room, the hospital robe hanging frumpily from her shoulders, as they waited for the mediwitch to come. “It’ll all work out. Dumbledore knows what he’s doing.”

“Does that really matter?” Hermione asked sourly. “Will he even be around long enough to see his plan to fruition? You’ve seen him. You know what the curse is doing to him.”

Tonks pursed her lips, frowning. Her lack of any sort of reassurance set Hermione’s heart racing. She realized belatedly that she’d been hoping she’d misread the situation.

“He’s dying, isn’t he?” she whispered.

Tonks nodded once.

“How long?”

Tonks’s tone was grim. “Not long enough.”

Hermione’s mind started racing with everything that meant. When Dumbledore died, would Hogwarts be safe? Would Harry? Would Voldemort finally make a play for the Ministry?
She felt the sting of guilt at the thought that followed on the heels of that one. If the Ministry fell, then the P.E.W.S. program would surely be abolished, or at least left by the wayside. She could stick close to the surrogates, maybe hide them away somewhere until the children were born, and make sure the Ministry never got their grubby paws on her babies.

And where would Snape be in that scenario? Sitting by Voldemort’s side, no doubt, perhaps made Secretary of some department or other. Or maybe—she shuddered at the thought—Voldemort would give him Hogwarts. *Headmaster Snape.* It was a frightening possibility. A better one by far, though, than some of the other alternatives. But if he’d displeased Voldemort so badly . . .

“Did you ever hear why Severus was . . . in such bad shape?” she hedged.

Tonks shook her head. “I haven’t spoken to him, and Dumbledore hasn’t told me. The Headmaster doesn’t appear to be too concerned about it, though, so it was probably something trivial. Maybe Voldemort was just in a bad mood because his favorite soap opera got canceled.”

The joke fell flat, but Hermione appreciated the effort, even though it was plain that Tonks wasn’t in a particularly jovial mood. She also hoped that the other woman was right. If Snape was tortured only because of Voldemort’s mood, it meant their secret was still safe and the Death Eaters would not soon be coming for her. The fact that she’d been allowed (or rather, required) to make her appointment with only Tonks as a chaperone was further proof that they really didn’t perceive any special threat. She took a deep breath, letting that hope fill her.

The door opened, and an older witch poked her head in. “They’re ready for you now, Miss Granger.”

Hermione looked at Tonks, who gave her a deeply sympathetic grimace, but nodded her on. “I’ll be waiting at the front.”

Hermione slid off the table and let the mediwitch lead her away.

#

The first thing Hermione did when she got back to Hogwarts was find a place to wait inconspicuously by the Entrance Hall so she’d see when McGonagall and Evelyn returned. When she saw the orange-haired Slytherin stride in, looking a bit tired, she caught her gaze, hoping for some sign that everything was okay.

Evelyn nodded once, not appearing at all surprised to see Hermione watching her, and went down the corridor to the dungeons.

Satisfied that everything went as well as could be expected, Hermione went up to her room, stopping in the common room to tell Ron that she’d be studying all weekend and not to bother her. It was partly true, at least. She planned to spend the rest of Saturday studying, but she knew she’d be in no shape to do anything on Sunday. She was glad the weather was nice enough that she could hope her roommates would be out most of the weekend.

Arriving in her room to find it empty, she settled in, ready to try to fit two days’ worth of studying into one.

#

Hermione was entirely uncertain what to expect from Potions class on Monday. She hadn’t heard whether Snape had been released yet, but he had been in such awful shape that she couldn’t imagine he’d be fit to teach already. So, she was the only one (aside from Ron, who she’d told the
bare minimum of Snape’s hospital stay to) that didn’t seem startled when Professor Sprout came bustling into Snape’s classroom a full three minutes after class was supposed to have started.

“So sorry I’m late, class,” Sprout said, dropping a collection of plants carelessly onto Snape’s desk. There was something amusingly incongruous about her sunny, scattered appearance in Snape’s carefully ordered dungeon environment. “Professor Snape has taken ill, so I’ll be teaching you today. I don’t know what he’s got you working on, but I thought we could take a break from it to examine some of the more esoteric plants and fungi that we grow right here at Hogwarts, and all the various potions that they’re used in.”

The Slytherins didn’t seem overjoyed with this turn of events, but the Ravenclaws were excited enough to balance things out. Ron was naturally thrilled, as well, but Hermione only took it as ominous that whatever had happened to Snape days ago was still affecting him, and that Pomfrey’s advice to find someone to cover his classes hadn’t merely been overly cautious. Recalling her own stay in the hospital wing not too long ago, Hermione had an unpleasant thought. If he was Crucioed as much as I was, or anything like it, he could be in there for weeks. She blushed with shame at the hope that sprang in her chest then. Now that the baby was out of her, she was aware of certain obligations that she had—obligations she couldn’t possibly be expected to fulfill as long as Snape was so indisposed. Of course, he’s probably built up a tolerance for it, and he’s much stronger than me physically. He’ll likely be out by tomorrow, she made herself think, though as penance or pessimism, she couldn’t be sure.

#

“Wotcher, Ron!” a bright voice called just as they were nearly to the Great Hall. Tonks was standing beside them a second later. “Don’t mind if I borrow Hermione, do you? Bit of girl talk, you know.”

“Er, no, go ahead,” Ron said, half-turned longingly toward the smell of lunch wafting through the hall. “See you, Hermione.”

“Walk with me?” Tonks said with false cheerfulness, not waiting for Hermione to keep up.

“What did you want to talk about?” Hermione asked as she hurried to keep pace beside the taller woman.

Tonks dropped the pretense in her face and voice. “Not me, actually.”

Hermione blinked. She realized what direction they were going. “He wants to see me?” Tonks nodded. “What about?”

“To beg forgiveness for being an uncaring prat if he’s got any decency,” Tonks muttered. “But of course, he doesn’t, so . . .” She glanced at Hermione, and her eyebrows pinched together. “Sorry. I know I shouldn’t be so hard on him, and I’m trying—I really am—for your sake. But he’s treated too many people I care about too poorly for me to be able to work up much sympathy for him. And now, he’s here, snug as a bug, while Remus is out—” She shook her head. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Hermione said automatically, though she wondered at the comparison. Did that mean that Snape was on the mend? Or did it mean that Lupin was in far more danger than she’d suspected? Despite her earlier guilty hopes, she dearly wished it was the former.

They soon arrived at the all-but-empty hospital wing. Tonks took her leave, and Hermione made her way to the curtained-off bed at the far end. Her steps slowed as she got close enough to hear raspy breathing coming from behind the curtain. Her heart raced; that sound was enough to tell her
that no, he wasn’t even close to being able to leave yet.

She stopped before she reached the edge of the curtain. He was expecting her, right? But was he expecting her this moment? She should announce herself—knock or something.

“Professor Snape?” she called, hoping she wouldn’t be waking him. He didn’t seem like the sort of man one wanted to be around when he just woke up.

“Stop hiding, girl,” a weak voice replied. It sounded like his throat was full of chalk. “I’m hardly going to hurt you.”

Wondering why he would think she was afraid of him, she stepped around the curtain to find herself standing at the foot of his bed.

She was struck dumb for several seconds as she took in the sight of him. The first thing she noticed (and the strangest thing to notice, really, considering the circumstance) was that he wasn’t wearing a scrap of black. He had been dressed in a pale green hospital robe with sleeves that were slightly too short to reach his wrists. His head was propped up on a couple pillows, and a white sheet and tan blanket were draped over his body, with his arms lying on top of them. His hair, messy from lying on a pillow, was actually much less greasy than usual, which Hermione assumed was due to his personal upkeep being taken out of his own hands. She pitied whatever poor house-elf was responsible for cleaning him, though she wouldn’t have been surprised if they all refused and Madam Pomfrey had to do it herself.

Considering the extent of the injuries she’d witnessed when he’d been brought in, there really had been noticeable improvement—outwardly, at least. His arm had been repaired, and the swelling in his eye had gone down considerably. His skin was now only lightly pink as opposed to flaming red, and there were no signs of the blisters that had covered him. She could see a still-healing scar on his wrist, as well as the edge of one on his chest where the robe came down into a V-neck. She guessed that the rest of the slashes now looked the same, as well.

“Enjoying the view?”

Snape’s bitter rasp made her jump. She hadn’t meant to stare.

“I’m sorry, sir. It’s just . . . what did they do to you?” Hermione took another step toward him, not bothering to try to hide the horror in her voice.

“They tickled me with kitten tails and sprinkled fairy dust in my eyes.” His attempt at a sneering tone came out more as a strangled whisper, but his glower was almost as effective as ever. “What does it look like they did to me?”

Hermione glared back. She knew Snape hated pity, but all she was showing him was normal concern. “I meant to say,” she amended, “why did they do that to you?”

Snape looked away from her to glare at where his feet tented the blanket. “The Dark Lord always has his reasons.”

“Is it . . .” she started. “I mean, it’s not . . . to do with us, is it?”

He gave her a sharp look, though his slightly swollen eye gave him an odd, lopsided squint. “You will have noticed by now that you’ve not been kidnapped by Death Eaters, I presume?”

Despite his harsh tone, his words allowed her to relax. He’d confirmed her suspicions, at least of the important issue. “So he still doesn’t know about it. About P.E.W.S., I mean.”
“You are safe from him for the time being,” Snape answered, then muttered, “though none of us will be safe from him forever.”

“But if he found out, he would want to kill me, wouldn’t he?” she asked. Unconsciously, she began to wring her hands. “And not just me, but you, the surrogates, maybe even Scrimgeour and the Ministry officials that came up with this bloody program.” Her tone took on a decidedly less fearful, more vindictive edge with that last bit. “I mean, here they go, making me breed, dirtying up the genepool . . .”

The corners of Snape’s mouth turned down even further than before. “The Dark Lord would not tolerate one of his loyal followers procreating with a Muggle-born.”

A sudden jolt of excitement sent her forward another step, and she had to stop herself from sitting on the edge of his bed, as she would have done had it been nearly anyone else.

“But what if he did?” Her bright smile seemed to confuse him. “I mean, if there were some way to keep him from knowing that we had already . . . that is, that there were already offspring involved, would he stop the program, or at least get you out of it? Would he be able to do what Professor Dumbledore couldn’t?”

Snape peered at her with narrowed eyes for a long moment. Finally, he asked, as smoothly as his current state would allow, “You would presume to manipulate the Dark Lord? To move him about as a pawn on some oversized chess board?” His lip curled. “Your time with Potter and Weasley has made you more arrogant than I’d thought. Clearly, trying to keep you alive is foolishness. I should have let Narcissa kill you and rid myself of the irritation.”

Hermione stood frozen for a full three seconds, then . . . “How dare you?” Her hands balled into fists, and one last step brought her within slapping distance of his face. Seeing as he was lying in a hospital bed, she restrained herself. “At least I’m trying to think of a way out of this mess!”

“Despite explicit instructions not to,” he hissed. “And keep your voice down, you stupid girl!”

“I’m shocked at you, Severus,” she said, lowering her volume but not her intensity. “I would have thought, of all people, you would have been the last to just roll over for the Ministry.”

His nose wrinkled at that, but he said, “Have you not caused enough trouble already? You know so little of how the world works, little girl. Just keep your ears open and your mouth closed and let the adults sort this out.”

It took every ounce of her self-control to keep from striking him. If he hadn’t been in such sorry shape already, she wouldn’t have bothered with the effort.

“Well,” she ground out, keeping her rage bottled up, “you’ve certainly done a splendid job sorting so far. Now, if that’s all, I’d like to get some lunch.” She turned to leave.

“It is not.” His voice stopped her and she turned back to look at him. When he had her attention, he continued, his tone dispassionate, as if he were assigning an essay. “You will return tomorrow at seven o’clock. I will ensure that Madam Pomfrey is gone. You will lock and ward the doors behind you. You will bring the two vials of potion which you will find—”

“Not bloody likely!” Hermione screeched. It had taken her until that moment to realize what he was getting at, so impossible was it to believe. Her eyes were wide as they raked pointedly over his battered body beneath the sheet, finally meeting his black eyes with a look of utter disbelief. “I’m not going to . . . Not when you’re like this. It can wait.”
“Once a week unless you’re pregnant,” he reminded her. “No exceptions.”

“They’d really expect you to . . .” she gasped. “Surely they must realize that if you can’t even stand it would hardly be healthy to . . .” She trailed off, her meaning clear.

His mouth was a hard line. “No exceptions,” he repeated.

“Then we’ll wait until Saturday. You’ll be a bit better by then, at least.”

“No,” he said firmly, though his voice was still weak. “If we do it tomorrow, you will become pregnant. If we wait until Saturday, it will be necessary to do it again next week.”

Hermione was about to ask what he meant, but first she ran through the math in her head. Tomorrow was Tuesday. The last two times she’d got pregnant had also been Tuesdays. With the schedule that the Ministry’s potions had her on, with Saturday transfers and Sunday menstruation . . . he was right. If she had sex tomorrow, she would get pregnant. By this point, that was almost assured.

“So that’s it?” she asked. “You’d rather risk your health and both our dignities so that you can be free of me one week sooner . . . so that you don’t have to suffer me any more than necessary?” Her voice was nearly a whisper as the unexpected sting of rejection tore through her. “Do I really disgust you that much?”

There was no expression at all on Snape’s face as he looked at her, seeming to take no notice of her hurt. “Tomorrow,” he said flatly.

Her look of hurt turned into a grimace. “No,” she spat. “You can do your duty when you can come and get me. I’m not going to sneak into a hospital to molest a half-dead man.” She spun to go, but his hand shot out and grabbed her wrist. His grip was light—not gentle, but weak. But the fact that he’d reached out to her at all stopped her in her tracks.

“Now who disgusts whom?” he asked, his left eye all but hidden beneath the swelling, his right one glaring out at her under his eyebrow.

She sneered at him and pulled her arm away. She was nearly to the curtain when she heard his voice again.

“What?” she snapped, though she couldn’t put as much venom behind it as she would have liked. Snape was looking at her with surprising earnestness. He appeared weaker than ever.

He held her eyes for a long moment, then rasped, “Please, Miss Gra . . . Hermione.”

Hermione trudged down the corridor, not sure what she was thinking or feeling. She hadn’t had a coherent thought since Snape had used her given name for the first time since she’d known him. She’d backed away from him and fled the room without saying a word.

“Wotcher, Hermione,” Tonks called, startling her. The young teacher was standing a short distance away from her, leaning against the corridor wall.
“Tonks,” Hermione said, confused. “Were you—could you hear?”

“No. Not clearly, anyway,” Tonks said. “I was just waiting for you, making sure no one else got close enough to hear either. Knowing who I was dealing with, I thought it might be necessary.”

Hermione couldn’t deny it. “Thank you.”

Tonks stepped into stride beside her as she continued down the hall. “I take it he didn’t apologize, then.” She didn’t sound as if she’d really had any hope for that at all.

Hermione shook her head. “No, he . . . he said I was safe from Voldemort,” she explained distractedly.

“But?” Tonks asked.

“But he—” Hermione stopped in her tracks and turned to look at Tonks. “He said we still have to fulfill the Ministry’s requirement,” she whispered. “Even while he’s laid up and so weak he can barely lift his arm. I just don’t know what to make of it.”

“Forcing an injured man to have sex is hardly the most crazy, insensitive thing the Ministry’s doing here,” Tonks replied uneasily, keeping her voice low.

“So you believe him?”

Tonks cocked an eyebrow at her. “Hermione, what’s this about?”

Hermione started walking again, shaking her head. “I just don’t know. He says we have to have sex because the Ministry orders it, then he says we have to do it tomorrow because that way I’ll get pregnant again immediately, but if we wait until the end of the week, we’ll have to do it again next week, and obviously he’s so disgusted by me that he’d rather only shag me once than twice . . . but then when I refuse to—ugh—come and do it on his hospital bed, he practically begs me, like there’s something more to it than that. Like, I don’t know . . . could he actually want to do it when he’s that badly injured? Is that some kind of . . . fetish? There are people who like that sort of thing, right?”

When she looked at Tonks, the other witch was looking at her with wide eyes and furrowed brows.

“He begged you?”

“He said ‘please’,;” Hermione clarified. “Then he used my first name. He’s never used my first name before.”

Tonks just looked at the floor as they walked. The corners of her mouth turned down slightly and she shook her head. “I have no idea what’s going on inside that man’s head. Sorry, I wish I could help you figure it out, but when it comes to figuring out Snape, I don’t think there’s a person in the world who could help you.”

Hermione sighed and looked at the floor passing away under her feet. “I was afraid of that.”

#

Hermione had a hard time focusing on anything else the rest of the day, only managing to do her schoolwork, always a second too late when someone spoke to her. Ron and Neville both asked what was wrong before the day was up, so Hermione thought it best if she went to bed early. Even in her sleep, her mind wouldn’t stop trying to figure out what Snape was getting at.
When she went down for breakfast the next day, she decided that it was stupid to let him rule her life like that when he wasn’t even there. No matter his motivations, his demand was obscene and completely inappropriate. She’d stick to her refusal and not go see him again until Saturday. She’d see how he was doing then and they’d go from there.

At lunch, she got a letter, delivered by one of the school owls. She recognized the handwriting instantly.

\textit{Classroom desk.}

\textit{Bottom left drawer, in the back.}

\textit{Please.}

Twice. \textit{When has Professor Snape ever said ‘please’ for anything, let alone twice?}

“Professor Snape said ‘please’?” Neville asked. He was sitting at the Gryffindor table beside her and had apparently caught the low murmur that she’d thought she’d kept inside her head. Also too late, Hermione realized she was holding the note like it was any normal letter instead of under the table, when Neville looked straight at it. “Weird.”

She shoved the note into her robes. “It’s nothing.”

The note seemed to have made Neville nervous. “Is this what’s been bothering you? Professor Snape asked you to do something?”

Hermione glanced around to see that Ron was talking to Seamus about something. No one else was paying attention. “He did.”

“What?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“But you don’t want to do it?”

She shook her head.

“Why?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Professor Snape’s scary. Him asking instead of telling—and saying \textit{please}—that’s even more scary. I might think it means—” He frowned, like the thought that just crossed his mind confused him. “—that something’s scaring Professor Snape.” He met her eyes uncertainly. “I don’t know, Hermione. Unless it’s dangerous or might get you in trouble, I’d reconsider. It sounds important.”

At six o’clock, Hermione opened the door to the Potions classroom, finding it unlocked. She looked around quickly to make sure no one was inside, then shut the door behind her. Casting a quick \textit{Lumos}, she made her way up to Snape’s desk.
There was soil scattered over the top of it. Clearly Sprout hadn’t done a very good job cleaning up after herself. Snape wouldn’t be too pleased with that when he came back.

It felt so strange getting into anyone’s private desk, let alone a teacher’s. It felt even stranger when she considered exactly what she was raiding said teacher’s desk for . . . and why.

Pushing those thoughts aside, she reached for the handle of the bottom left drawer. It didn’t budge. Hermione exhaled in exasperation. Why would Snape send her somewhere she couldn’t get into? She tried *Alohomora*, but it still wouldn’t open. She cast a quick detection spell and found out there was a ward on that single drawer, of the sort that required a password.

*Great,* she thought. *Like I have any idea what he would pick for a . . .*

Then, to her annoyance, her mind informed her of the answer when she would much rather have continued on in ignorance. At least then she could have gone with her original plan of refusing to go to him. The phrase *too clever for my own good* flitted momentarily through her mind.

Grimacing slightly, she put her hand back on the knob and said, “Lily.”

The drawer slid open easily.

*Tonks was right,* she thought as she reached into the back, past a stack of parchment rolls, and withdrew two vials of liquid. One was exactly like the others he’d sent her on previous occasions, and the other was a short, square vial of dark blue liquid. *That man’s mind is like no other.*

#

She waited until five minutes to seven before making her way to the hospital wing. At seven o’clock exactly, she opened the large door and shut it gently behind her. There was no one visible in the room, and she couldn’t hear any sounds of movement.

“Madam Pomfrey?” she called carefully.

There was no response from the witch, but she heard a hoarse rasp come from behind the curtain where she knew Snape’s bed was. She walked forward slowly, both vials clasped in one hand, the heels of her shoes clicking lightly on the stone floor.

“What was that?” she asked as she got closer to the curtain.

“I said I would get rid of her,” he repeated.

She stepped around the curtain, and her mouth set in a thin line. “You’re even worse than yesterday,” she accused.

“No, I am not,” he said. His voice and appearance did not back up his assertion. Hermione wondered if he’d got any sleep since she’d last seen him.

“I can’t believe I actually came,” she muttered. She walked over to set the vials on the nightstand beside Snape’s head, then turned to leave. She was already past the curtain by the time his feeble protest made her stop. *So, we’re going to have this conversation,* she thought, gritting her teeth. She pointed her wand at the door and warded it so no one would interrupt them, then cast a silencing spell so no one could eavesdrop, hoping there wouldn’t be any medical emergencies any time in the next few minutes.

“So, what?” she asked, crossing her arms, when she once again stood beside his bed. “We take the
potions, I climb on top of you and . . . ride you 'til you impregnate me?” She grimaced at her own coarse language, but she was too angry and disgusted to properly censor herself.

“That was the general idea,” he said, his voice barely more than a whisper. He didn’t look any more pleased with that plan than she did.

There was a chair nearby. Hermione grabbed it and moved it beside his bed so that she could sit facing him. He turned his head on his pillow to meet her eyes. She pursed her lips and evaluated him. He did seem weaker than yesterday, but that probably was just due to lack of sleep. His swollen eye was nearly healed now, his pink coloration was gone, and his skin was already starting to return to its usual sallowness. A lock of clean black hair lay across his cheek and onto his nose, and her mood was lightened by the inexplicable amusement she felt when she noticed how much better his hair looked now, even lying haphazardly around his face. She nearly had to stifle a grin when she realized that his hair now reminded her a bit of Harry’s, black and messy. It was a good thing he didn’t have the energy for Legilimency. He certainly wouldn’t appreciate the comparison. In fact, it might be enough to ensure he’d never wash his hair again. But he was glaring at her now.

“I don’t understand you,” she told him honestly. He snorted in amusement, then winced in pain. “You’re one of the most fiercely independent people I know, almost to a—no, not almost. To a fault. You’re so independent, so scared of being dependent, that you push people away. And the harder they try to get close, the harder you push. And yet you’re going along with this Ministry decree . . . for what?”

“As I said before,” he whispered, “there are things you do not understand. And you are incorrect in your assumption of my independence.” He laced the word with bitterness.

“Then tell me!” She leaned toward him, imploring. “If I don’t understand, then explain it to me.”

He shook his head—or started to, before wincing again. He glared back at her, but didn’t say anything.

“Is that it, then?” She frowned. “You won’t trust me with whatever it is, so instead you expect me to blindly obey your commands, to keep producing children only to shove them off on other poor girls until . . . until the Ministry can snatch them away? What is this all leading to, Severus?”

“You do not trust me.” His tone held no question.

“Well, how can I, when you don’t tell me anything?”

“Are you equally distrusting of the Headmaster? Of your Head of House? Of your dear friends the Lupins?”

Hermione’s hackles raised as he sneered the last part. But she knew she didn’t have a good answer for him. “Then why now?” she asked. “If you’re so disgusted by me that you don’t want to touch me more than necessary . . . is that really it? Is that worth giving up one more week in which we—or rather you, all of you, might find the solution to this?”

“This will not be resolved in one week,” he said, his tone grim.

“How are you going to find a solution if you give up hope?” she snapped, sitting back in the chair and folding her arms across herself. “Don’t be so pessimistic!”

The corner of his mouth twitched up for just a moment.

“Is that funny?” she demanded.
“No,” he whispered, the amusement gone. “Not at all. Only . . . you are not the first young witch to tell me . . .” He trailed off, and his eyes lost focus.

Did I just remind him of Lily? Hermione wondered with a start. She didn’t know entirely how she felt about that.

“Fine.” She stood up. “Fine, then. If there’s no hope for a solution soon, then we may as well not waste any more time.” She picked up the vial she knew was hers and downed the potion in two swallows. Then she grabbed the other and thrust it at Snape.

He was looking at her with the strangest expression. She could tell part of it was surprise, but it looked like there was a bit of admiration, as well, and gratitude. She faltered.

“I assume . . .” she said, her confidence wavering. “That is, if you still want to get this over with now.”

“Yes,” he rasped. His mouth set in a frown and his eyes fell on the vial in her hand. His hand moved to reach for it, but fell back to the sheet.

Hermione pinched the bridge of her nose. “I don’t believe this.” She unstopped the vial and knelt down next to him. “Open your mouth.”

He looked at her warily, but did as she asked. His head was still angled to the side, so she held the vial close to his mouth until he wrapped his lips around the neck, then tilted it up to pour and hoped he didn’t choke on the potion.

She set the empty vial back on the table and sat down as they waited for the potions to take effect.

As she looked at him . . . Snape . . . Severus . . . her teacher . . . her husband . . . she was reminded of the first moment when she realized that there was another, very human side to him. The moment when she realized that inside the Teacher, there was the Man. Now, she saw him again, the Man. There he lay, divested of his great bellowy robes, his imposing height, his fierce bearing, and even, to a degree, his voice, as well suited to slicing as were the knives he kept in his Potions classroom. Just a fragile, broken soul in a frail human body . . . so easily damaged.

He wasn’t looking at her now. He’d turned his head to stare at the ceiling. Was he even aware of her scrutiny? A faint grimace was frozen on his face. Yes, he knew she was staring again. Then why didn’t he snap at her to look somewhere else? Was it merely that he lacked the energy? Or was some part of him tired of pushing people away?

“It’s time,” he said suddenly, his voice terribly hoarse. He didn’t see her jump, as he was still staring at the ceiling. “If you are ready, you may begin.”

She nearly laughed. He may have as easily been telling her to perform the next step in brewing a potion as to mount him and shag him senseless (in this case literally, most likely). Then she shook her head at the preposterousness of the situation and at the way he clung so desperately to the distance between them.

She stood and crossed the few feet to his bedside. His arousal was more evident than ever, from this angle and with only the sheets and his hospital robe in the way. She swallowed hard. It was . . . a little intimidating.

She glanced at his face. He was scowling at her. Her cheeks burned as she realized he’d seen her staring. Then she realized something else, and felt her blush deepen.
“Can you adjust your clothes yourself?” she asked him, her chin up, trying not to let him see her discomfort. “Or shall I?”

Snape said and did nothing for a long moment, then his hands moved quickly, sliding up to the top of the sheet, shoving it down past his waist. Then his fingertips gripped the fabric of his robe, and he waited.

Hermione slipped her shoes off her feet and her robes over her head, leaving her in a knee-length skirt and light, long-sleeved blouse. Snape stared at her in wide-eyed confusion, and she frowned. No, she certainly wouldn’t make it harder on the both of them by getting naked. She had no desire to put herself under his critical gaze any more than she already had, and she knew he had no desire at all to see any more of her than necessary—not if she disgusted him so badly. But it would make things go more smoothly if she didn’t have to wrangle all that extra fabric while trying to situate herself.

She draped her robes over the chair and made to climb onto the bed.

“I’ll try to be careful,” she told him. She could hardly forget the weakened state he was in.

He snorted, then winced. “I am not as breakable as I may appear at the moment, Miss Grang—”

Her hard look cut him off, and she stopped moving, glaring at him until he relented. He met her gaze for a moment, then finished his sentence.

“. . . Hermione.”

Better.

Hermione was not quite as klutzy as Tonks, but neither was she the most graceful person in the world. She was sure someone who was athletic and light-footed might have been able to spring into place on the bed with no trouble and without looking like a fool. Unfortunately, she was not such a person.

First, she had to get her knees up on the bed, which was higher than she’d expected. The mattress was soft and springy, and she was sure she gave Snape several painful bounces as she sought out somewhere to place her hands, then scrambled up onto the small bed. By the time she found herself kneeling astride his body, her hands hanging awkwardly at her sides, he was wincing, his eyes squeezed shut, and a hiss of pain escaped from between his gritted teeth.

“Do you call that being careful?” he snapped at her when the bed finally stopped bouncing, sending her a glare.

“Do you call that being not breakable?” she shot back. She had been trying to be careful. It wasn’t her fault she hadn’t really succeeded.

Their mutual irritation distracted them both from their situation, but after a few seconds, reality reasserted itself. Her frown of annoyance melted back into uncertainty. Before she had to ask, Snape adjusted the fabric under the folds of her skirt, making things ready for her.

She leaned forward enough to grasp the top of the metal bed frame with both hands, giving her something to balance on. She closed her eyes, moving by touch, and found him. It felt strange and . . . not bad.

His hand slipped away, the back of his long fingers grazing her inner thigh and sending a jolt through the skin it touched. She wished he would linger, would let those dexterous hands wrap
themselves around her soft thighs . . . but he pulled away as if she would scorch him. He couldn’t even bear the thought of touching her.

Best to get it done with, then. The sooner she got things taken care of, the sooner she could leave and they would both be free of each other.

She got going, but still wasn’t used to the softness of the mattress and she ended up pushing him too harshly down into it, which he informed her of with a sharp hiss of pain. He was wincing again. She was dead certain that if not for the potion, even besides the fact that he didn’t want her, he wouldn’t be physically capable of doing this. Yes, best to get this over with as quickly as possible. To spare him the pain.

She tried to be gentle, being as careful with him as she could possibly think how to. The slow, gentle rhythm she found wasn’t entirely unpleasant. In a weird way, it was rather nice. Of course, it wasn’t real. It was only a parody of sensuality, just a vague simulation of what actual lovemaking might be like. In truth, it was the same as it ever was. Just forced copulation for the purposes of procreation, no emotion involved. But if it weren’t . . . if it was actually with someone who cared about her . . . she thought it might just be a little bit like this.

She tried what she could to make it good for him without being rough, the sooner to end it and let him rest. It was difficult, when her body kept wanting to chase after her own pleasure, but she focused on those muscles and what they could do with that warm softness she had inside her.

She looked down at him to gauge his reaction, to see if her plan was working. He was staring at her in shock, his mouth hanging open slightly, as she moved fluidly over and around him. Their eyes met and she found herself unable to look away from his wide-eyed wonder, such a rare and precious expression on that face.

Yes. She inwardly smirked. That seems to do it.

Her eyes refocused on the wall in front of her, focusing on her task. Snape made a strange, strangled sound, like some disturbing combination of pain and pleasure. The pain she was causing pricked at her conscience, but knowing that she was managing to wring pleasure from him as well let her know that their goal would soon be accomplished. It also filled her with an unexpected smugness.

When he started twitching beneath her, she was worried that he was having some sort of fit, but then she realized that he’d started trying to move with her. She picked up the pace, trying not to be too rough.

He was making the strangest noises, whimpers and grunts all mixed together, the pain counteracted by the potion, maintaining his arousal even through the strain on his body. The bed bounced heartily beneath them, swaying and creaking in a rather embarrassingly way. Her hair became tousled about her head, obscuring her peripheral vision. Snape had suddenly become quiet. The only sound coming from him was quick, intense breathing. Hermione glanced down at him to make sure he hadn’t passed out or something, only to discover his face screwed up in concentration and his eyes locked on her chest.

Snape was staring at her breasts, which were bouncing enthusiastically. They weren’t particularly large breasts at all, but her blouse was thin and close-fitting, and with her arms out of the way, still grasping the bed frame, she imagined the bouncing must be distracting. And anyway, the way she was hovering over him, she’d placed her breasts directly in his line of sight.

Still, it was an odd thing, watching him, his eyes focused intently on her breasts as if they were a
difficult puzzle, his breathing ragged and wheezing, and feeling him strain under her in what weak efforts he could manage.

*It’s too much,* she thought, worrying that he would break something or have a heart attack or otherwise injure himself further. Just when she was about to back it off, he squeezed his eyes shut, and a loud grunt ripped itself from his broken throat.

He was finished, their task was completed, and Snape sank into the mattress and became very still.

With somewhat less bouncing than it had taken to get up, Hermione climbed down from the bed. Her ever-curious eyes fell on the slick and glistening part of him which he made no move to cover. *Mine.* The word flashed through her mind entirely of its own accord. He was hers. His body, anyway. That primal claim, more instinct than thought, astonished her more than anything else yet that evening.

His weak moan brought her back to her senses.

“Severus, are you all right?” she asked urgently, running her eyes over his face and body, trying to determine how badly she’d damaged him.

His eyes were closed, his face lax, as if he didn’t have the energy even to hold himself together. His lips moved slightly, forming the faintest whisper. “Thank you.”

Reality came crashing back around her. She remembered why they’d done this, why he’d risked his health to have sex with her now rather than having to do it twice later. She sighed dejectedly. She could claim his body all she liked, but what really mattered—his mind and his heart—would never be hers. And without them, she’d never really even have his body. Snape was not hers, and never would be. She had nothing.

After a moment, when he still didn’t cover himself, it was clear that he had no energy to do so. She wondered if she should just toss the sheet over him and leave him be, but then she remembered that Pomfrey washed him, and the mediwitch would probably notice. Plucking her wand from her robe, she cast the most gentle cleansing charm she could, then gently picked up the edge of his robe from where it still lay bunched under his hands on his stomach and slid it down far enough to cover him decently, then pulled the sheet and blanket up to his chest. He never stirred.

#

Sleep did not come easily for Hermione that night. When she could nod off, she was plagued with dreams. Mostly, dreams of killing—killing Draco, killing Snape, killing everyone she cared about. When she awoke, she lay awake wondering what she was, what she had become, what her life had come to mean. She hadn’t helped Harry at all with what was clearly the most pressing issue in the war effort and she didn’t know why she’d been so incapable of finding anything helpful. Maybe there simply was nothing to be found. She dearly hoped that wasn’t true.

Around dawn, a dull pain made itself at home in her skull and wouldn’t go away no matter how much she tried to ignore it. She wanted to take a potion for it, but that would require going to the hospital wing, where Snape was, and she couldn’t face him again yet.

At breakfast, she received no owl from St. Mungo’s, which she had mixed feelings about. On the one hand, she was extremely grateful that she had another week before risking yet another child being brought into this terrible situation. On the other hand, it meant that either her body’s rhythms were off, which could signal that something was wrong, or that their calculations were off, which wasn’t any more comforting. It was unexpected, so it was disconcerting.
The headache lasted throughout most of the day, making her irritable. Or perhaps simply giving an excuse for her irritability. Ron, Neville, and Luna all made an attempt to cheer her from her slump and include her in fun, but she just wasn’t in the mood.

At dinnertime, instead of eating, she went to the library, hoping that focusing on her studies would help her clear her temper. Somehow, even with everything going on, she’d managed to work so far ahead in all her classes that nothing could hold her interest long enough to distract her.

In her quest for some mental stimulation, she went to the shelf where the latest articles of various magical journals were displayed. She thumbed through them, hoping for one she hadn’t yet read . . . *Modern Magic, Potions Quarterly, What’s New in the World of Charms, More Magical Plants* . . . Finally she spied one. She grabbed *Medical Magicians* and returned to her seat.

The publication was mostly a ‘who’s who in Healing’ where the latest up-and-comers in the profession got their backs patted and their ideas lauded. It usually didn’t interest her, but these were desperate times. On page seventeen, she stopped cold.

There was a photo of a handsome blond wizard smiling nervously and occasionally brushing his hair behind his ear. The photo was accompanied by a full-page article.

**ELLERY PARTRIDGE: HEALER FOR THE FUTURE**

*Healer Ellery Partridge is a singularly gifted wizard. Though raised in Manchester for the first ten years of his life, he went to school at the cutting-edge California Institute of Magic (also called CalMag by the locals), then returned to his country of birth to apprentice with the great Healer Demitri Orlando Pontus. Partridge so excelled in his field that by the age of twenty-three he had attained full Healer credentials and now, at only thirty-four, is Healer-in-Charge of the Venus Patinkin Birth and Pregnancy Ward at St. Mungo’s Hospital.*

*Though he is a favourite among patients and staff for his friendly demeanour and easy bedside manner, Healer Partridge has far loftier goals than merely being an excellent Healer.*

“We know that wizards have much longer life spans than Muggles, on the average,” he explains. “I hope to discover exactly why that is. More importantly, I hope to find a way to widen the gap even further. I think that by studying magical pregnancies, births, and children through the first stages of life, I may discover a clue to lengthening the magical lifespan to well above the current average of one hundred and thirty years."

An admirable goal, but Partridge is not content with simply prolonging life.

“I believe there are ways, methods yet untapped, to harness the enormous potential that magic gives us, even beyond the degree to which we do now,” he continues. “A child has vast stores of potential which are often far from realized by the time that child reaches adulthood. If we can begin at the beginning, while children are still in the womb, possibly even earlier, we may discover there are ways of unlocking greater magical power in a child, perhaps even finding a way to detect Squibs before they’re born, finding out why they don’t carry on their parents’ magical genes, maybe even correcting the deficiency while the child is still forming."

A bright hope for the future indeed.

The rest of the article consisted of more empty praise and even further quotes from Partridge about
how he hoped to improve the wizard race through what seemed to Hermione to be enormously
dangerous theoretical procedures of dubious morality.

_This is my Healer?_ Hermione thought once she reached the end. She had obviously seriously
misjudged the man the first time she’d met him. He may have a nice face and pleasant disposition,
but he sounded like someone Voldemort would love. Stop the Squibs, live longer, and screw the
Muggles. There was no word on how exactly he was getting all this information he was talking
about or how he planned to go about testing any of his theories, but she could guess. She wouldn’t
be surprised if he was secretly performing illicit procedures on the very patients he was there to
treat.

A terrible, terrible thought filled Hermione’s head, overwhelming everything and making her see
red. She crushed the journal in her hand.

“That little snake!” she hissed.

What had he done to her? What was he doing to the surrogates? To her unborn children? Was he
using them for illicit experiments and information-gathering?

But of course, it wouldn’t be illicit, would it? Not if his research was Ministry-approved. So, that’s
why they’d chosen him to be her Healer. They wanted children of superior intelligence and magical
power to bolster wizarding bloodlines. They’d already admitted their plan to not leave their
upbringing to chance, and they’d certainly gone out of their way to hand-pick their parents.
Hermione scoffed at that thought. Genetic donors, more like. In hindsight, it shouldn’t have
surprised her that they would try to give the children any other sorts of developmental advantages,
no matter how experimental and unproven.

She didn’t hear the flapping until the bird flew in the open doors of the library and landed on a
shelf beside her head. The owl looked at her impatiently, appearing quite put out that she hadn’t
been in the Great Hall where she was supposed to be and it had been forced to track her down. She
felt no sympathy for it. In fact, the owl was lucky that it wasn’t tied to the package it carried, as
Hermione would not have had the presence of mind to untie it first.

She took one glance at the St. Mungo’s seal on the familiarly-shaped package, grabbed it in both
hands, and hurled it against the wall. The sound of shattering glass was remarkably satisfying.

_I’m not taking your poisons anymore_, she thought venomously. It was possible those potions were
truly meant to help her, but now it seemed equally possible that they were only meant to help the
Ministry.

“Miss Granger!”

She jumped at Madam Pince’s voice as the old witch looked around a bookshelf at the mess.

“Sorry,” Hermione muttered, Vanishing the package, note and all. She didn’t need to read it. She
knew what it said by now. She’d already got two just like it.

When her heart rate slowed down after a few minutes, she regretted her rash action. She should
have saved the potions and analyzed them, so she knew exactly what she’d been getting fed and
exactly how angry she should be with Partridge.

#

A few hours later, Hermione was changing into her sleepwear. She nearly tore her tank top as she
pulled it on.
The time since she’d left the library had only seen her grow more and more frustrated with herself.

_Stupid, stupid!_ she ranted. _Now I can’t find out what he was giving me. Should have just taken a closer look at them, but no, I had to smash them like some hormonal . . . boy!

“Something wrong?”

Hermione turned her glare on the only other person in the room: a girl wearing a highly appropriate shade of flannel pajamas. Seeing only concern in those blue eyes, she took a deep breath and tried to calm herself.

“It’s nothing, Lavender. I just had a bad day.”

“Wanna talk about it?”

_Yeah, right. Let me tell you all about how I nearly killed Professor Snape by rutting with him in his hospital bed, am now carrying yet another of his children, and just found out that some mad Healer is using me for his own personal medical experimentation. “Not particularly, thanks.”_

“Come on, Hermione,” Lavender insisted, climbing up on her bed and grabbing her pillow to hug it in her lap as if she were at a slumber party. “You can tell me. Is it about that guy you were having problems with earlier?”

“What?” Hermione asked impatiently, momentarily confused. When she remembered that in her desperation after kissing Lupin, she’d mentioned it to Lavender, she shook her head. “No, no, not at all.”

“Then what? Hermione, it’s obvious something’s bothering you. It’ll probably help to talk about it.”

“I really don’t think so, Lavender,” Hermione said, already walking toward the bathroom. She knew Lavender was really just after gossip and she hoped she could get away long enough for her to lose interest, even if she had to hide in the bath for an hour. Before she reached the door, Lavender’s voice made her stop in her tracks . . . because it wasn’t Lavender’s voice.

“Four princes are coming.”

“What?” Hermione spun around to face her.

Lavender was still sitting on her bed, still holding her pillow, but she wasn’t looking at Hermione. Her eyes were unfocused, her jaw slack. Hermione was about to ask her again what she was talking about when Lavender started to shake like she was having a seizure and her eyes rolled back into her head.

“Lavender!” Hermione ran to her and grabbed her shoulders, shaking her, moments away from rushing to get Madam Pomfrey. But then Lavender’s spasms subsided into slight tremors, though her eyes were still rolled back so far Hermione could barely see the irises. Then Lavender spoke again, in the harsh, grating, slightly terrifying voice she’d used a moment ago.

“Four princes are coming. Two of fiery heart and two of sharpest wit. Bred in lies, conceived in fear, and borne from hate. Before the last breathes first, the two to whom they owe themselves will die. Then they shall sit alongside their dark master and mould the future according to his will. . . . Four princes are coming.”
Hermione stared at Lavender, slack-jawed, wondering what she’d just witnessed. The next moment, Lavender blinked and looked up at her.

“Er, Hermione, do you want to let go of me? And how did you get over here so quickly?”

Hermione took her hands away from Lavender’s shoulders and staggered back a few steps. “What did you say?” she gasped.

“I said how did you get over here,” Lavender replied, her brow wrinkling. “You were nearly to the loo a moment ago.”

“No.” Hermione shook her head. “Before that. About . . . princes.”

“Princes?” Lavender laughed. “Are you sure you’re not having boy troubles?”

Hermione was studying her intently, trying to figure out if this was a joke. “Do you mean to tell me that you’ve no idea you just had some sort of fit and started spouting nonsense?”

Lavender frowned. “Fine, Hermione. If you don’t want to tell me what’s bothering you, you don’t have to. But it’s obvious you’ve had a hard day. Maybe you should just get some sleep.”

“Lavender, I’m not joking! Don’t tell me that you’ve got no idea what just happened.”

“What happened,” Lavender snapped, “is that I offered a bit of help and you started acting like a mad woman. Seriously, Hermione. Get some sleep.” With that, she flopped down in her bed, turned her back on Hermione, and pulled the covers up to her ear.

Hermione sat on her own bed, trying to decide what to do. If it was a joke, Lavender didn’t seem to be getting much amusement from it. And yet . . . it couldn’t be what it seemed like. After the whole ordeal at the Department of Mysteries over a year ago, when she’d found out there were real prophecies, and then finding out that there was one about Harry saying that he’d have to kill or be killed, she’d been forced to take another look at her opinions on the matter of prophecies.

Crookshanks jumped up onto the bed beside her, licking his paw and looking rather put out.

If it was a real prophecy, what did it mean, and—oh, dear Merlin—what a horror would Lavender be to live with when she found out that she really did have ‘the Sight’?

Hermione leapt from her bed and threw on her school robes over her pajamas. Two minutes later, she was pounding on Professor McGonagall’s door.

Within moments, the door swung open to reveal McGonagall in a nightshirt and dressing gown, her hair loose about her shoulders. “Yes, yes, what is it, child?” she asked, looking more than a little annoyed.

“I need to see Professor Dumbledore!”

“I’m afraid you can’t,” McGonagall said simply.

“Please, Professor. It’s important.”
McGonagall took a brief look around the hallway, then hurried Hermione inside and closed the door.

McGonagall’s sitting room was exactly as Hermione would have expected it to be. The furniture was tidy and practical, with a few throw pillows and tartan blankets to make it more comfortable. There was a painting on the wall above a fireplace of a young man in a kilt, and Hermione briefly wondered who it was before McGonagall directed her to a chair and took another one herself.

“You can’t see the Headmaster just now,” McGonagall explained, “because he’s not in the castle.”

“Well, where is he?” Hermione persisted. “This is important. At least . . . I think it’s important.”

McGonagall considered her for a moment, then said, “If anyone beside yourself or Mr. Weasley were asking, I would tell them to mind their own business.” She looked at her for a second longer. “Professor Dumbledore has gone to visit Mr. Potter. It seems he can’t get away from lessons even by dropping out of school.” There was a distinct note of disapproval in her voice at the last part. She’d made no secret of her opinion on Harry’s choice to go on a secret mission rather than continue his studies.

“Oh,” said Hermione, sinking into her chair. “That’s good.” Maybe with Dumbledore’s help, Harry would get closer to finding the Horcruxes.

“Is it something I can help you with?” McGonagall asked.

Hermione considered it. With Dumbledore gone, her options were limited. She was hardly going to ask Trelawney for help, and Firenze, the other Divination teacher, always put more focus on watching the skies than anything else, from what she’d heard.

“Perhaps,” she said hesitantly. “What do you know about prophecies?”

McGonagall sat up, her back stiffening. “Why do you ask?”

Hermione grasped for a plausible explanation. She didn’t want look like a fool to the most levelheaded person she knew, in case she was mistaken about what she’d heard. “I was just thinking, with everything that’s been going on, how it’s too bad that we never found out what was in that prophecy that Voldemort was after. You remember, when we went to the Ministry, and Sirius . . .” She trailed off, realizing for the first time that his was yet another death she’d had a hand in. If she’d just made Harry stop long enough to see that it was a trap . . .

“Yes,” said McGonagall. Her lips were pressed into a thin line. “I do have some recollection of that event occurring.”

“It would have been nice, you know . . . If we knew what it said, maybe it could help Harry now.” She was bluffing, of course. If Dumbledore had told McGonagall about the prophecy, if he’d told her that Harry had told them, Hermione was about to look like a liar.

To her surprise, McGonagall shook her head. “Really, Miss Granger, I’m surprised at you. I thought you of all people would have learned that putting faith in prophecies and the like is nothing but folly.”

Hermione blinked. “But, Professor, what if the prophecy is true?”

“The future is not set in stone,” McGonagall asserted. “Even if a true prophecy did exist, there would be no way of knowing whether it were to be fulfilled despite an attempt to stop it—or to fulfill it—or because of it.”
“Then . . . do you mean you don’t believe in real prophecies at all?”

She let out a sharp breath before answering. “Whether I do believe or not is not at issue here. I have seen too much in my life to discount anything offhand. But there is a reason that prophecies and other forms of divination are not admissible as evidence to the Wizengamot. It is impossible to know for certain what to make of them until it is too late, and then the point is moot. True or not, they are not anything to base any sort of decision on. Many wizards have met their downfall by attempting to avert a prophecy—or to ensure one comes to pass.”

Hermione stared at her lap. McGonagall was right. Prophecies were irrational, even if they were true, and therefore could not be trusted.

“Thank you, Professor McGonagall. I’m sorry for bothering you. I suppose I was just grasping at straws.”

#

Hermione lay in bed that night with Lavender’s words running round and round in her head. She knew she shouldn’t let it trouble her. She had enough troubles without it, and McGonagall’s point was valid. But it was a puzzle, and her mind could not simply ignore a puzzle.

If it truly was a prophecy (and she didn’t know what else it could have been, as Lavender was hardly creative enough to think of something like that on her own), then perhaps she should at least determine what it meant. After all, when Harry had heard Trelawney’s prophecy in their third year, it had partially come true before the summer, and the rest had been fulfilled the next year. And as to the one about Harry and Voldemort . . . well, it didn’t seem as if there had been anything particularly urgent about it, though it was proving quite relevant currently.

But figuring out what Lavender’s prophecy meant first required figuring out who these four ‘princes’ were, and she hadn’t the faintest idea of that. She knew of no British royalty that were magical . . . though it had said that they were “coming”, so it could mean that they were princes from some other country. And, admittedly, it hadn’t even specifically stated that they were wizards, though she couldn’t imagine Muggles serving Voldemort, as the prophecy seemed to imply. She simply didn’t have enough information to go on.

She rolled over and tried to put it from her mind. When sleep finally came, it was not restful.

Draco was in the Room of Requirement, standing before the magical cupboard that had let the Death Eaters into Hogwarts. He didn’t look sure of himself at all, and his hand shook as he grasped the handle.

The door creaked open, and Draco moved aside. Hermione watched as one long, slender boot emerged from the cupboard, followed by a slim leg, and finally, a man stepped out. He was dressed all in bright, solid colors—form-fitting trousers and a shirt with ruffles. A bright red cape was draped elegantly over his shoulders, and a sword swung from his hip. His eyes were bright, shining blue, and his black hair seemed to flow from his head as if caught up in a torrent.

Atop his head perched a simple, elegant, golden crown.

Hermione recognized him immediately. He was every Prince Charming in every Muggle animated film she’d seen as a child.

He bowed to Draco, and Draco rolled up his sleeve to show him the Dark Mark on his arm. Prince Charming did the same, and there it was—the snake and skull burned into his perfect, elegant
forearm. He spoke to Draco, but Hermione couldn’t hear what he said, and the next moment, someone else was emerging from the cupboard.

This one wore strange, gold-colored slippers and baggy trousers that gathered at the ankles. When the man emerged, Hermione saw that he was dark-skinned and fit. His chest was bare but for a light vest, and he wore a large turban on his head, in the middle of which sat a shining emerald. On his bare, muscular arm was the Dark Mark.

Behind him came a man dressed the strangest clothing yet. He was wearing a painfully bright purple suit, and his hair was greased into a wavy coif on top of his head. Hermione gasped in shock when she finally recognized him as a Muggle musician her mum had been into for about a month two years ago, who spelled his name with a symbol that meant nothing at all.

She started laughing from the sheer ridiculousness of it when a fourth person emerged and her breath caught.

It was a woman. Taller than all the men and dressed in tight leather trousers and a crimson red halter-top, she emerged from the cupboard as smoothly as smoke, and her feet made no sound on the floor. Her skin was pale, nearly white, and her face was stunning. She smiled at Draco in the way an indulgent queen might acknowledge a pauper at her feet, then turned to look directly at Hermione. Her smile widened, and Hermione saw two sharp fangs nestled comfortably amongst the woman’s teeth.

#

When Hermione met Ron on the way to breakfast, she could not even make it all the way to the Great Hall before shoving him into an empty classroom and shutting the door behind them.

“Oi, what are you doing, Hermione?” he protested. “I’m hungry.”

“Your stomach can wait, Ron. I have something to tell you.”

His eyes brightened hopefully. “Your marriage to the slimy old man got called off?”

She gaped at him a moment, then rubbed her hand over her face. “No, Ron. No. And for your information, he’s not old. Or slimy!”

His face fell. “Oh. It’s not bad, is it?”

“I don’t . . . I don’t know.”

“Well, can you spit it out, then? I’m perfectly willing to sit here and chat all morning, but my stomach has less patience.”

Hermione paced back and forth as she spoke. “I think Lavender’s a Seer.”

Ron nearly choked on his laugh. “Right. And I’m the crown prince of Latvia.” Hermione shot him a look. “You’re serious?”

“Last night, she started acting very odd, then said something even odder, then the next moment had no idea she’d done any of it.”

“What did she say?”

Hermione recited what she’d heard Lavender say, hoping that she remembered it exactly. When she
finished, she looked at Ron and waited.

“Blimey,” he said after a few seconds. “I’ve heard Lavender say some pretty nutty things, but never anything like that.”

Hermione nodded. “Me, too. What do you think it means?”

“You think it’s a real prophecy?” he asked doubtfully.

“What else could it be, Ron? You know the stuff she makes up intentionally isn’t any more believable than most of what comes out of Trelawney’s mouth. It’s all ‘you will be tragically killed by a tomato on Tuesday’ and so on.”

Ron thought for a long moment, then said, “Sounds like Voldemort’s got some more followers on the way.”

“Yes, thank you, Ron, I’d got that.” She put her hands on her hips. “Anything else?”

“Well, I don’t think it’s urgent,” he griped, his mood darkened by her dismissal of his previous statement. “I mean, if they haven’t even been born yet, we shouldn’t have to worry about fighting them for a while.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, genuinely having no idea what he was talking about.

“Before the last breathes first? That’s got to be talking about a baby, hasn’t it?” he said, as if it was completely obvious. “Unless it’s talking about someone holding their breath for a really long time. Hey, maybe it’s a merman! Or, a merprince!”

Hermione shook her head. “No, I think you had the right idea. Of course that part must mean that they’re not born yet.”

“Well, then,” he said with an air of finality. “If they’re not born yet, then they’re not a problem yet, and we’ve got more than enough problems here and now. Besides, if we beat Voldemort soon, we won’t have to worry about these whoever-they-ares joining him, will we?”

“That’s surprisingly optimistic of you, Ron,” she observed. “You’re only saying that because you want to go eat, aren’t you?”

“Mostly,” Ron chirped. “Can we?”

She shook her head and smiled. “Yes, all right.”

#

Sprout substituted Potions again that Friday, though it was with the promise that Professor Snape would be back on Monday. Hermione spent most of Saturday reading and working ahead, so on Sunday she thought she had earned a bit of time to relax.

It was a very agreeable November day. Still chilly, but it was a crisp, invigorating chill rather than an unpleasant one. She was sitting under a tree out by the lake, playing a sort of wizarding version of Uno.

“It’s a simplistic game, isn’t it?” Hermione mused, staring at the three numbered cards in her hand, each a different primary color.

“You’re only saying that ’cause you’re losing,” Ron said, looking a little too happy about the
single card he held. “You got this at Zonko’s?” Across from Hermione, Luna nodded. “Too bad there’s not another Hogsmeade weekend coming up. I’d like to see what else they have. I haven’t thought to look for a card games section before.”

“You wouldn’t want to go there now,” Luna observed, carefully deliberating between her five cards. “Not with the crime they’ve been having.”

“Crime?” Hermione asked. She hadn’t heard of recent crime in Hogsmeade.

“Oh, yes,” Luna said airily, grasping one card between two fingers, lifting it out a bit, then sliding it back into the neat fan and continuing to stare at her hand. “Theft, a bit of vandalism. Nothing serious yet. I suspect Curd-Knuckled Cansies. They always get greedy when it starts getting cold.”

Hermione didn’t even bother asking what Curd-Knuckled Cansies were. By now she could tell when Luna was referring to something that existed only in her mind.

Finally, Luna played a card.

“I win again!” laughed Ron, slamming his card down onto the pile.

Hermione rolled her eyes and added her hand to the pile for Luna to shuffle. “Is there any game you’re not good at, Ron?”

Ron thought for a moment. “Slippery bat-dragon,” he declared. “I’m pants at that.”

“Do I even want to know what that is?”

His nose wrinkled. “Not really.”

“Hey, guys!” Neville called from where he stood knee-deep in the lake. “Look at this!” He was using his *I just found a really cool plant that is in no way interesting to normal people* voice. “It’s a bifurcated sea-daisy!”

Hermione grabbed the gathered cards out of Luna’s hands before she could shuffle them.

“Oh, sorry, Neville! I’ve just dealt!” she shouted, tossing cards haphazardly between herself and Luna. “This game’s too boring for Ron, though! I’m sure he’d love to see!”

“Ron, come look!” Neville yelled, his voice jumping in pitch with his excitement.

Ron threw Hermione a look that promised retribution, then got up and trudged down to the lakeside.

The next game progressed in near silence as Neville led Ron around the shore, pointing out one plant after another. Finally, Hermione was down to her last card, which fortunately matched the current color. She smirked at her imminent victory. Then, with a serene smile, Luna played her card. “Blue. Draw four. Hello, Professor Snape.”

Hermione jumped and looked at Luna, only to see her gazing pleasantly at some spot behind Hermione.

Hermione spun. “Se—er, Professor Snape!”

Snape was standing a few feet behind her and to her left on the grass, his long black robes blowing gently in the light breeze. His mouth drew into a thin line as she nearly used his given name, but fortunately Luna made no sign that she noticed the slip.
“Loath as I am to disrupt your weekend,” he drawled, “I require your assistance, Miss Granger.”

Hermione gulped, still trying to adjust to his sudden presence. “What with, sir?”

He scowled at her, but before he spoke, one of the cards from the deck flew up and smacked her in the face. Three more followed in quick succession.

“Draw four,” Luna reminded her gently.

“What do you think?” Snape barked. “Are you or are you not working on a project for extra Potions credit?”

“Oh, of course.” The cards danced in a circle around Hermione’s head, and she tried to swat them away. “Sorry, Luna,” she said, turning back to her friend. “Looks like you’ve won.” She set the card in her hand on the ground, and the moment she did so, the four circling in the air fell onto the grass.

“It’s quite all right,” Luna said, giving her another tranquil smile. “I understand.”

Hermione got to her feet and ran to catch up with Snape, who had already started walking.

Her eyes wandered over the black robes, billowing as if they were alive. It was a familiar sight, one she’d seen countless times over the years. But now, she saw it with new eyes. Now, she found herself wondering what was beneath the robes.

She recalled the last time she’d see him, looking so weak. While at the time she had mostly noticed his face—and a more alien part—now she remembered a glimpse of slim hips and tight stomach, and wondered if the rest of him could possibly be so slender, hidden under all those thick, imposing layers.

Catching herself in her shameless wandering thoughts, she hurried to put herself even with his pace.

“You’re looking well, sir,” she commented as she walked alongside him.

“Appearances can be deceiving,” he muttered, not bothering to look at her.

After a moment, she realized they weren’t headed back to the castle.

“Where are we going?” she asked. “I thought you wanted to work on the Potions project.”

“And that is exactly what we are doing,” he said.

They walked in silence the rest of the way, and when they passed the gate, he stopped and turned to her.

“Take my arm.”

She looked at him in confusion. “Where are we Apparating to?”

“You require more books for research. I have several in my home which may be useful to you.”

“Your—” she blurted, but caught herself. Snape was taking her to his home? Visions of an opulent mansion full of paintings of old wizards flashed through her mind. He smirked unpleasantly and held out his arm for her.

She took it, trying not to notice how warm and firm it was, and the next moment, felt the familiar
squeeze of Apparition. When the world around her settled, she found herself standing on a sloggy, grimy lawn outside a run-down little house that had moss growing up the walls.

She looked at Snape in shock and released his arm.

His smirk was still in place as he looked back at her. “Welcome to Snape Manor.”

The inside of the house was even less hospitable. It made Grimmauld Place look charming. She had always assumed that Snape, being a pure-blood, would have a secret family fortune and an army of house-elves. She thought, given his association with the Malfoys, that he must run in the same circles while out of school and that his generally poorly-kept appearance was more a matter of disregard than a question of means.

Now, seeing this nearly derelict building that he called his home, she recalled the books he’d purchased for her and wondered again what it all meant.

After the initial shock wore off, she realized with some sadness that Snape really did fit in with this environment. He seemed to keep his house as meticulously as he kept his person. The room was all blacks and browns with a ratty sofa, a musty armchair, a small table, and—she caught her breath—every wall covered floor to ceiling with books. Suddenly, the house was beautiful.

“I must apologize for the dust,” Snape said smoothly. “I’m afraid I’m not the housekeeper Wormtail was.”

Hermione drew a sharp breath. “Peter Pettigrew was here?”

“The Dark Lord saw fit to grant me an assistant last year.” He didn’t sound especially grateful for the gesture.

Hermione tried to picture it, that little rat of a man scurrying around under Snape’s feet.

“I hope you persecuted him at every opportunity,” she growled, not trying to disguise her revulsion.

“No sympathy for the rat?” Snape asked. “How surprising.”

“Pettigrew is the reason Harry’s an orphan!” Hermione snapped. Snape’s expression darkened at her words, but she wasn’t finished. “And he took twelve years of Sirius’s life! He’s a traitor and a coward and—just—if he hadn’t—ooh!” She tried to calm herself. “For once, I think our opinions of a person are in agreement.”

She turned from him, trying to compose herself. She generally tried to think of Wormtail as little as possible. She moved to the dust-covered mantel and saw two picture frames sitting on it. As she looked at the first one, Snape was suddenly by her side. He snatched the other photo and stuffed it into his robes.

She jumped at the sudden movement. When she noticed what he’d done, her eyes narrowed.

“That was of Lily, wasn’t it?”

He didn’t reply but turned his face from her.

“It’s . . . okay, Severus,” she said quietly. “I don’t think it’s anything that would surprise me.”

Snape looked at her sharply, but after a moment, she heard a small sigh as he set the photo back on
The mantel.

There were two children in the picture; they didn't look older than twelve. One was a pretty girl in a sun dress, the other a skinny boy with long black hair whose coat was too big for him. Lily was smiling cheerfully out of the photo, and even through the dust, Hermione could see Harry’s eyes shining from beneath the strands of red hair that were caught in a silent wind. Young Snape stood beside her, fidgeting with his sleeve, his head ducked slightly, his black eyes locked on Lily’s face, looking as if he couldn’t quite believe she was standing so close to him.

Hermione covered her mouth with her hand, fighting back a sudden swell of tears from the many conflicting emotions that crashed down upon her. Finally, she settled on one thought: Harry needs to see this.

“It’s lovely, Severus,” she said once she was sure of her voice. He simply grunted and his posture stiffened.

She looked again at the first photo. It was of a woman in her thirties with lank, dark hair and a sour expression, who scowled out of the frame as if wishing the photographer would just go away. It was only when she blinked that Hermione could tell it was a wizard photograph.

There was something familiar about the woman, beyond the obvious.

“This is your mother, isn’t it?”

Beside her, Snape nodded.

“What was her name?”

“Eileen.”

“What happened to her?”

“She was beaten to death by my father”—he ignored Hermione’s gasp—“who then shot himself in the head with a revolver.”

“That’s horrible!” Hermione spat out.

Snape raised an eyebrow at her. “Indeed. I learned of it when I returned the summer after my fifth year. By that time, they were already in the ground.”

Hermione stared at him with her mouth hanging open. She was so shocked by what he said that it took her a moment to realize how odd it was to hear the word revolver come from Snape’s mouth. Then it hit her.

“Was your father a Muggle?”

Slowly, watching her carefully as if to gauge her reaction, Snape nodded.

Immediately, something she hadn’t thought of in many months came to her mind, something she’d shown Harry last year: an old Prophet clipping with a photo of a pallid, dark-haired girl named Eileen Prince, and it all made sense.

“Sir, are you . . . are you the Half-Blood Prince?”

His gaze was steady, unblinking. “I am.”
“Then, Harry’s Potions book—”

“Is mine, yes. It belonged to my mother. If it isn’t too much trouble,” he sneered, “perhaps Potter would see it to return it to me.

Surprising even herself, Hermione laughed. Snape glowered at her, looking ready to explode, so Hermione said quickly, “I’m sorry. It’s just . . . I was so close to figuring it out. I was just off a generation.” Then she added to herself, “And I was so hoping it was a girl . . . .”

“Then congratulations are in order,” he hissed cruelly. “I’m so happy one of the few pleasant pieces of my childhood could provide you a momentary diversion. Would you like me to dig up the bones of my cat for you to play with as well?”

Hermione staggered back against the books. “No! That’s not what I—”

“Look through the stacks!” he barked as he stormed away from her toward one of the bookcases. “If you find anything useful, set it aside!” Then he moved the bookcase, revealing hidden stairs, went through, and slammed the case behind him hard enough to knock several books off. Hermione heard his boots stomping up the stairs, a bang, loud cursing, then another door being slammed.

For several seconds, she stood there in shock, wondering what had just happened. She replayed it in her mind only to be horrified that she had essentially laughed at his dead mother. Or, at least, that’s how he might have easily seen it. She shook her head at her own insensitivity.

Too much time around the git, a tiny part of her suggested. You’re starting to become one yourself.

She brushed that thought aside quickly, turned to the nearest bookcase, and got to work.

#

Snape’s personal library was both fascinating and terrifying. Where he had procured some of the rarer volumes, she had no idea and was afraid to find out. She didn’t know how much time she had to go through them, so she skimmed each book quickly, setting aside any that looked remotely relevant to Wentworth’s Brew.

An hour later, she was sitting in the threadbare sofa with around thirty books piled by her feet and another in her lap. When the bookcase swung open and Snape stepped through, she leapt to her feet.

“I’m sorry!”

He looked at her quizzically.

“For what I said before,” she clarified, “and for laughing. It was insensitive.”

His head cocked to the side, then he gently moved the bookcase back into place.

“I accept your apology,” he said evenly. “And I . . . should not have reacted so harshly.”

Hermione blinked in surprise. His acceptance of her apology was the most she’d been hoping for. She certainly hadn’t expected him to give one of his own.

“It’s okay,” she blurted, clutching the book she held to her chest.

His eyes roamed the floor at her feet. “You’ve found enough, then?” She couldn’t tell if he was
being ironic or not.

“Yes, I believe these will keep me busy.” He didn’t respond. She shifted her weight. “It’s a really lovely library you have, Severus.”

He snorted.

“I mean it. It’s quite remarkable. I could spend days looking through it.”

He looked at her oddly again, just for a moment, then moved toward her. He withdrew his wand from his robes, flicked it toward the books, and a few seconds later they were stacked neatly, wrapped in brown paper, and shrunken to a manageable size.

Emboldened by his current calm state, Hermione said, “Severus, that photo of Lily—”

“I’m not getting rid of it,” he said quickly, giving her a warning look.

“No, no,” she hurried to assure him. “I just wondered if I could have a copy. For Harry. I don’t think he has any pictures of his mum when she was that age.”

Snape looked at her for several long seconds, deliberating. For just an instant, his eyes flicked to the photo of Eileen and his lips pursed. Finally, he moved to the mantel, grumbling something she couldn’t understand, and quickly removed the photo of Lily and himself from the frame.

“Geminio,” he said, pointing his wand at the photo, and a duplicate copy appeared. He put the original back in the frame, then picked up the duplicate.

Before Hermione could thank him, he ripped it in half, crumpled one half in his hand and tossed it into the fireplace, then handed her the other.

“Th-thank you,” she stammered, momentarily confused. When she looked at the half of the photo she held, she realized he’d only given her the part with Lily in it. It came to her fairly quickly then that he didn’t want Harry to see what a pathetic, awkward child he’d been.

While Snape stuffed the shrunken package of books into his robes and headed to the door, Hermione reached down and snatched the crumpled half of the photo from the fireplace, stuffing it into her pocket before he could see, then hurried out the door after him.

#

The next week passed in relative peace. After returning to Hogwarts, Hermione didn’t see Snape at all, aside from class and at meals. In class, he practically ignored her, only speaking to her as much as he did the other students.

She had hidden the two halves of the photo under her mattress, meaning to give the piece with Lily to Harry at the first opportunity, as she didn’t particularly like the symbolic implications of its current location. She didn’t want to simply owl it to him, though, as she wanted to see his face when he saw it.

She hoped the duplicate was not degenerative. While the original had been a wizard photograph, the copy was still, like a Muggle photo. It was an inexact spell, acting something like a Muggle photocopier, with the copy never being quite as good as the original. But, it was better than nothing, and Hermione knew it would mean a lot to Harry, even if she couldn’t exactly tell him the truth about where she’d got it.
Once she had a moment to reflect, she wondered why she’d taken the half with Snape. It didn’t take her long to deduce that it was because it showed a softer, more uncertain side of Snape, a side she could relate to. He’d known her since she was a child; it was good for her to see what he’d been like as a child. Although when she looked at it, she also had the occasional fleeting thought that twelve years down the road that could be the face of one of her own children.

It wasn’t until Thursday that it hit her. She was looking at the photo before digging into the stack of books from his house, as she’d done every other night that week, when she remembered Lavender’s prophecy.

*It couldn’t be,* she thought. *Could ‘prince’ mean ‘Prince’? Could it be talking about . . .* A wave of light-headedness washed over her as she considered the idea that her children were fated to serve Voldemort. *No. That’s preposterous. It doesn’t make any sense. Voldemort would never . . . Why would he want the children of a half-blood and a Muggle-born?

She tried to put it out of her mind and resolved again to talk to Dumbledore as soon as he came back to Hogwarts.

#

When Sunday came, Hermione took two of Snape’s books down to the library to read them. The author of those books was constantly referencing outside sources, and she hoped that at least some of them would be in the library for her to check. She said hello to Madam Pince and settled in at a table in the corner.

When the sun went down, she started looking for a good place to stop reading for the night. She was just reaching for a scrap of paper to mark her page when the doors burst open, making her jump and drop the book.

“Miss Granger,” said the figure in the doorway. Snape looked harried, and he cringed like he was in pain. “Come with me.”

Madam Pince poked her head out of a reading nook to give him a stern look, but he didn’t seem to notice, and after a moment she went back to what she was doing.

“All right,” Hermione told him. She had no idea why he’d suddenly come to get her. They certainly didn’t have any appointments set. “Let me just gather the books.”

“Leave them,” he bit out. He strode forward and grasped her arm firmly. “Come with me now.”

“Hold on!” she protested as he tried to drag her physically to her feet. He released her and she stood. “Where are we going?”

“You’ll see when we get there,” he said impatiently. “Now just come.”

“But—”

He bent his head to hiss in her ear. “If you value your life, you will come with me now. Quickly and quietly.”

His words sent a jolt of adrenaline through her, and she nodded dumbly. He spun on his heel and strode out with her rushing to keep up.

He didn’t stop until they had reached the gates of Hogwarts.
“Sir, it’s too late,” she protested, panting for air. “It’s nearly curfew.”

Ignoring her, he opened the gate, ushered her through, and closed it behind them. When he turned to face her, his eyes were intense. She saw uncertainty, determination, and a great deal of fear.

Only then did she realize he was grasping his left forearm.

She gasped. “No! You’re being summoned. But, why am I—” Her stomach jumped, and she felt she might pass out. She’d known the answer to the question before she could finish asking it.

“The Dark Lord wishes to see you,” Snape said urgently. He stepped directly in front of her and grasped her shoulders. “Do exactly what I say when I say it, and for God’s sake, keep that infernal mouth shut for once in your life.”

“Don’t take me,” she begged, tears stinging her eyes. “Please. There must be some other—”

“You have no choice. Nor do I. If I don’t bring you, we’re both as good as dead.”

“He’ll kill me anyway!” she shouted. “That’s all he wants! He’s found out you’ve married a Muggle-born and he wants to kill me for it! And he knows I’m Harry’s friend! You’re just going to hand me over to be slaughtered!” She struggled with him, but his grip was strong.

“Silence, girl!” he hissed, shaking her, and she stopped struggling. “You don’t know what he wants. Just obey me without question. He’ll expect me to have some measure of control over you. . . though if he knew you he’d know better. He’ll pry into your mind. You must not allow him to find the secrets he’s looking for. Can you do that?”

She looked into his black eyes, usually so cold, now burning with the same fear that was coursing through her.

“I—I’ll try,” she said, fighting back tears.

He looked at her for a long moment, his gaze boring into her, assessing her. She knew she wasn’t ready for what was coming. She would fail. Voldemort would see into her mind, see that Snape was a spy, and they would both be dead. There was no hope.

Like a striking snake, Snape lunged at her, crushing her mouth in a desperate, nearly brutal kiss.

Hermione’s mind reeled, unable to process the sensation she was experiencing, fear and panic now warring with confusion and an unexpected surge of lust.

Her mouth was closed, and he didn’t try to open it, but all the same, it was incredibly intense. It seemed to speak of passion and need and other emotions Hermione couldn’t begin to guess at. All at once, everything she thought she knew about how Snape felt about her was called into question. . . as was everything she thought she knew about how she felt about him.

It lasted only a moment, then it was over. Snape pulled back and stared into her eyes just as he had been, as if trying to decide if she was ready for what awaited them.

Before she could say anything or react at all to his kiss, he wrapped his arms tightly around her shoulders, and they Disapparated.
With a loud crack, Hermione was standing in a forested area. Snape released her at once.

“Wha—”

Before she could finish, he grabbed her arm and dragged her along behind him as he hurried through the darkness. Then it was all she could do to keep up and keep from tripping over rocks, fallen branches, and the uneven ground.

She barely registered the growing light as she watched the ground under her speed past, but when they finally came to a stop, she looked up, and her heart filled with terror.

There was a luxurious country house spread out before them, the light of hundreds of candles pouring through the many windows. Though she’d only got glimpses of it, she recognized it instantly.

It was where Narcissa Malfoy had held her captive.

“Miss Granger, control yourself,” said Snape suddenly. Only then did Hermione realize she was shaking.

“S-sorry,” she said, trying to find some way to compose herself for what she knew was coming, but her nerves were such a wreck from everything that had happened in the past few minutes, she felt sure she would die tonight. “Is . . . she going to—”

“No,” he assured her. “It is . . . an intimate gathering.”

When her fear of what that might mean threatened to overwhelm her, she blurted out, “Why did you kiss me?”

He looked at her steadily, said nothing, and started off toward the house, once again dragging her behind at such a pace that her focus became nothing but staying on her feet.

Soon, they reached the double-doored entrance to the house—the same doors Lupin had carried her through when they’d come to rescue her. Snape pulled her forward, through the doors, out of the cold night air and into the oppressive warmth of the house.

The entryway was clean, as was the hall, but there was little in the way of decorations. Snape led her along so many twists and turns that she knew she wouldn’t be able to find her way out if she needed to run. Finally, he stopped at a door.

She felt a moment’s relief that it wasn’t the same room where Narcissa had kept her, then Snape turned the door knob, and she felt she might pass out.

The first thing she saw when he led her into the room was a large, imposing chair. It was, in fact, the only thing in the room aside from several walls lined with sparsely-stocked bookshelves and a tapestry of a completely generic landscape. In the chair lounged a single black-robed figure.

“My Lord. I have brought her, as you commanded.”
“Of course you did.” Voldemort smiled, his red eyes flashing with some kind of horrible glee.
“And how is your young bride this evening?”

Hermione’s heart leapt into her throat. So, he did know. Somehow Voldemort had found out about their marriage. She tensed, waiting for him to raise his wand, wondering if there could be some escape route she had missed.

Snape showed no sign of distress, not even a tensing in the muscles of his mouth. His voice was perfectly calm when he answered, “She is well, as you may see for yourself.”

Voldemort turned his eyes on Hermione and she found she couldn’t meet them for more than a moment—which was for the best. If he couldn’t make eye contact, he couldn’t perform Legilimency. Her gaze, instead, fell first onto Snape, then to the room around them.

There were two other cloaked figures standing off to the side, who she hadn’t noticed on her first glance at the room. They were both rotund, shortish figures, their hoods up and casting their faces into shadow. As she moved her eyes away from them, she caught a gleam of silver.

Pettigrew, she realized. Of all the . . .

“Step forward, girl.”

Hermione’s attention snapped to the snake-like face. She hesitated, afraid.

“Go to him,” Snape told her, his voice beginning to sound strained. She felt a gentle touch at the small of her back, urging her forward.

As her feet moved toward Voldemort and every cell in her body screamed that she was going the wrong direction, her thoughts lingered on Snape’s hand at her back. The touch hadn’t lasted long, but it seemed she could still feel it. Why had it been so gentle? Why had he not simply shoved her forward? Those questions led, inevitably, to the kiss he’d given her before they left. Could there be tenderness somewhere under that hard exterior? Did he actually have any kind of warm feelings for her?

“Kneel.”

Voldemort’s voice seemed to have come from the other end of a long tunnel. Her fear of him was partially becoming overshadowed by the renewal of her confusion and tenuous hope at Snape’s actions—and at the further confusion which that hope brought. She wondered again: did she really, truly even want Snape to . . . no, not love; that was impossible. But at least to like her? She thought she did, but when faced with the reality of it . . .

Then she was kneeling on the soft carpet before Lord Voldemort, not entirely sure how she’d come to be there. He pulled out his wand, pointed it at her, and she cringed.

How foolish to think of her relationship with her husband when she was about to die.

Voldemort laughed, the sound echoing strangely around the empty room.

“I won’t kill you,” he said mockingly. “Not yet, anyway.”

He didn’t want to kill her? Then why was she here? Why had he told Snape to bring her? What could he possibly want if not to murder her, now that he knew her dirty blood was mixing with that of his follower?
She glanced back at Snape, hoping for some sign of an answer. Snape said nothing, but there was something in his eyes. Perhaps it was reassurance.

“Look at me,” commanded Voldemort, and she did so.

There was no subtlety to his invasion of her mind. He did not slip in quietly; he barged in and ransacked her thoughts as if they were his for the taking. She tried to fight him, to push him out, but it was like wrestling a raging bull. So she could only go along for the ride . . .

Her parents were smiling and telling her how thrilled they were about her attending Hogwarts. She was poring over books of magic, memorizing every spell she saw. She was saving Harry and Ron from the Devil’s Snare. She was tearing a scrap from a book and scribbling the word pipes. She was drawing a chart comparing the phases of the moon with the days Professor Lupin had been ill. She was fighting a Death Eater in the Department of Mysteries, then again inside Hogwarts.

Voldemort withdrew from her mind and sat looking at her for a moment, stroking his chin with his index finger. “Of course . . . .”

He leaned forward and raised Hermione’s chin with his cool fingers, drawing her face closer to his own.

Hermione’s heart raced so fast she thought it might burst. She was so close she could see the thin slats of skin that served as his nostrils moving back and forth with his breath. He tilted his head back, looking down his non-existent nose at her.

“Not much to look at, are you?” he said. “Yes, that must be why I didn’t see it.”

If she hadn’t been scared out of her wits, she would have offered a retort of some kind for such a hideous person having the nerve to call her plain.

“See—” she tried to ask, but his grip tightened punishingly on her face, stopping her words.

The next moment, he was in her mind again.

It was her first day of Potions class, and she was looking up at Professor Snape, waiting eagerly for the knowledge he would impart. She was under the stands, setting Snape’s robes on fire.

As Voldemort dredged up old memories of Snape, one memory suddenly surged forward, drowning out all others.

His lips on hers, raw emotion surging between them, hope and confusion and pleasure warring in her mind.

She blinked and swayed and realized that Voldemort had again withdrawn from her.

He looked at Snape. “I am satisfied.”

Snape’s face remained stony. “Thank you, my Lord.”

“Take her back,” Voldemort told him, waving a hand dismissively. “I have no more need for the two of you tonight.”

Snape nodded and moved forward. He took Hermione by the arm, guiding her to her feet, and led her toward the door.

She spared a glance at the two Death Eaters as she passed them and almost stumbled. As they
turned their heads to watch her, the light of the room pierced the shadows under their hoods. Pettigrew was watching her intently, a nasty little grin on his face like he knew something others didn’t.

The other Death Eater was Horace Slughorn. How he had managed to rise so far in the ranks that Voldemort would have him here when so few others were, she wasn’t sure she wanted to know. He was not smiling. In fact, there was more than a little fear in his expression, and he looked at her as if to say, *Take me with you.*

She scowled at him as Snape led her through the doorway. *You’ve made your bed, Professor,* she thought bitterly. *Now you get to lie in it.*

Snape didn’t speak to her until they had Apparated back to the gates of Hogwarts.

“You did well,” he said as he unlatched the gate.

Finally able to breathe freely, she found herself smiling stupidly at the sheer fact of being alive. “Did I really?”

He looked at her, one eyebrow raised. “We aren’t dead, so I would say your performance was adequate.”

“You don’t seem all that happy about it.”

“That was merely one in an endless series of trials.” He stood aside to let her walk through. “Neither you nor I will be able to pass them indefinitely.”

She frowned, watching him shut the gate behind me. “Well, excuse me if I take a moment to be grateful that I was face-to-face with Vol—You-Know-Who and lived to tell about it.”

“You must not speak of this!” he hissed. “Not to anyone who doesn’t know about our arrangement, at the very least, and that includes Potter and Weasley.”

He was seriously putting a damper on her relief. “How did he know about it, anyway? What was he after? What was all that about?”

Snape’s face revealed nothing. “I am not privy to all the workings of the Dark Lord’s mind.”

“But you said he wouldn’t tolerate one of his followers marrying a Muggle-born! Yet he seemed to have no problem with it.”

“I have been wrong before.”

She had to hurry to keep up as he strode along the grass to the castle. “But it doesn’t make sense! He hates Muggle-borns! That can only mean . . . he has something planned for me.”

“It is possible,” Snape said as if the prospect was not at all troubling. “He has a great many plans. Most involve the deaths of everyone you care about. You can’t possibly think you’re in any more danger than you were before.”

“No,” she admitted. “But . . . there’s just something very odd about all this. What did he mean when he said he didn’t see it? What is it? He seemed . . . almost pleased at what he found. But all the memories he pulled up then were just of me researching, reading, fighting . . . nothing he can’t have already known about, right? I mean, he’d have known about my fighting the Death Eaters, and he must know that since I’m in school, I would be—”
“Miss Granger!” Snape snapped. “Cease your yammering unless you have something useful to say!”

She stopped cold, stunned, and had to run to catch up with him. “I beg your pardon? You could show a little more concern, not to mention gratitude! I saved your life back there! He was digging around in my mind about you, you know! He’d have found something incriminating if I hadn’t—”

“Yes!” Snape spun on her. “Do tell me exactly which memory you distracted him with so that he didn’t go looking any further and find enough incriminating evidence to kill us both on the spot!”

She gaped, horrible realization dawning. “You . . . That . . . You only kissed me so I’d have a powerful memory to focus on when he came looking for you in my mind.”

His lip curled unpleasantly. “You didn’t seriously think I kissed you because I wanted to?”

She turned away from him and rushed toward the castle, trying to stop the sudden flow of tears.

He pursued her, his longer legs allowing him to keep up easily. “Or perhaps you imagined it to be some grand romantic gesture? A last farewell, in case we both were killed?”

“Why must you be so cruel?” she cried, turning to look at him defiantly, not hiding the tears on her face and in her eyes.

“Oh, quit blubbering. You know what sort of man I am.”

“I’m carrying your child!” she screeched. “Does that mean nothing to you?”

He swooped down on her, grabbing her by the back of the head and pressing his hand to her mouth. “Silence! Do you want the whole school to know?”

Hermione immediately quieted, hoping dearly that it was late enough for all the students to be asleep or that the wind had carried her words away before they reached the castle. She shook her head, blinking back tears, and he released her.

“Compose yourself. You must not draw attention when you go back to your room.”

Taking a deep breath, she tried to do so, but it was so hard when he was standing right there, glaring at her.

“I don’t love you,” she whispered, looking at his feet, “and I don’t think I ever could—”

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

“Let me finish! I . . . I had hoped . . .” She trailed off, suddenly unwilling to open herself up to any more mockery.

They stood in silence for several seconds before he finally spoke.

“Hope is for children and fools, Miss Granger. The world is what it is and it will be what it will be. Hoping changes nothing.”

Then he turned and made his way toward the castle, and she followed several steps behind in silence.

#
It was late when she returned to Gryffindor Tower, but there were still a few people up. Given the fact that none of them were assaulting her with questions or giving her scandalized glances, she guessed that no one had heard her outburst on the lawn.

She went to her room, said as few words as possible to Lavender and Parvati, changed clothes, and crawled into bed.

She lay there, trying to get to sleep, for what seemed hours. Long after her roommates were sleeping soundly, she was still wide awake. There was just too much going on in her mind.

Voldemort wanted something from her, that much she was sure of. If he didn’t, he’d have killed her. But Snape was right. Voldemort was always going to kill her anyway. Which meant that Voldemort wanted something from her that required her being alive. Perhaps he planned to use her as bait for a trap for Harry. That was certainly plausible. But surely Voldemort’s spies had informed him by now that Harry was married, possibly even that he had a child on the way. Even a sociopath like Voldemort must have realized that a spouse was better bait than a friend.

But why didn’t he mind that she’d married Snape? One of his lieutenants marrying a Muggle-born? It would be a slap in the face. He wouldn’t stand for it, even if he wanted to use her as bait for Harry—she certainly wasn’t irreplaceable in that regard. Which meant that what he had planned for her also in some way involved her relationship with Snape.

Perhaps he thought Snape might be used to turn her to their side, or at least that she might be used to gain information about the Order or pass along false intelligence. But Snape was already a trusted spy, so why would she be needed for that? It would be redundant, an unnecessary division of resources, and a potential liability. And surely Voldemort couldn’t be stupid enough to think that she’d ever turn on Harry.

Then again, Pettigrew had turned on his best friends, and he hadn’t even needed the persuasion of a spouse to do so.

Was that it? She ran the encounter with Voldemort through her mind again, analyzing it in the light of this theory. He’d asked after her well-being. He’d examined her memories of her intelligence, deduction, and combat skills. To see if I’d make a useful follower. He’d looked at her memories of Snape and been satisfied when he’d found out . . . that he’s treating me well. The gentleness of Snape’s touch in Voldemort’s presence made sense now. If Voldemort expected Snape to turn her to their side, he’d expect him to be kind to her to gain her favor.

She snorted bitterly. Well, if she hadn’t known already, that was proof enough that Snape wasn’t really on Voldemort’s side. If he was, he’d treat her with tenderness all the time, not just in Voldemort’s presence. Way to find the silver lining, Hermione, she thought wryly.

The theory fit all the evidence she had. Somehow Voldemort had made an exception and would accept a Muggle-born as his follower, given her skills, intelligence, and position with his archenemy. But then, he himself was a half-blood, as were some of his followers, so it should perhaps have not be so surprising that his twisted logic would lead him to such a decision.

It was a relief, in a way. It wasn’t as bad as she thought. It all hinged, after all, on her succumbing to Snape’s charms and making the decision to turn against her best friend—which she would, under no circumstances, do. The battle was won before it was even begun.

Finally, her mind settled down, and she slipped into a deep sleep.

#
Her ears were filled with screaming. Explosions shook the floor. The air was saturated with smoke and the smell of blood.

Hogwarts was under attack.

Hermione ran through the corridors as they crumbled down behind her. She was searching for something...or running from something. There was no telling why. All she knew was she had to keep running.

Finally, she arrived at her destination: the Great Hall.

It was in shambles. All the House banners were aflame. The tables were smashed to splinters. The walls were lined with the mounted heads of house-elves.

Bodies were everywhere, sprawled in horrible, undignified, inhuman positions. She recognized every one.


Harry.

She stepped between them, making her way to the front, where the Head Table remained in tact. After passing Harry's body, laying haphazardly over Ginny's, his face pressed into the stone of the floor, she saw that wasn't the end. There were more bodies, all even more horribly mangled than the others.


Snape.

She stepped over Snape's body, crumpled on the steps up to the High Table—his lower jaw completely missing from his face, his eyes gouged out—and found herself standing before Voldemort.

The Dark Lord sat proudly in the chair ordinarily occupied by Dumbledore, a fur-lined robe around his shoulders, a silver crown atop his head. She looked at him impassively, and he smiled.

"Hello, Mother," said a voice. Four voices, in fact—in unison.

She turned her head, looking to one side of the table, then the other, unsurprised by what she found.

There were four young men, two on either side of Voldemort, each with a hooked nose, raven hair, and brown eyes—each with a small golden crown glittering on his head.

"Did we do well?" asked the young man to Voldemort's right.

"Yes," she said.

"Have we made you proud?" asked the young man beside him.

"Yes," she said.

"Did you see Father?" asked the young man to Voldemort's left.
“Yes,” she said.

“It’s your turn now,” said the last young man.

“Yes,” she said.

She raised her right hand and found it grasping a jaw bone still wrapped in flesh. She looked curiously at the sharp, fractured end of it where it had been broken and ripped away.

She pressed it to her neck and slit her own throat.

Hermione jerked out of bed, her body flushed with adrenaline, fighting back bile. She fell onto the floor and clutched at her throat, telling herself over and over that it was just a dream.

But was it? The prophecy ran through her mind, as clearly as when she’d first heard it.

Four princes. Her children. The Dark wizard. Not a Dark wizard, the Dark wizard. It could only be him.

That’s what Voldemort had planned for her. He had to know the purpose for her marriage to Snape. He knew they were being forced to have children. He wanted them for himself. Followers to train up as he saw fit, in case his immediate plans to take control fell through. She had no doubt he could manipulate the Ministry enough to ensure that her children were given to Death Eater families for proper rearing once they were born, or at least ones which held proper pure-blood values.

It was prophesied. It would happen. Maybe not exactly as her nightmare had envisioned it, but close enough. She and Snape would be dead, and their children would be under Voldemort’s control. And, somehow, he would use them to finally accomplish his goal. Or they’d simply be raised in a world run by Voldemort and would ascend in his ranks to help keep the world under his thumb. Either way, it was just about the worst thing she could imagine.

Going back to sleep was unthinkable, and she couldn’t stay on the floor and let her emotions overwhelm her. It would wake one of the other girls up, and she might ask what was wrong.

She ran downstairs to the common room and fell, sobbing, into the first arm chair she saw.

It was hopeless. If it had only been the prophecy, she might have thought it could mean something else, but with what she knew of the Ministry’s law and their plans, and after her encounter with Voldemort . . . The future in store for her unborn children was now painfully clear to her, and there was nothing she could do about it.

No. That wasn’t entirely true. Three were already on the path to that fate, but one she still had in her control.

Her sobbing slowed, and finally stopped, as she considered an option she’d never before entertained. Unconsciously, her hand slid over her belly.

She could spare this one that fate. Find a way to not get pregnant again. She could ensure a fourth child was never born. Maybe if she did, if she interrupted the prophecy before it could be fulfilled, she might even spare the other children, maybe even herself and Snape. And if she spared them, perhaps she could save the world from whatever harm they would do in Voldemort’s name.

It was the only way.
She became very still, sitting upright in the chair, staring into the dying fire as she thought of the best way to terminate her pregnancy so that it would look like an unfortunate accident. It could be done tonight, before the Ministry had one more day to interfere.

It was the best thing she could do for the child in her womb, and it might even save the world.

So deep was she in her thoughts that she didn’t see a lone figure descend the stairs until it was standing in front of her.

“Hermione? Are you okay?”

She looked up, disorientated.

“I heard someone crying. Your—your face is all wet.”

“I’m . . . I’m fine, Neville,” she lied.

“Oh.” He sounded far from convinced, but he turned to go.

“Neville.”

He stopped and looked at her, his brows turned up in concern. “Yeah?”

“Can I . . . ask you something?”

“Of course.” He took a seat in the chair across from her and waited patiently.

What was she doing? She couldn’t tell him the truth, and without all the facts, there was no way he could give an informed opinion. And since when was she going to Neville for advice?

“If you . . . knew someone was going to become evil, was going to do terrible things to a lot of people, what would you do to stop them?”

He thought for a moment. “I suppose I’d try to talk to them before they became evil or stop whatever it was that made them that way.”

She shook her head in frustration. This wasn’t working at all.

“Suppose the person was always evil. Suppose . . . suppose there had been a—a prophecy about Voldemort before he was born, telling you what he would become. Would you have killed him as an infant, or killed his mother when she was pregnant with him?”

Neville was quiet for a long time, looking intently at the floor between them. When he finally spoke, he sounded like he was choosing his words very carefully.

“Last year, Harry told me about the prophecy—the one about him and Voldemort. Not everything, of course, but . . . he said that it could have as easily been me and not him. That the wording of the prophecy was vague and it wouldn’t have come true at all if Voldemort hadn’t tried to stop it. It’s like that with them, you know. They don’t always mean what you think they mean. Even when they seem perfectly clear, they’re not.” His gaze drifted to the fire. “Kinda makes me wonder what the point of them is at all. They never seem to help, only get in the way and make things worse. If that prophecy hadn’t been made, or if Voldemort hadn’t heard it, he wouldn’t have come after Harry or me, and maybe Harry’s parents would still be alive.”

“Or maybe they all would have died and Voldemort would already be in control.”
Neville shrugged. “There’s no way to know either way, is there? Maybe it was always going to be
Harry. Maybe I’m supposed to be The Boy Who Lived. Maybe Voldemort was meant to win back
then. How do we ever really know which way is best, without being able to see how it all would
have played out the different ways? I don’t know. This sort of thing makes my head hurt. That’s
why I dropped Divination fourth year. I sort of figure it’s best to just take what life gives you as it
comes.”

As he spoke, the echoes of the nightmare were driven from her mind, replaced by the calm, simple
logic of her friend. Simple, yes, but not flawed. And, she now realized, very much like what
McGonagall had already told her.

What had she been about to do? Kill her own child because of some words from the mouth of her
airhead roommate? She couldn’t even be sure the prophecy was talking about her children. It was
all just guesswork. This whole situation was driving her to insanity.

She went to Neville and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Thank you, Neville. You’re a good
friend.”

“Er . . . you’re welcome,” he said, patting her back awkwardly. “Do you wanna tell me what this is
about?”

She stood back and shook her head. “I can’t.”

“Okay,” he said. “Well . . . glad I could help.”

He had no idea what he’d just done, but she’d never forget it. She resolved to spend more time with
him and her other friends. She needed them to ground her, or she might just fly away.

“Good night, Neville.”

“Night, Hermione.”

She went back up to bed and managed to sleep peacefully until morning.

#

The next several days were blessedly uneventful. She attended classes, did her schoolwork, and
made it a point to spend every minute she could in the company of her friends. She still missed
Harry badly, but having Neville and Luna around helped to even things out a bit.

She gave no more consideration to the prophecy beyond putting it from her mind. She’d been the
only one to hear it (aside from telling Ron, who’d dismissed it out of hand), which meant she was
the only one whose actions or decisions might be changed by it. Neville and McGonagall were
right. It was foolish to allow such non-information to cloud one’s judgment. So she decided to
simply pretend she’d never heard the prophecy at all.

On Saturday, she got her work done quickly, then met Ron, Neville, and Luna in the Room of
Requirement. They’d decided to see what frivolous uses it could be put to.

They spent the entire day in a Romanesque spa, soaking in the hot water, basking in the steam, and
laughing about nonsense until their sides hurt.

When she finally returned to her room, she was wrinkled as a prune. She stripped off her swim suit,
put on her pajamas, and fell into bed.
As she drifted off to sleep, she heard a sound wafting in through the open window with the breeze. It was faint, but somehow she recognized it. It seemed as if she’d heard it once . . . years ago . . .

She slept peacefully that night and dreamed of nothing. When she awoke the next morning, the sun was nearly parallel to her window, and hard, bright rays cut through the gaps in her bed hangings.

Lavender and Parvati were still sleeping soundly, and Hermione tried to roll over and go back to sleep. She figured she still had an hour or two before she needed to get up for breakfast. Unfortunately, a pounding headache made that quite impossible. After ten minutes of lying in bed, growing more and more awake, she got dressed.

She slipped out of her room without waking the other two girls and made her way out into the halls. The corridors were silent and peaceful in the early morning light, the windows still foggy with dew. Finally, when she reached the Entrance Hall, she ran into someone else.

“Good morning, Professor,” she said.

“Good morning, Miss Granger,” said McGonagall. “You’re up early for a Sunday.”

“Couldn’t get back to sleep.” She shrugged. “I was going to see if Madam Pomfrey had a headache potion, but then I got hungry, so I thought I’d grab a scone or something. But you’re up early yourself, aren’t you?”

“I’m always up early,” McGonagall responded simply. “Not all of us can afford to have a lie-in every day of the week.”

Hermione refrained from pointing out that seven-thirty a.m. (the usual time for students to get up on weekdays) wasn’t much of a lie-in. She was about to bid McGonagall a good day when a soft creaking broke the silence and distracted them both.

The doors of the main entrance slid open just wide enough to allow a lone figure to stagger in. Whoever it was looked like he’d just dragged himself out of hell. He was disgustingly filthy, covered in wounds and dirt, his shaggy hair frayed and matted, his mouth caked in blood and other things Hermione didn’t want to identify.

The shock of his appearance was such that it took her a moment to register that he was also completely naked. Aside from a scrap of some strange pink fabric which he clutched in one hand, there was nothing to indicate he’d ever even seen civilization.

But it was his eyes that caught her and caused her heart to leap into her throat. They were wild, manic, floating somewhere between terror and madness, and when they finally locked with hers, Hermione looked past the bloodshot surface and saw something familiar in their golden-brown depths.

She gasped. “Remus?”

He took several uneven steps into the Entrance Hall until his wavering legs finally gave out, and he collapsed onto all fours, dropping the pink scrap by his knees. Hermione was still frozen to the floor in shock, but McGonagall hurried toward him, Conjuring a blanket and draping it over his shuddering back.

“Remus, what’s happened?” McGonagall asked.

Lupin was staring at the stone floor before him, and for a moment Hermione wondered if he knew
where he was or who they were. Then his mouth moved, forming words, but Hermione couldn’t hear it.

McGonagall lurched back, her hand flying to her heart. “What—what did you say?”

In the instant before he next spoke, Hermione recognized the pink scrap and felt herself go light-headed.

“I said,” he growled, looking up at McGonagall. His voice was harsh and raw, but growing in strength with each word. “We. *Ate. HAGRID!*”
Lupin's Tale

Chapter by Severely Lupine (ShawnaCanon)

No.

It was a joke. That was all. Just some really, really tasteless joke. Any second, Hagrid would walk in and they’d all have a good laugh about it.

Except it wasn’t funny. Not by any stretch of the imagination. And even if it were, Lupin wasn’t the type of person to pull such cruel pranks, let alone commit to one to such a degree. He was covered in filth, trembling so fiercely it might have been a seizure . . . and naked.

There wasn’t a chance in hell that this was anything other than completely, hideously real.

“Miss Granger!” called McGonagall desperately, her voice cracking. “Come here!”

For a moment, Hermione didn’t know if her feet could move. The panic in McGonagall’s voice was nearly as terrifying as the wild look in Lupin’s eyes. This was beyond bad.

Then her rational mind kicked in, and she ran to them, determined to do whatever was needed of her.

“Yes, Professor?” she asked once she was beside the other woman, willing her voice to remain steady and not quite succeeding.

“Help him to my office,” McGonagall ordered. “I’ll be there shortly.”

“No!” Lupin protested, shrinking away from them.

“No! I’ll be there shortly.”

Lupin started shaking his head. “No. No, I’ll—I’ll go back to the forest. I’ll leave. I just wanted to—to let you know.”

“Nonsense.” McGonagall said firmly. “Go with Miss Granger, Remus.”

Hermione reached down to try to help Lupin up, but he flinched away from her hand.

“No . . . no . . .” He was still shaking his head, but he allowed her to take his upper arm and got to his feet as she guided him up. He wrapped the blanket tightly around his body as he stood, under the arm she held and over the other. Once upright, he staggered as if he was too weak to stand, and Hermione put her arm around his waist for support. He was pitifully thin—she could feel his ribs clearly even through the blanket. His arm fell heavily around her shoulders so he could lean on her.

At this proximity, she had to fight not to cringe away from him. Not only did he look terrible, he smelled worse. It seemed as if he hadn’t bathed in at least a week. The sweat and dirt would have been expected from anyone, especially if he had been in the forest, as his words implied. The blood was evidence enough that what he said about Hagrid was the truth. But there was something else . . . . . After a moment, she recognized it as the stench of vomit.
“Just let me go,” he protested, his voice hoarse. But Hermione started walking with him toward McGonagall’s office, and he didn’t fight her.

From the corner of her eye, she saw McGonagall gather up the tattered remains of Hagrid’s umbrella and dash away.

They arrived at McGonagall’s office without being seen. Hermione ushered Lupin inside and helped him into one of the chairs in front of the desk.

He pulled the blanket as tightly around himself as he could and curled inward, rocking back and forth slightly. After a few seconds, she heard a faint, high-pitched keening sound. She doubted he was aware he was making it.

Hermione just stared at Lupin for a moment, trying to reconcile what she was seeing with the calm, steady man she thought she knew.

First Snape, now Lupin . . . to say nothing of whatever was becoming of Dumbledore. One by one, her stalwart Teachers were being broken down, leaving mere Men in their places. And poor Hagrid . . .

“Are you all right?” Hermione asked lamely, mostly to distract herself from the stench of blood that assailed her nose with the thought of Hagrid.

The high-pitched sound stopped, and Lupin was suddenly very still. He didn’t look at her, but merely continued to stare at the floor in front of him. In a soft, hoarse voice, he told her, “I’m the farthest from all right I’ve ever been.”

When he spoke, she saw that his teeth were red.

With a wave of her wand, she Conjured a bowl. With another, she filled it with water.

“Here,” she said, holding it before him. “Wash your face now, and after you tell us what happened, you can have a proper bath.”

He made no move to do so. “It doesn’t matter,” he muttered.

“What do you mean? Do you want . . . Oh.” She knelt down, trying to look him in the eyes, but he avoided her gaze. “You’re not an animal. No matter what’s happened.”

He didn’t answer, but his lips pressed together. Or seemed to. She couldn’t see a great deal past the dried blood and dirt.

She Conjured a flannel, dipped it in the water, and washed his face for him. He didn’t fight her, but he didn’t help. It was as if he couldn’t have cared less what she did to him. Filthy, clean . . . it was all the same to him.

When she finished with his face, she Conjured a glass and filled it with water as well, then handed it to him. He took some of the water, then spit it out into the bowl. He did this several times, until what he spat out was only light pink in color, then he drank the rest of the glass.

Just as Hermione Banished the bowl, cup, and flannel, McGonagall came in, followed by Snape and Mad-Eye Moody.

“Thank you, Miss Granger,” said McGonagall. “Now, please go find Professor Tonks. I believe she is—”
"NO!"

Hermione jumped at the outburst. Lupin was looking at McGonagall with that same flash of madness in his eyes that had been there when he’d entered the Great Hall. If he hadn’t needed his hands to hold the blanket closed, Hermione was quite sure he’d have jumped up and shaken McGonagall by the shoulders.

"Remus—"

"Not her! You can’t tell her what I did! Please, just—just let me make my report and leave. I don’t want her to know—" He made as if to dart out of the room.

"All right, Remus, all right.” McGonagall laid her hands on his shoulders, urging him back into his seat. “We won’t get her yet. But you must know you’ll have to tell her some time. You can’t simply avoid her forever.”

He shook his head in denial, saying nothing.

McGonagall looked at Hermione wearily. “You may go, Miss Granger.”

Hermione looked dumbly from one of them to the next. “What? No—no, you can’t just—you can’t expect me to just go about my day now! How can I pretend nothing is wrong when—” She looked at the quivering mess that Lupin had become, and suddenly he looked all too familiar.

He was her. Dumbledore had sent him on a mission that had left Hagrid dead and Lupin shattered. Just like he was constantly sending Snape on missions from which he may or may not come back whole, or even alive. Just like he was asking her to suffer pain and loss that no one should have to go through. All for the Order. All for the greater good.

"Where’s Dumbledore?” she growled. Her own pain she might have been able to force down and bear, but to see the pain of those she cared about . . . This had gone too far.

“Miss Granger,” McGonagall said, her tone growing sterner, “we will deal with this. Please return to your room.”

“Does he realize what he’s done to Remus?” she demanded. “What he’s done to Hagrid? What this will do to Tonks when she finds out?” Lupin gave a soft whimper, but she ignored it. “Where does it end, Professor? How many of us have to give our lives—give our sanity—for the Headmaster’s plan?”

“Miss Granger!” McGonagall gasped. “That is quite enough. I may not agree with all aspects of Professor Dumbledore’s plan, but we all know full well that his is the best we’ve got. We must trust that he will tell us what we need to know when it becomes necessary.”

“Was this part of his plan?” she shouted, pointing at Lupin.

McGonagall didn’t have an answer. Instead, she said in a weary voice, “Miss Granger, please. You’re not even a member of the Order. You can’t expect us to—”

“No.” Finally, Snape spoke. His face was tense, his eyes boring into Hermione. “She’s of age, Minerva. She’s as deeply entrenched in this as any of us. Why not let her join officially?”

“Severus is right,” said Mad-Eye. “The girl’s not a fool, and she’s old enough to choose for herself.”
McGonagall looked thoughtful for a long moment. Then she asked softly, “Remus, what do you think?”

“Hermione’s more than capable,” he muttered. “If she wants in, let her in.” Then he added under his breath, “She can take my place.”

McGonagall didn’t dignify that last remark with an answer, but looked seriously at Hermione. “Well, Miss Granger, in the absence of Professor Dumbledore, the decision is up to me. Is this what you want?”

“Yes,” Hermione said without hesitation. She was already affected by the decisions the Order made. She may as well get a vote in any further resolutions.

Another moment, then McGonagall nodded. “Welcome to the Order. Now take a seat.”

Hermione sat in the remaining chair while McGonagall took the one behind her desk and Snape and Mad-Eye Conjured two more. McGonagall waved her wand, and a setting of tea appeared. She poured a cup and Levitated it to Lupin. He looked at it, hanging in the air, then took it and uncurled enough to sit back in a still hunched but more upright posture.

“Thank you,” he said, the words purely thoughtless instinct.

“For the sake of all present,” McGonagall said, “why don’t you start at the beginning, Remus?”

Doubting very much that either Snape or Mad-Eye was completely in the dark about Lupin’s mission, Hermione felt glad that McGonagall was taking her newly-minted membership in the Order seriously.

Lupin took a fortifying sip of tea, then stared into his cup as he spoke.

“Nearly two months ago, Dumbledore called me into his office. He informed me that the old rumors about werewolves in the Forbidden Forest had finally become true.”

Hermione listened intently. She’d guessed as much in the past several minutes, but hearing it confirmed . . . Suddenly, she remembered the sound she’d heard as she’d drifted off to sleep last night and realized why she’d recognized it. It had been the howl of a werewolf.

“It’s a mid-sized pack,” Lupin continued. “Three dozen or so. They’d broken off from the pack that I attempted to infiltrate last year—Greyback’s pack. After the failed attack on Hogwarts in June, Voldemort’s followers had got restless. Some of the werewolves noticed that Greyback still had not been given the Dark Mark. They came to believe that he never would.”

“And rightly so,” Snape interjected. “The Dark Lord disdains werewolves nearly as much as Muggle-borns. He finds them useful, but would never bestow on one the honor of his mark.”

Lupin waited for him to finish, then went on. “ Apparently some of my words last year had actually sunk in. Some of them realized that Voldemort would never keep the promises he made us. Werewolves would be no better off under his rule than we are with the Ministry in charge.”

Hermione felt a thrill of hope. “They want to turn against him?” she asked. “They want to join us in fighting them?”

Lupin shook his head, but his eyes never left his tea. “They want no part of the war—on either side. Dumbledore hoped that, given this change in their opinions, I might be able to sway them to help us. He hoped that, with Greyback no longer influencing them, they might see reason.”
Snape snorted derisively, as if the idea of werewolves and reason coming together was nothing short of laughable.

“Yes...” Lupin mused softly. “You’re quite right, Severus. It was a hopeless endeavor from the start.”

“Dumbledore sent you out to them,” Hermione asked, appalled, “knowing full well that you had a pregnant wife who needed you?”

“Tonks is strong,” Lupin said, “...and she doesn’t need me.”

“More to the point,” Mad-Eye added before anyone could contradict Lupin, “there weren’t any other options. No one else would have got the chance to say two words to them.”

“It’s true,” Lupin admitted. “I was the only choice, really. Most werewolves are dreadfully suspicious of wizards. I had to leave my wand behind if I were to have any hope of them accepting me in their midst.”

“But aren’t some werewolves wizards?” Hermione asked.

“Some, yes,” said Lupin. “But of those who were bitten as children, I’m the only one in the past century who’s got a proper magical education.”

“And those who were bitten as adults?”

Lupin was quiet for a long moment, then said, “Adult Muggles adapt to the change more easily. Having had no prior experiences with werewolves, and no knowledge of us beyond fiction, they have no idea of the prejudice they’re facing—at least not until they’ve come to terms with what they’ve become. But wizards know immediately the life they’ve been condemned to. Most of the time, the psychological scarring alone is so extreme that they become incapable of focusing their magic in any but the most basic ways. Due to their condition, they lose their jobs, their spouses often leave them, and their friends decide it’s not worth the risk to be associated with them. Their entire lives, everything and everyone they know, including themselves, is wiped away in one fell swoop. In short, Hermione, many of them do not survive past the first few transformations.”

Hermione had never thought what it must be like for werewolves. Not really. If she was honest with herself, she tended to think that all werewolves were either monsters like Greyback or more-or-less well-adjusted people like Lupin. In her mind she knew that both of them were exceptions, but it had never really registered before.

She didn’t know quite what to say in response to that information, so she asked, “What did you do with your wand? Surely you kept it close.” She couldn’t imagine leaving her wand somewhere she couldn’t get at it fairly easily, especially when going into a dangerous situation.

It seemed to be the wrong thing to say, as a pained look came over Lupin’s face and his hands tightened around his teacup.

“He left it with Hagrid,” McGonagall said. “That’s how he sent the Patronus when Severus was injured. He’d been reporting in with Hagrid at the time.”

Lupin nodded. “It—it was decided that it would be too risky for me to come back to the castle to make my reports. The werewolves would smell it on me easily and resent me for it, for my ability to go back and forth... as if I fit in here. So, Ha—” He choked on the name and had to swallow and try again. “Hagrid became the intermediary. He spends—” He winced and amended his words. “He spent so much time in the forest, his scent was all over it, and he was tolerated, if not
welcomed, by its inhabitants. My meetings with him went largely unnoticed.”

He paused and took a steadying sip of tea. “I haven’t made much progress in trying to convince them that Dumbledore is different than other wizards, that he’s fighting for us as much as anyone. Even when I told them how he’d secured my education, that only made them bitter that he hadn’t done so for any others. They . . . accused my parents of bribing him—and wouldn’t believe me when I said my parents wouldn’t have had the means to do so even if Dumbledore was the sort of man who could be bought. They don’t believe we will ever be accepted in wizarding—or even in human—society . . . .”

“Get to the point, Lupin,” Snape snapped. “What led to the events that bring you here tonight?”

McGonagall gave Snape a warning look but didn’t reprimand him. She seemed as eager as anyone to hear what had gone wrong.

“Last night was only the second full moon since I joined them,” Lupin said. “The first one went smoothly enough, all things considered. I . . . enjoyed it too much. The freedom, just being able to run, to let go, and oh, Hermione”—he looked at her directly; this backstory was primarily for her benefit, after all—“you’ve no idea how much the wolf wants a pack. And not having Greyback there to terrorize everyone . . . I haven’t felt so free since . . . well, since James and Sirius were still alive . . . . Or rather, the wolf hasn’t.”

“You speak of the wolf like it’s a separate being,” Hermione noted.

“Yes . . . No.” Lupin shook his head. “Some of each, I think. It’s part of me, always buried deep in my mind. With the moon, it gains ascendance, if only for one night a month.”

“But, Remus, you were taking the Wolfsbane Potion, weren’t you?” Hermione asked.

“I couldn’t,” he stated. “They’d never have trusted me if I did, if I used my connections and favor with the wizarding world to procure something none of them had the means to get. And even if they wouldn’t have been able to smell it on me, they’d have known when we transformed. They’d have seen the humanity in my eyes.”

“Then,” Hermione gasped, “you mean there were wild werewolves running around in the Forbidden Forest?”

“Were?” repeated Mad-Eye. “Still are, girl. Or haven’t you been listening?”

“But that’s—”

“Unconscionably dangerous?” Snape offered. “Indeed. As dangerous, one might suggest, as stuffing one down a tunnel and trusting him to mind himself. Of course, Albus tells the students at the beginning of every year that the Forbidden Forest could kill them. Presumably, he considers his duty to keep them safe from its inhabitants fulfilled.”

“Enough, Severus,” McGonagall scolded, then directed her attention to Hermione. “If we had run them out, all hope of them joining us would be gone.”

“And where would they go?” Mad-Eye asked. “They’d be no more welcome anywhere else.”

Hermione could see their points, and really, it wasn’t as if there weren’t even more dangerous things in the forest, as she and Ron had told Tonks—Oh, that’s why she was looking toward it so wistfully when we went to have tea with . . .
“Continue, Remus,” McGonagall instructed.

“Last night went much the same as the previous moon,” Lupin explained. “The pack’s encampment is deep in the forest, far enough that even I did not believe there would be any danger to humans—and as wolves humans are the only ones in danger from us.”

“Humans and part-humans,” Snape corrected harshly.

Lupin shrank into his blanket. “Yes. As it turns out.” Some tea sloshed from his cup; his hands were shaking. He set the cup down on McGonagall’s desk before he made a bigger mess of it. “Just before sunset, we removed our clothing and left it in the trees so we wouldn’t tear it up. They don’t wear much in the way of clothing, of course. They don’t see the need. If we’re to be treated as animals, if we act like animals, then what use are human customs? They wear only what keeps them warm, and even that they must put far out of reach of the wolves.”

“Because of the human scent,” Hermione guessed, and Lupin nodded. “Well, that’s poor logic. They can’t say they’re not human when their own noses tell them they are.”

Lupin’s lips quirked, just for a moment, but his eyes were sad. “Once we transformed, it didn’t take long before we started to hunt. I hadn’t thought there would be a danger, had believed that we would stay well clear of the castle . . . but I was wrong. We ran aimlessly for a long time, stopping now and then to rest or find a puddle to drink from. It was nearly dawn before we caught a scent worth following.”

His eyes became unfocused as he stared into the space before him, and his voice took on the haunted quality again. “I could see it all happening, but I had no control. I knew that if the wolf had found prey, it meant someone was in danger. But I could do nothing to stop it. All I could do was watch . . . Hagrid had . . . He’d never taken dangerous monsters very seriously. He’d wandered far into the forest. I’ve no idea what he thought was so important to . . . We found him kneeling by a rock, gathering . . . something. We were on him before he knew what was happening. He didn’t even fight back much. Didn’t want to hurt us, I suppose. He had his wand, but he only cast Stupefies. I caught an elbow in the ribs as he tried to fight us off, but there were too many of us. By the time I got to my feet, the others had taken him down, and I didn’t even hesitate . . .”

“Thank you, Remus; that will do,” McGonagall said softly from behind her hand.

“I could taste—taste his blood!” Lupin choked out as if he hadn’t heard her. “I could feel my own teeth ripping into him and I couldn’t—I couldn’t do a thing to stop!” He was shaking again, furious with himself. “I tried calling out, getting control of the wolf, but I couldn’t! And some part—some part of me actually—liked the taste of—”

“That’s enough, Remus!” Mad-Eye growled, rising quickly. With a thump, his hands came down on Lupin’s shoulders, getting his attention and calming his shaking.

After a few seconds, Mad-Eye released him and sat down. There was madness in Lupin’s eyes, but he tried to keep his voice calm. “When the sun rose, we were all disgusted by what we’d done. The others went back to the camp, but I . . . After being sick in the bushes until I thought I would die, I knew I had to come tell you what happened, to bring back his . . . his wand.”

“You did the right thing, Remus,” said McGonagall. “If you tell me where this happened, I’ll send someone to retrieve the body.”

Lupin gave her an agonized look.
“Or . . . what’s left of it,” she amended.

Rather than tell them, Lupin asked for a quill and parchment and, with a shaking hand, drew a rough map.

“If that’s all,” he said, rising to his feet, “I need to get back.”

Everyone looked at him like he’d just suggested he go eat someone else. “Your mission is over, Remus,” McGonagall said. “You need to go see Madam Pomfrey, then go back to your rooms and take a hot shower.”

He turned a hard gaze on her. “My place isn’t here anymore. Isn’t that obvious? I don’t know that it ever was.”

“Now, Remus—”

McGonagall was interrupted when the door to her office flew open with a bang. They all looked up, startled, to find Tonks standing in the doorway, out of breath, as if she’d sprinted across the castle.

“Remus,” she breathed. “You’re back.”

She reached for him, running forward, but he lurched back from her. “Don’t touch me!”

That stopped her cold. “What . . . what happened to you?”

He turned away from her, his shoulders hunched. “No . . . Please go. Please go,” he whispered.

“I’m not leaving, Remus,” Tonks said. “Tell me what happened.”

“I finally became what I already was,” he whispered.

“I don’t understand—”

He spun on her, hysterical. “Of course you don’t! You never have! And I’m going to make damn sure you never do!”

He brushed past Hermione and the others, keeping well out of Tonks’s reach.

“Remus!” Tonks’s voice stopped him just as he reached the doorway.

He half-turned and looked over his shoulder. “I’m sorry. I can’t. I won’t do this to you anymore. I never should have relented.”

“Not this again—”

“I won’t let you tie yourself to a monster any longer! I was selfish . . . so selfish . . .”

“Remus, you’re not—”

“Aren’t you listening?” he hissed. “I’m leaving you, Tonks!”

The room fell into silence. McGonagall’s mouth was hanging atypically agape, Mad-Eye looked ready to leap up and throttle Lupin, and Snape . . . Snape was sneering with a victorious glint in his eyes.
Lupin looked as stunned as anyone by what he’d just said.

Tonks stood gobsmacked, and Hermione wanted to say something, to come up with something that would make Lupin see sense, but it was not her place. She felt like she was committing a vile intrusion just by witnessing this, even though she hadn’t chosen to do so.

“What was this, then?” Tonks marched toward Lupin, pulling something from her robes: the Y-shaped stick he’d had Hagrid give her. She shoved it in his face. “What about separate parts being one, Remus?”

“I won’t lie to you and say I never loved you,” he said softly. Then, carefully, he reached out and took the stick from her hand. He looked at it for a moment, then waved his hand over it, and one of the forks burst into flame. Tonks jerked back from the fire, but Lupin met her eyes, then gripped the burning piece of the branch in his bare hand and snapped it off. As it fell to the floor and smoldered, he handed her the remaining piece of the stick. “Sometimes one part must be removed by force when its presence would destroy the whole.”

Before she could respond, he fled.

Tonks moved to follow him, but McGonagall was suddenly behind her, laying a hand on her shoulder.

“Let him go. He needs some time to deal with what happened.”

“Do you think he meant it?” Tonks’s voice was tiny.

“Of course not,” McGonagall replied. “Alastor, follow him. Make sure he gets out of the castle without causing a disturbance—but let him go.” Her look was stern as she said it, and Mad-Eye nodded gruffly. She turned to Snape, who wore a humorless, vindicated smirk. “Not a word, Severus.” She handed him the bit of parchment Lupin had drawn on, her instruction clear.

Snape’s smirk disappeared. “Of course,” he muttered as he roughly brushed past Tonks, out the door. “If ever there’s a dirty job to do . . .”

Tonks staggered back, barely catching herself, as if all the strength was suddenly sapped from her. Hermione leapt up and guided her into a chair.

Tonks clutched the branch in her fist so hard her knuckles were white.

Hermione knelt by Tonks’s chair and said whatever soothing words came to her, fairly certain that Tonks wasn’t hearing any of them.

When she reached up to smooth Tonks’s hair, wondering when it had got so long and fine, she felt a small stab of despair.

Tonks’s hair was mousey brown again.
“It just doesn’t feel real, you know?”

Hermione reached over and squeezed Harry’s hand. “I know.”

From his other side, Ginny sniffed.

Beside her, Ron muttered, “I never thought it’d be . . .”

“I know,” Hermione said again.

She hadn’t been there when Snape had brought Hagrid’s remains back. She’d been sitting with Tonks. The young teacher had been put on . . . well, no one dared name it suicide watch, but McGonagall had informally asked rather firmly that Hermione take turns with herself, Sprout, and Pomfrey in staying close to Tonks.

Trying to get Tonks to see that even if her husband had left her (which Hermione was by no means certain of), it wasn’t the end of the world, that she still had something to live for—not least of all the child growing in her belly—had helped to keep Hermione’s mind off of the fact that one of her oldest and closest friends was dead.

But watching McGonagall Levitate that huge coffin into the enormous grave at the edge of the forest brought the reality of it crashing down on her.

The whole staff was at the service (aside from Binns), and some fifty-odd students, as well. It wasn’t that more didn’t want to pay their respects; it was rather that most of them hadn’t got over their shock enough to believe it just yet.

Dumbledore wasn’t there either, to Hermione’s dismay. But then, Dumbledore hadn’t been seen in the castle for a while now.

“He’s been helping me,” said Harry when she mentioned it. “With the”—he glanced at the small crowd around them—“my project. I think he . . . doesn’t think he has much time left.”

“I’ve seen him,” Hermione said, her voice sounding dead in her ears. Ron didn’t know what they were talking about, so, as quickly and quietly as he could, Harry explained about Dumbledore’s cursed hand and how it had been spreading lately. Ron just pursed his lips and stared at Hagrid’s grave.

At the front, McGonagall was still speaking.

“Rubeus Hagrid was a large man. Even as a boy he was simply too big to be allowed. But the size of his body was nothing to the size of his heart. He was one of the kindest, gentlest, bravest souls I’ve ever had the pleasure of knowing.” She looked at the grave, her eyes glistening. “Hagrid never feared anything. Not even the things he should have. He saw too much the good in people—and in creatures—to fear them.”

“That’s not true,” said a cold, soft voice behind them, and Hermione turned to see her husband standing a short distance away. She released Harry’s hand on instinct, but she couldn’t tell if Snape had noticed or cared. “Hagrid feared the Dark Lord.” He looked steadily at Harry, who met his
eyes without blinking. “He, at least, had enough sense for that.”

Harry looked away from him, back toward McGonagall, who was still going on. Hermione was glad. She didn’t think she could stand to see her best friend and her husband get into a shouting match right now.


“You’ll have to, Miss Granger.” She heard Snape’s voice, chilly as the December breeze that rustled her hair. “Like it or not, Hagrid won’t be the last.”

The matter-of-fact way he said it, as if it was as certain as sunrise, sent a chill through her. She blinked back fresh tears, but when she looked back at Snape, he was already striding away from them.

“Git,” muttered Ron, but neither he nor the others seemed to have the energy for anything more.

Several yards away, she heard a harsh whisper. She looked over to see Astoria Greengrass and Orla Quirke, a couple of Ravenclaw girls, muttering to each other. They were both glaring venomously at one person.

Tonks didn’t seem aware of their scrutiny.

A surge of anger flared in Hermione’s chest. It wasn’t Tonks’s fault that Hagrid was dead. It wasn’t really even Lupin’s fault. Yet they were glaring at Tonks as if she’d personally stabbed Hagrid in the back.

Hermione slipped her wand out of her sleeve just a bit and, keeping it down, gave it a quick wave toward the girls. The whispers stopped immediately.

Hermione looked around to see if anyone else was directing inappropriate attention toward her friend. As her eyes roved, she glanced at the treeline and something caught her attention. Peering closer, she made out a pale human shape hiding behind one of the trees several yards in. Then she blinked, and it was gone.

She looked around. Snape was now standing near McGonagall but seemed to glance at Hermione out of the corner of his eye.

“What d’you think he was after in the forest?” asked Harry in a tight whisper. “If he knew there were werewolves on the loose, what was so important?”

“Probably nothing,” said Ron. “He didn’t have a second thought before sending twelve-year-olds to visit a giant man-eating spider. I don’t think it entered his mind that any sort of creature might ever harm him, much less one that was human most of the time.”

Harry didn’t look pleased with this answer, but he nodded tersely. Then his hand dipped into his pocket and pulled something out.

“What’s that?” Hermione asked.

Harry opened his hand so she could see it more clearly. It was a small, roughly-carved wooden flute. “First year,” he said. “Hagrid’s Christmas present to me.” His hand tightened around it, his knuckles going white. “He was the first friend I ever had.”

Hermione looked into his eyes and saw that they were glistening. “Oh, Harry!” she said, wanting
to throw her arms around him—but before she could, Ginny had done so. Harry held Ginny to him tightly, his head buried in her shoulder, his crying muffled by her cloak and hair.

Wordlessly, Ron moved around to stand by Hermione and put his arm around her shoulders. She leaned into him, grateful for the comfort . . . though she felt an odd, vague wish that it had come from a different place.

“We should get going,” Harry said, staring into the dying embers. The common room was empty now and had been for at least an hour. He made a move to get up, but Hermione stopped him.

“Wait, Harry! I almost forgot. I’ve got something for you.”

She raced up to her room, being as quiet as she could so as not to wake Lavender and Parvati, and got the photo of Lily from under her mattress. When she came back down, Harry was standing at the foot of the stairs as if he’d meant to follow and realized he couldn’t.

Hermione smoothed the torn photo in her hands. “Don’t—don’t ask where I got this from, because I can’t tell you, but . . .” She pressed it into Harry’s hand.

He looked at it, not realizing what it was. “Who is this?”

“Don’t you recognize her, Harry?” Hermione whispered. “It’s your mum. It’s your mum as a child.”

His eyes went wide, and he looked at it closely, straining to see it in the dim light from the scattered torches. He ran his fingers over it, his lips pressed into a thin line. “She’s so young . . . All the other pictures I have of her, she’s grown. How did you—”

Hermione shook her head. “I said I can’t tell you.”

Harry looked as if he wanted to beg her for the answer, but nodded. “Thank you,” he choked out.

A mad thought flew into Hermione’s mind, and she grabbed Harry’s hand. “Harry! There’s something . . . I wonder if you might help me with something.”

“Of course,” he said, pocketing the photo. “Whatever you need.”

“Do you remember that potions book you used last year?”


“I’d like to . . .” Hermione thought up a quick lie. “I’d like to reference some of the margin notes, see if there’s anything that might help with a project I’m working on. Where did you put it?”

“The Room of Requirement. I stashed it there after Snape caught me with it, and I guess I never thought to try to get it back. Don’t need it anymore, do I? Come on, we can get it now. It’ll take forever for you to hunt through the mess if you don’t know where to look.”

Telling Ron and Ginny they’d be right back, Harry pulled his Invisibility Cloak out of his bag. “I may not be a student anymore, but you probably shouldn’t be caught out after curfew.”

Hermione got under the Cloak with him, and together they made their way to the corridor on the seventh floor. Harry tucked the Cloak under his arm and walked back and forth three times.
Entering the door that appeared, Hermione was astounded at what she saw. The room was full to bursting with all manner of objects, trinkets, and furniture. Hermione gasped at the sight of countless books shoved into every nook and cranny, her fingers instantly itching to look through them. She saw a conspicuous empty space along one wall.

“**The Vanishing Cabinet,**” Harry explained as they moved through the mess. “Dumbledore told me he had it taken out and destroyed.”

Hermione looked around the treasure trove. There was rusting weaponry, expired potions, a beautiful tiara and other jewels, even a huge stuffed troll. “People must have been storing things in here for centuries!” she remarked. “What were you thinking of to make it appear?”

“That I need somewhere to hide something,” Harry said dismissively. Hermione nodded, filing the information away. This would be a room worth coming back to. “Here it is.”

Harry pulled out a book from amongst the clutter and handed it to her. She brushed the dust off the cover and flipped through the pages. This was it. Snape’s book. She stopped at one of the more heavily marked pages and looked at the scribbled words, imagining him writing them, hunched over his desk, his nose nearly touching the page.

“I hope it helps,” Harry said. “Too bad we never figured out who the Half-Blood Prince was, though.”

Hermione hummed noncommittally and followed Harry out of the room.

#

As the days wore on, the reality of Hagrid’s death continued to sink in. And the further in it sank, the more Hermione began to feel as if she’d not lost one friend, but two.

She thought she might have become bitter and angry toward Lupin after the initial shock wore off, but that was not the case. She was angry at him, yes, but not for his hand (or paw, as it were) in Hagrid’s death. She was angry at him for not facing up to it, but rather choosing to brand himself a monster and hide away in the woods like an animal.

“Perhaps we should go look for him,” she suggested once to Ron, but he merely snorted and said that if Lupin wanted to run off like a ruddy coward, maybe they were better off without him.

But they weren’t better off, and Ron knew it as well as she did.

Harry certainly wasn’t better off for having one of his few remaining pseudo-father-figures showing himself so woefully inadequate. If Lupin couldn’t deal with the lot fate had cast him, how was Harry—much younger, with a much more trying fate—to do so?

Their classmates weren’t better off—those who had always considered Lupin one of their best teachers. They’d looked up to and respected him (most of them had continued to do so even after his lycanthropy was made public), and now not only had he effectively agreed that those prejudiced against his kind were right all along, but demonstrated that when the going got rough, it was a perfectly acceptable option to run and hide.

Some Gryffindor.

And Tonks . . . Tonks certainly wasn’t better off.

“**Five feet on the proper identification and capture of Lethifolds,**” Tonks said, her voice flat and
empty, as the bell rang for the end of class. Her hair hung in lank strands around her eyes, and she didn’t bother to brush them back.

“I’ve never seen her this bad,” Ron whispered to Hermione as they gathered their things.

“We should talk to her,” Hermione agreed.

They approached cautiously, as one might a wounded animal. Whether she didn’t see them or simply didn’t care, they couldn’t tell.

“Come to invite me to tea again, have you?” Tonks asked, startling them.

“Isn’t there anything we can do to help?” Hermione implored.

Tonks laughed humorlessly, but said nothing.

Hermione exchanged a worried look with Ron, and he backed away to give them privacy.

“He’ll come back,” Hermione said softly. “He just needs time to process things, then he’ll return.”

“No,” said Tonks. “He won’t. Not on his own. And I’m . . . just so tired of forcing him to do things. I should have known this wouldn’t work.”

“Don’t say that!” Hermione insisted, grasping one of Tonks’s hands fervently. “He loves you. I know he does. You know he does.”

“And yet . . .” Tonks sighed, but didn’t pull her hand away, “I think he hates himself more.”

“He’ll come back.” Hermione squeezed her hand for emphasis. “He will.”

Tonks gave her a weak, forced smile and pulled back from her. “You’d better go. You don’t want to miss lunch. You’re eating for two, remember.”

“So are you,” Hermione reminded her, but Tonks just grimaced.

#

“Someone needs to go talk to Remus,” Hermione told Ron, Neville, and Luna as they ate lunch. “Maybe if we owl Harry, he’ll go talk some sense into him.”

“Don’t you think Harry’s got enough to take care of?” asked Ron. “Not least of all my sister.”

“But who else will he listen to? Sirius is gone, and Harry’s dad’s been dead for years. They probably could have knocked some sense into him, but they’re not around anymore, so it’s up to us.”

“What about Professor McGonagall?” Neville offered. “Or Dumbledore?”

“Dumbledore’s still gone,” Hermione pointed out. “And I think if Professor McGonagall thought she could do something, she would have by now.”

“If no one else is going to, we could go talk to him,” Luna suggested as if that hadn’t been exactly what Hermione was getting at.

“We’d better do it soon,” Neville said. “We’re leaving for the Christmas holiday tomorrow.”
“This afternoon, then,” said Hermione. “After classes. We’ll meet in the Entrance Hall.”

Once they’d all agreed, Hermione ran back to her room before her next class to grab the Transfiguration essay she’d forgotten on her bed. After stuffing it in her bag, her eyes fell on the shabby potions book stacked with her other texts. On a whim, she Transfigured some spare parchment into green wrapping paper and wrapped the book up. Neville was right; time was nearly out if she was going to do what she’d taken it in her mind to do.

“Dobby!” she called out. “Dobby, can you hear me?”

With a small pop, Dobby appeared before her. “Dobby heard his name, Miss.”

“Yes, Dobby, would you do something for me?” she asked. “Purely as a favor, of course. I don’t want you to think I’m trying to force you at all.”

“Dobby knows Hermione Granger would never force Dobby to do anything.”

Hermione smiled and held the wrapped book out to him. “If you would, I’d like you to see that Professor Snape gets this present on Christmas morning—but don’t tell anyone about it.”

Dobby cringed slightly at the name. “Hermione Granger is giving Professor Snape a present? Hermione Granger is even kinder and more generous than Dobby thought.”

Hermione frowned. Dobby still hadn’t taken the present from her. “Do you have something against Professor Snape, Dobby?”

“Dobby would never speak ill of the teachers at Hogwarts, Miss, but . . .” Dobby wrung his hands. “Professor Snape is friends with Dobby’s former family.”

The way he said friends made something tighten in Hermione’s chest. “Did he ever . . . hurt you, Dobby? Like the Malfoys did?”

Dobby shook his head, his large ears slapping against his cheeks. “No, never hurt Dobby, Miss . . . but he was friends with them.”

“Well, I don’t think they’re friends anymore,” Hermione said. “Mrs. Malfoy nearly killed me not too long ago, and Professor Snape saved me from her. They didn’t sound at all on friendly terms.”

Dobby considered this, then nodded and took the book. “It would be Dobby’s pleasure to deliver Hermione Granger’s present.”

Giving him a warm smile, Hermione nodded back. “Thank you, Dobby.”

#

She came back from Herbology with Ron and Neville, ran to her room to drop her things off, then went with them to meet Luna in the Entrance Hall.

“Are we ready, then?” Hermione asked softly, trying to avoid catching the attention of any passersby.

Neville patted his bag. “I’ve got some tarts and a sandwich from the kitchen, and a bottle of butterbeer I’ve been saving from the last Hogsmeade weekend. I reckon having some proper food in him will help him see sense.”

“Good.” Hermione nodded. “Now, I’ve worked out where in the forest I think they’re most likely
to be, based on what we know of the location of where Aragog’s nest was, where the centaurs usually move, and where Grawp was last seen—”

“Hermione.”

“What is it, Ron?”

“What are we going to say to him? ‘It’s okay, Remus, we don’t care that you killed our friend’? I don’t know about you, but I do care, Hermione.”

“Ron!” Hermione gasped. “Remus is our friend, too! And it’s not like he meant to—”

“I know, I know,” Ron said, holding his hands up. “It’s just . . . I don’t know if I can pretend like everything’s okay. And don’t you think he knows what this is doing to Tonks? Don’t you think if he really cared about her he’d have come back?”

Hermione felt the blood rising in her cheeks. “If you don’t want to come, no one’s forcing you,” she bit out. “Neville, Luna, come on. We want to be back before curfew.”

She stormed toward the main entrance, not looking back to see if Ron was following. She heard two sets of footsteps behind her, but she hoped a third would join them any moment.

She didn’t get a chance to find out if Ron would follow.

“And where do you think you’re going?” Snape asked, meeting them at the main doors. He must have just been coming inside.

Hermione cursed her timing but looked Snape in the eyes. “We’re going to see Remus.”

“You’re going to do no such thing!” Snape snapped, his eyes darting to three places behind her, and she heard Neville shifting his feet.

“Someone has to go talk to him, S—Professor!” she insisted. “He’s obviously not going to come back on his own. Someone’s got to go talk some sense into him.”

“If the wolf wants to rot with his own kind, let him.”

“Hey!” Ron protested. It was no surprise that, even with everything that had happened, when given the choice between Snape and Lupin, Ron sided with Lupin.

“Silence, Weasley!” Snape barked. “You children may be willing to throw yourselves on the mercy of the wolves, but fortunately that is not your decision to make! Return to your common rooms at once!”

“But we can’t just abandon him!”

Snape leaned so close to Hermione that she could feel his breath on her face. “Your life is no longer yours to throw away,” he hissed, then stood straight and looked at the others. “The same goes for the rest of you. As long as you are students at this school, you are under my authority, and I will not stand aside and allow you to go off and get yourselves killed on a fool’s errand. Return to your rooms!”

Neville hurried away, pulling Luna with him. Ron went more slowly, keeping an eye on Hermione and waiting for her at the bottom of the stairs.

“The moon’s not full,” Hermione persisted, knowing she’d already lost this argument. “They’re not
monsters.”

He leaned closer to her again and said in a low voice, “Go to your room, Miss Granger.”

Hermione scowled, trying to think of a rebuttal, then set her jaw and stormed away.
“Have you thought of a name yet?” Ron asked, biting the head off another gingerbread man.

Ginny rolled her eyes. “Not much thinking to do, is there?” She tossed a knowing look toward her husband. Harry, at least, had the grace to look moderately embarrassed as Ginny continued. “If it’s a boy, we’ll call him James Sirius.”

“And if it’s a girl?” Hermione asked.

“Lily something,” Ginny said with a shrug.

“What about Lily Ginny?” Ron asked, already reaching for another biscuit. “That’s traditional.”

“‘Lily Ginny’?” Ginny said. “Honestly. Can’t you hear how that sounds?”

“Lily Ginevra?” Ron offered, and Ginny pulled a face. “Lily Petunia?” he suggested, and Harry choked on his milk.

“It’s not so outrageous,” Hermione said while Ron sniggered. “She may be horrible, but she did raise you, Harry.”

“And if you’re so set against picking a name from our family,” Ron added, with just a trace of petulance, “there’s not many names left, are there?”

“I’m not set against it,” Harry protested. “We just . . .”

“There aren’t any tragically murdered women on my side of the family,” Ginny explained, her tone much less biting than the words themselves.

“We just haven’t decided yet,” Harry finished. “Besides, considering I was an only child and my dad was an only child—”

“And considering the kid is half-Weasley,” Ginny put in.

“—we thought it was a good idea to think of a boy’s name first.”

“Which took all of three seconds,” Ginny added, “but the point stands. I’m sure we’ll think up something if it turns out to be a girl. Maybe we’ll even get really wild and give her a middle name that hasn’t already been used by someone we know.”

Harry pointed a biscuit at her. “Now that’s just crazy talk, Gin.”

Ginny leaned closer to him and bit a limb off the biscuit Harry was brandishing. She grinned cheekily, Harry laughed, and Hermione felt a stab of jealousy pierce her gut.

Hermione had spent most of the train ride from Hogwarts fuming. Not only was her husband being a total prat, but he had the gall to be right as well. Of course it was too dangerous to go out looking for Lupin, but she had to try anyway because that’s what friends do. She supposed she should have been glad that Snape cared enough to stop her, except that he’d done it in such a possessive and uncaring way that a small part of her wished she hadn’t already given Dobby Snape’s Christmas present.
She knew Snape wouldn’t be happy about her spending the holiday with Ron, let alone a whole house full of young men, but he hadn’t bothered to ask about it—and anyway, what else was she supposed to do? Her own parents were amnesiac in Australia. Unless Snape wanted her to stay at Hogwarts with him (and he’d had plenty of time to ask her if that had been what he’d wanted), there was really nowhere else she could have gone other than the Burrow.

Fred and George had come along with Mr. and Mrs. Weasley to pick her and Ron up at King’s Cross, and the rest of the family was coming at later times. It was going to be a packed house, all right, but at least Molly insisted on her and Ginny sharing a room while Harry stayed in Ron’s. Not that Molly could object to Harry and Ginny sharing a room now that they were married and already expecting a child, but the only other option was for Hermione to share a room with one of the boys, and there was no way in hell Molly Weasley would have such a scandalous arrangement under her roof, even in the unlikely event that Hermione had preferred it.

Now, sitting at the kitchen table with her closest friends, a plate of still-warm biscuits filling the air with the scent of gingerbread, Hermione pushed away the jealousy she felt at her friends’ happiness. Why couldn’t it be like that for her? The war would end eventually, and despite the stupid prophecy, despite Snape’s pessimism, there was no guarantee that they wouldn’t both survive. Perhaps when the war was over and things calmed down, she and Snape could find some common ground with each other and find . . . if not the wedded bliss that Harry and Ginny seemed to be enjoying, then at least a kind of fond companionship. And who was to say that this plan of Dumbledore’s, whatever it was, wouldn’t work out just fine, and she’d get all of her children back, and they’d be a more-or-less happy family? And Harry and Ginny would come visit on Sundays, and their children would play Quidditch and chess together, and Ron would find someone else . . . Luna, perhaps, or someone they didn’t know yet.

She tried to picture it. Snape at a table, a pair of glasses perched on his oversized nose (she’d never seen him wear glasses, but she thought they would suit him, and his eyes weren’t getting any younger), helping a black-haired boy and bushy-haired girl with their History of Magic revision . . . Harry and Ron coming through the door with their wives, greeting Snape with a smile and a wave, as if he were an old friend . . . a little boy with red hair and green eyes running to Snape and begging to be hoisted into the air—

Laughter burst from Hermione’s mouth in an unexpected stifle that sounded like a fish snorting.

“You all right, Hermione?” asked Ron, looking at her like she’d gone slightly mental.

“Yes,” Hermione said, smiling, then took a biscuit from the tray. It was soft and delicious. “Yes, I’m fine.”

#

Charlie arrived by Portkey the next night, a large bag slung over his shoulder, looking like some kind of young, rugged Father Christmas.

“Looks like you’re getting a little fat there, Gin,” Charlie said after he hugged his sister, looking down at her belly. “All that hiding out’s been getting to you. You’re not getting any exercise.”

“Oh, I’m getting plenty of exercise,” Ginny told him, looking lasciviously toward Harry, who looked between them awkwardly and turned away to tell Ron something very important which had only just crossed his mind.

Charlie grimaced. “Right. You win that one. But seriously, I brought my broom. I was hoping we’d get in a game of Quidditch before dinner.” Then, as an afterthought, he added, “You’re okay to do
that, right? It’s not gonna, you know, hurt the baby?”

“Not as long as Fred keeps the bludgers away from me,” she said with a grin, and they quickly rounded up Harry, Ron, and the twins.

“Must be nice to have brothers,” Hermione mused as she stood in the kitchen, watching the pickup game through the window over the sink.

“It is,” Molly said in a soft voice.

At dinner, Charlie suggested that they take a trip to Diagon Alley for some last-minute Christmas shopping. “And anyway, I haven’t been there in years. I’m starting to miss the old place.” This plan was agreed upon by all, so the next morning, they piled into the floo.

Diagon Alley was a happy bustle of activity. Not even the empty, broken windows of Olivander’s, Florean Fortescue’s, and a handful of other shops could dampen the Christmas spirit that permeated the neighborhood. The Death Eaters really had been strangely quiet of late, or seemed to be. Hermione knew that Voldemort was just focusing on some other, less explosive plot, and lulling the populace into a false sense of security was probably part of that. Still, it was nice to be able to enjoy a day out with her friends—not that any of them really let their guard down for a second.

“Stay together, now,” Molly commanded. “No splitting up like before.”

“See you guys back at the Burrow!” called Fred as he ran into the crowd.

“We’ve got to make sure our employees haven’t blown up the shop yet,” said George, following his brother.

Molly blustered and looked like she wanted to go after them, but Arthur put a hand on her shoulder. “They’ll be fine, Molly. They know how to take care of themselves, and they do have a store to run.”

Molly just fretted futilely for a moment, then turned to address the others. “All right, where would you like to go first?”

#

By noon, Hermione was exhausted. She’d found presents for everyone and even managed to slip them by her escorts quickly enough that they didn’t see what she’d got. She was tired, and most of the others still weren’t done with their shopping. It took a five-minute discussion to convince Molly to let her go rest and grab a snack, and then only if Charlie (the only other one who was finished with his shopping by that point) went with her. Not that she minded all that much; it was just that she didn’t know Charlie very well and they didn’t have much in common, so she didn’t know what they’d talk about.

“So, they made you get married too, huh?” Charlie said as they walked, apropos of nothing.

Wrongfooted, Hermione stuttered, “Y-yes.”


He was quiet for several more seconds, so Hermione asked, “Don’t you want to know who it is?”

“Does it matter? You were forced into a marriage you didn’t want. If it was me, I’d have tossed the
Hermione sighed. “It’s complicated.”

“Well, if you change your mind and want some help, you know where to find me.” He grinned. “And my dragons.”

They had arrived at a café called Bubble, Bubble. As Charlie held the door for her and she went in, she searched for a proper response. Hermione didn’t know what to say, but she was certain of one thing: she was deeply fond of the Weasleys. When even the one who knew her least would make such an offer . . .

“Tonks!”

Charlie’s surprised voice startled her out of her thoughts. He followed her inside quickly, making his way to the bar. Tonks was sitting alone, hair as mousey as ever, finishing a sandwich. She looked over and gave a fair imitation of a smile.

“Wotcher, Charlie,” she said, then she noticed Hermione behind him. “Wotcher, Hermione.”

Hermione looked between them, confused. “You two know each other?”

Charlie laughed. “We went to school together. Tonks was my first, last, and only girlfriend.”

Tonks rolled her eyes. “We dated for a month in second year. Apparently I ruined him for other women. Quidditch was his mistress after that, though I hear now it’s dragons. One does wonder about his proclivities.”

“Says the girl who married the wolfman.”

Tonks got very quiet and stared at the table, any semblance of cheerfulness erased.

“Oh, bugger,” muttered Charlie. “I stepped on something, didn’t I? I’m sorry, Tonks, I didn’t mean . . . What’s wrong?”

Tonks didn’t respond, so Hermione pulled Charlie aside and whispered, “Didn’t you hear about Hagrid?”

“Of course, but—” He cringed. “Bollocks.”

“Remus left her after that.”

“Bollocks,” he said again. He sat down in the booth next to Tonks, and Hermione sat across from them. There was a moment of awkward silence before he asked, “How are your parents?”

“Nothing to complain about,” she said, and the corner of her mouth turned up slightly. “They haven’t mentioned you lately, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

“They’re good people, your parents. Tell them hello for me next time you see them, will you?”

Tonks nodded. “It probably won’t be until after New Year’s. They’re visiting my dad’s grandmother in South Africa for the holidays. She’s not doing well, so it may be their last chance to spend time with her. I would have gone, but I got scheduled to work Christmas Eve at the last minute.”
“Kingsley scheduled you to work, after everything . . . ?” Hermione couldn’t believe Kingsley would do such a thing, knowing what Tonks was going through, unless it was absolutely critical—and Hermione figured, now that she was part of the Order, she’d hear if something dire were about to happen.

“Wasn’t Kingsley,” Tonks said, then looked suddenly guilty, like she’d said something she shouldn’t have. Hermione didn’t press.

“Then it’s settled,” Charlie declared, draping an arm over Tonks’s shoulders. “You’ll come to the Burrow for Christmas.”

“Charlie, I can’t—”

“Sure, you can. The more, the merrier. No one should be alone at Christmas, Tonks.”

“I’ll only bring everyone down.”

“I’m sure Fred and George can more than make up for whatever doom and gloom you bring with you.”

“Are you sure Molly won’t mind?”

“Mrs. Weasley loves you,” Hermione said. “We all do. Please come.”

Tonks relented.

#

The next day at breakfast, a strange owl arrived with a letter, which it obligingly dropped into Hermione’s porridge.

_Miss Granger,_

_Your next appointment with Healer Partridge has been scheduled for this Saturday, December the twenty-seventh, at ten o’clock. We look forward to seeing you._

_L. Watson_

_Scheduling_

_St. Mungo’s_

Hermione stuffed the paper into her robes and excused herself.

She’d nearly forgotten about the next transfer, but obviously the bastards at St. Mungo’s hadn’t. And as far as she knew, Dumbledore didn’t have the next surrogate lined up yet. Given the condition Dumbledore was in last she saw him, and the fact that he hadn’t shown himself for any reason, not even Hagrid’s funeral, she shouldn’t have been surprised.

There was a knock. “Hermione? Are you all right?” Ron had followed her to her room.

“I’m fine,” she lied through the door.
“What was in that letter?” he asked. “Was it a threat? If someone’s threatening you, I’ll—”

“It wasn’t a threat, Ron.”

“Then what was it?”

*A promise.* “A letter,” she said, trying to slow down her racing heart. “From St. Mungo’s. I’ve got an appointment on Saturday.”

“It’s not serious, is it?”

*Deadly,* she wanted to say, but instead said, “Just routine,” which was all the worse for being true.

“Okay,” he said, sounding uncertain, then she heard his footsteps going back down the hall.

*Ron, wait!* Fling the door open, catch him in the hall . . . *It’s horrible, Ron! They want to take my baby! I’m pregnant, and they want to take my baby from me! They’ve already stolen three and they want to take this one and who knows how many more and I think Voldemort wants them for some evil purpose and Severus isn’t helping me at all and—*

No.

It was no use fantasizing about such things.

Ron and Harry wouldn’t be able to change Dumbledore’s mind, not when Lupin, Tonks, and McGonagall had all gone along with the Headmaster. And she couldn’t run off with Ron to save herself and her baby—for oh so many reasons, but foremost was that she couldn’t leave her other three children if there was a chance they would be returned to her if all went well.

No, she was committed to Dumbledore’s plan now. She had to see it through to the end, whatever that was.

#

By breakfast on Tuesday, Hermione had managed to convince everyone that it was just a routine checkup due to the potions she was being given for fertility (at which point most of the men at the table promptly found something else to talk about—some of them turning pink, though from anger or embarrassment, she couldn’t tell), though there was something odd in the looks that Molly and Arthur gave her, and when she topped her waffles with gravy and bacon, neither of them said a word.

None of them were expecting the owl that barged its way through the window and dropped a letter in front of Hermione. And they certainly weren’t expecting the second owl which followed moments later with a missive of its own.

Both owls stole pieces of meat from the table and flew away. Hermione opened the first letter.

*Miss Granger,*

*Your appointment has been rescheduled to January the tenth. We’re sorry for the inconvenience.*

*L. Watson*

*Scheduling*
Hermione felt a faint flush of relief. *Two more weeks. Maybe . . .* But she hardly let herself hope. Instead, she opened the second letter.

---

**Hermione,**

*I’m very sorry to disturb your holiday, but it came to my attention that my office had scheduled your next transfer for a mere two days after Christmas. I know how important the holidays are, especially to someone in a stressful time of their life. I have asked them to reschedule to a less intrusive time. Another week or two won’t hurt anything. You should be getting a letter from Scheduling if you haven’t yet.*

*Have a happy Christmas.*

*Healer E. Partridge*

*St. Mungo’s*

---

Hermione stared at the parchment, blinking.

“*My appointment’s been rescheduled to after New Year’s,*” she told the others at the table, her tone flat as she tried to process what Partridge meant by it. He seemed to think he was doing her a kindness, and on a certain level, he was—but he was still going to take her unborn child from her because the Ministry told him to, and seemed to see no offense in that.

Partridge was one strange fellow.

#

Christmas Eve day was marked by a five-hour Quidditch match pitting Harry, Ron, and Fred against Charlie, George, and Ginny. Molly tried to get Ginny to sit it out, but Ginny insisted that she wasn’t far enough along for it to be any danger to the baby and that the exercise would be good for both her and it. The truth of this was questionable, but Ginny had been cooped up in a house for months, so there wasn’t much arguing with her on this point. The game was heated, with Harry’s team a mere twenty points ahead when Charlie finally caught the snitch. He and Harry had flown so far chasing it that by the time they came back, they’d stopped to say hello to Luna and invite her and her father for lunch the next day.

Bill and Fleur arrived just as the game was wrapping up, Bill having had to help close up Gringotts for Christmas (many of the goblins would still come in, of course, but only to make sure everything remained secure while the humans were off).

Tonks arrived at dusk, weary from her shift but summoning a smile for all of them. They took her in like a sister, doing what they could to help her forget her troubles, at least for a time. Fred and George even got a laugh out of her with one of their products, a false flower which gave anyone who sniffed it a pig snout for an hour. Ron was less pleased.

Hermione sat next to Molly at dinner, and during the meal caught her looking around at everyone
with a smile and wet eyes.

When she caught Hermione looking, Molly said softly to her, “It’s just so good to have my family home again, and more besides. You’ll know one day, dear, how wonderful it is to have them close. It’s . . . almost perfect.” Molly’s smile fell, and she glanced at the Weasley clock, where every hand pointed to ‘home’ except Percy’s.

Hermione hoped Molly was right.

#

That night, Hermione dreamed of Christmas . . . Snape in a Weasley jumper with a dark-haired boy on each knee, reading to them from Dickens . . . five children playing in front of the fire: two with brown hair, two with red, and one with a ponytail of violent pink . . . sitting with Ron and Harry, helping them plan their schedules around their Auror training . . .

She was awoken by a loud, insistent knocking coming from downstairs. A stuffed stocking fell on the floor as she got up to look outside. It was barely twilight. Who would possibly be visiting so early on Christmas morning?

She opened the bedroom door, then looked back. For a moment, she thought of seeing if Ginny wanted to go with her, but Ginny merely grumbled at the noise, turned over, and pulled the blanket over her head.

Others were coming out of their rooms, as well. Arthur was going down the stairs, his wand drawn, with Molly behind him. Tonks was with them, her wand also in her hand. Clearly there was always the potential for danger, but Hermione didn’t think a Death Eater would come at this hour, or have the courtesy to knock.

Bill and Charlie passed by her door, and Hermione followed them down the stairs. She heard voices coming from the front room, but she couldn’t make them out. It must have been a friend, though, as when Hermione could finally see the front door, Arthur was opening it, his wand already put away.

A man stood on their doorstep, thin and pale and wearing very familiar black robes.

There was half a second of stunned silence, and then Tonks flung herself at the man, nearly knocking him over with alternating kisses and slaps, babbling an incoherent string of half-formed invectives.

After a few moments, the slaps and rebukes stopped and she snogged him so thoroughly that Fred started making catcalls from the sofa area.

“Fred!” Molly scolded, but she was smiling. She put her hand on Tonks’s arm. “All right dear, let him in. It’s too cold out there to leave him standing on the doorstep like a beggar.”

Tonks withdrew from her husband enough to let him breathe and pulled him through the doorway into the house. At some point in the last minute, her hair had changed to the most brilliant pink Hermione had ever seen.

By now, nearly everyone else was either already in the living room or coming down the stairs. At once, Lupin was descended upon by most of the Weasley clan. Hermione ran forward to hug him and tell him how glad she was to see him (resisting the urge to ask him why he was wearing what were obviously Snape’s robes). She was nearly crushed by Molly hugging him as well, and other people bombarding him with greetings and other words too muddled to make out.
When Lupin was finally able to break away from the crush of gingers, he took Tonks’s hands in his and looked at her desperately. The room fell silent.

“I’m a very bad man, Dora.” She started to protest, but he put a finger to her lips. “I am. All the more so because of how I hurt you. I honestly thought you’d be better off without me. Truthfully, I still do. But it was wrong of me to make that decision myself. I gave up my right to walk away when I married you.” She tried to speak again, but he wouldn’t let her. “I never stopped loving you. Not for an instant. After . . . what happened . . . I didn’t believe that you—that anyone—could love me, not really, not knowing what I am. But I came here hoping . . . hoping and fearing that you can—that you, my good and pure and precious Dora, might still somehow love a weak, dangerous man who’s a monster one night a month and a coward all the rest. Tell me to leave now and I will; I’ll leave and never bother you again. Or tell me to stay, and I’ll spend my life at your side, trying in vain to make up for what I’ve done . . . for what I am.”

He moved his finger away from her lips so she could speak.

“You really are dense, aren’t you?”

Lupin looked confused, and his eyes lowered as if his heart was sinking.

“What do you think that was out there?” She jerked her chin toward the door. “A ‘bugger off’ kiss?”

He looked up hopefully. “Then . . .”

“I forgive you.”

He winced. “I couldn’t ask—”

“I forgive you,” she repeated. “And I love you. You’re a good man, Remus. You are. And even if you are a weak, cowardly, dangerous monster, you’re my weak, cowardly, dangerous monster. And you’re also a kind, patient man, a faithful friend, a generous lover, and you’re going to make a wonderful father.”

He still didn’t look entirely convinced. “Say it.”

“Stay.”

Lupin wrapped his arms around her, engulfing her in Snape’s robes, and kissed her with more passion than Hermione knew he had in him.

The twins, Charlie, Bill, and Fleur cheered, Molly and Arthur beamed, and Ron and Harry looked a bit embarrassed about witnessing such a display from their former teacher. Hermione could understand the feeling, but she didn’t share it. She cheered along with the others, grateful that while so much of the world was falling apart, this one piece found a way to put itself back together.

When the kiss didn’t wane but intensified until it looked like Tonks wanted to strip Lupin naked and give him a proper welcome right there in front of everybody, Arthur cleared his throat loudly, and they broke the kiss, both blushing scarlet, evidently having forgotten they had an audience.

“We’re glad you’re back, Remus,” Arthur told him. “We all thought we’d really lost you there. But, if I may, not to be indelicate—”

“What made you come to your senses?” George said, proving that his talent for finishing sentences was not limited to Fred.
Lupin suddenly looked around like he’d misplaced something, then said, “Someone came and got me.”

“We tried to come and get you,” said Fred, sounding a bit insulted. “You told us to bugger off.”

“So did we,” said Arthur, “and Minerva, and Alastor, and—”

Lupin cleared his throat. “Yes, well.” Tonks was looking at him like this was all news to her, which it undoubtedly was. It was news to Hermione, as well, and she wondered if she’d still have made her own attempt if she’d known of the effort that had already been made. “Someone else.”

“Who?” Harry asked.

“Yes,” said George. “What master of persuasion succeeded where so many others failed?”

“See for yourself,” said Lupin. “I believe he’s still outside.”

Hermione moved with the others to the doorway, but she already knew what they’d find. Standing on the front lawn, only barely visible in the growing light, was Snape.
“Severus?” said Arthur, stepping out the door. Snape didn’t move as the group cautiously came toward him. “Is that you?”

“Of course it is,” Snape snapped, and his eyes locked with Hermione’s for only a moment.

“You brought Remus back?” Harry cried. “But—but you hate him!”

“I think, Harry, that is why he was the only one able to get through to me.”

“Are you sure that’s really Snape?” asked Ron suspiciously.

Lupin chuckled. “Quite sure, Ron.”

Arthur marched out to Snape and grasped his hand firmly. “Thank you, Severus. You’re a good man.” Then, in a softer voice, he added, “I’m sorry for the way Molly and I reacted earlier.”

Snape nodded, drawing his hand back. “As you should be.”

Molly bustled forward, grabbing both her husband and Snape by the arm and dragging them toward the house. “Enough standing around in the cold—everyone inside. I won’t have you turning into icicles when there’s a perfectly good house right here.” As Hermione tried not to laugh at the sight of Snape being manhandled by Molly Weasley, she became acutely aware that it was indeed below freezing outside and she was only wearing her night clothes. “Severus, I insist you stay for breakfast,” Molly was saying as she shooed everyone inside. “No, don’t sneer at me, young man! I won’t have any argument about it!”

With an accusing glare at Hermione, as if she had personally sicced Molly on him, Snape was dragged into the Burrow.

As soon as she was inside, Molly charged into the kitchen, ordering the twins and Ron to help her (Hermione suspected this was to keep the inappropriate comments about Snape to a minimum).

Hermione was still feeling slightly dazed about everything that had happened in the last few minutes. Snape was here, and he’d gone to talk sense into Lupin. More surprisingly, it had worked. It was all Hermione could do to keep from blurting out the dozens of questions that flew through her head, one after the other.

Arthur had moved to light a fire in the fireplace, and Snape was standing uncomfortably before Tonks and Lupin. Tonks, who was clutching Lupin’s arm, her fingers twined with his, seemed to be fighting some sort of internal struggle.

“Snape, you’re a nasty git,” Tonks said.

“A curious gratitude you have, Miss Tonks,” Snape sneered.

“It’s Mrs. Lupin,” Tonks said, glaring, “and hear me out. You were mean to me every chance you got when I was in school, you outted Remus as a werewolf, and you laughed when you heard Sirius died.”

Snape raised his eyebrows at her, not denying any of it.
Tonks shored herself up, as if what she was going to say next was quite difficult. “But, you brought my husband back to me. I don’t know the details, but it seems you got through to him when no one else could—not even me. So, I reckon that makes you my friend now, like it or not.” Before Snape could get away, she threw her arms around him in a hug. Snape looked too stunned and mortified to fight back, and she had his arms trapped anyway. Just as he regained his senses enough to try to get away from her, she released him and stood back, wrapping her arm casually around Lupin’s waist.

Snape sputtered, full of indignation. “I—am not—”

Lupin laughed. “There’s no use, mate. Once a Hufflepuff’s claimed you, there’s no getting rid of her. Believe me.” Tonks slapped him on the chest in mock affront.

Snape glared at Lupin, whose laughter died to a contented smile. Others in the room were still laughing, though Hermione wasn’t paying enough attention to know who it was. She was desperately hoping Snape wouldn’t simply storm out.

Arthur, apparently sensing this possibility, said loudly, “Boys, why don’t you go collect everyone’s presents and bring them down. I don’t imagine any of us stopped to open them yet.”

Harry, still looking confused at the whole thing, followed Charlie, Bill, and Fleur up the stairs. Ginny rolled her eyes and trailed after him.

“I’d better get cleaned up and find something to wear,” Lupin said to the room at large. “I imagine Severus will want his robes back.”

“After you’ve worn them?” Snape sneered, but Lupin just shook his head indulgently.

“Let’s find something for you, Remus,” Arthur said and, with a significant look at Hermione, led Tonks and Lupin up the stairs.

Though she could still hear a great deal of movement and voices from the other areas of the house, the silence between Hermione and Severus—now the only ones in the room—felt palpable.

Before anyone else could walk in and see them, Hermione went to Snape and hugged him tightly, slipping her arms under his, around his waist. His body was chilled, thin, and stiff; it was like hugging a statue. He didn’t return the hug, but neither did he pull away.

“Thank you,” she said softly.

He cleared his throat. “I hope you appreciate it. I’m not getting you anything else.”

Confused, Hermione released him and looked into his eyes. “You mean . . . this was my Christmas present?”

“You returned an old, battered book of mine. I thought it only fair to return something old and battered of yours to you.” There was no humor whatsoever in his face when he said this.

“You brought Remus back . . . for me?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Surely you didn’t believe I did it for Tonks—or, heaven forbid, for Lupin himself?”

Hermione shook her head, part of her disappointed that he hadn’t simply done it out of the goodness of his heart, and part of her flattered and appreciative that he’d gone to such lengths for her when she’d thought he didn’t care about her at all. She decided to dwell on the latter. “Then
thank you for my friend. Though I think you may have a hard time getting rid of either of them now anyway."

Snape scowled, looking in the direction Tonks and Lupin had gone. “Admittedly, an unforeseen and unfortunate consequence.”

“Only you would call friendship an ‘unfortunate consequence’, Severus.”

Snape’s scowl deepened, and he gave a noncommittal hum.

“I’m sorry for getting so angry,” Hermione blurted. “The other night. You were right; it was too dangerous.”

“I’m glad you recognize that now.”

She peered at him. “You had no intention then of going to find Remus, did you? You would have just left him out there if I hadn’t had Dobby give you that book.”

Snape met her gaze steadily. “Do my past intentions matter?”

“Oh course!” She caught herself, then added, “But your actions matter more.”

“Then why ask?”

“I suppose . . . I just want to know you better. You surprise me, Severus. Sometimes you’re horrible, then other times it seems like there’s a genuine, caring man under there. I’m just trying to get a handle on how much of what I see is the spy and how much of it is the real man.”

“They are the same, Miss Granger,” Snape said coldly.

“I don’t believe that.”

“Unfortunate, as it’s unlikely you’ll have the time to find out for yourself one way or the other.”

The finality of his tone made her blood chill. Again, he seemed to be implying that one or both of them would not live much longer.

“Stop being so pessimistic!” she snapped. “The war’s not over yet! You can’t know—”

“Presents coming through!” called Bill, leading a caravan of Weasleys down the stairs, all carrying or Levitating presents and stockings in front of them. Bill winked at Hermione with his good eye as she stepped away from her husband, and she wondered just how many of them knew about her and Snape now.

In a matter of seconds, the room was once again filled with people. The present-fetchers all crowded the clearest corner they could find, dumping presents and trying to arrange stockings. Arthur, on their heels, immediately started trying to direct them. Tonks came down followed by Lupin, who had cleaned up and was wearing a pair of leather trousers and a brown jumper with a full moon on it. It pleased Hermione to see that Molly must have made one for him, just in case, though she thought the picture was a little ill-advised. Lupin handed the folded black robes to Snape, who took them (despite his earlier remark), though held them at arms’ length as if they’d been disgustingly soiled.

Hermione fought a laugh at Lupin’s outfit. “Nice trousers,” she said.

He smoothed them self-consciously. “Bill’s,” he said. “They claimed it was all they had available
in my size."

“Not that I’m complaining.” Tonks said with a wink.

The noise brought Fred and George from the kitchen. They joined the general chaos without actually contributing to the organizing effort. Hermione watched as George snuck small mystery packages into some of the stockings, when suddenly Fred yelled, “Oi! Mum! Snape’s trying to escape!”

Snape, who was already half out the door, glared at Fred, then stood straighter as Molly came into the room carrying a box wrapped in brown paper.

“Thank you for allowing me to warm up,” Snape said crisply, “but I can’t intrude on your hospitality any longer.” He got the words right, but he couldn’t seem to wipe the faint disgust from his tone.

Molly put one hand on her hip and shoved the box at him with the other. “Thought as much. At least take this. I won’t have it be said that anyone left my house hungry on Christmas, especially not after . . . Well, just have this.”

Snape took the package with a nod, met Hermione’s eyes for a moment, then was out the door in a flurry of black robes.

#

“Come on, Remus, you can’t leave us in suspense forever,” Fred said across the table. He was sporting a blue jumper with an orange F.

“I’m sure we can make it worth your while,” added George (in a green jumper with a red G).

Tonks (in a rainbow striped jumper) shook her head. “It’s no use. If he’s not telling me what Snape said to him, he sure isn’t telling you.”

Lupin grinned and continued eating.

Breakfast was a cheerful, raucous affair, and Hermione was enjoying herself immensely. The food was delicious, and the company was good. No more could have been asked for. So why did Hermione still feel as if something was missing?

As she looked around, she occasionally spotted others having similar thoughts. Molly glanced at the window more than once, as if hoping for an owl. Hermione knew Percy’s continued absence was not easy on her. And as happy as she was to have her two best friends with her at Christmas, Hermione felt a twinge every time she thought about the fact that this was her first Christmas without so much as hearing from her parents. Part of her wished that Snape had stayed, though she knew it would never have happened. She thought he could have used a bit of holiday cheer. But as she looked around the crowded Burrow, the knowledge that she had a family made her feel slightly less bad that she didn’t have her family.

“I still don’t get it,” Harry muttered as they exited the dining room and found an empty corner in the living room. “Not that I’m not glad Remus is back, of course, but why would Snape do it?”

Ron grumbled something rude which Hermione chose not to hear.

“Maybe he’s not as bad as you think he is, Harry,” Hermione said. She couldn’t very well tell him the reason she knew Snape did it, but her point still stood. “After all, you know Kreacher isn’t as
bad as you thought he was at first. And you know Sirius’s brother wasn’t really what everyone thought he was.”

Harry stared at his lap. “I suppose you’re right. I’d like to really believe I can trust Snape, but it’s hard when we just don’t know why he does anything. He hates me, but he’s saved my life more than once. It just doesn’t make any sense.”

It made sense to Hermione. She could ease her friend’s mind so simply. But it was Snape’s secret.

Then again, it was Harry’s mum, and Harry’s life that was being put in danger more than any other. She seriously doubted Snape would ever tell Harry himself. Didn’t Harry deserve to know?

“Ron, could you get me a butterbeer, please?” Hermione asked pleasantly.

Ron looked for a moment like he would ask why she wasn’t getting it herself, then said, “Sure,” and headed for the kitchen.

Hermione leaned close to Harry. “Promise you won’t tell anyone, Harry.”

“Tell them what?” Harry whispered back, surprised.

“Anyone. Not even Ron or Ginny.”

Harry looked at her suspiciously. “What’s this about, Hermione?”

“Professor Snape,” she hissed. “Promise.”

Harry nodded slowly. “All right. I promise.”

“The photograph of your mother I gave you.” She spoke so quickly that her words began to run together. “I got it from Professor Snape. He knew her as a child.”

“I know that, Hermione,” Harry said calmly. “They were at school together, same year as my dad.”

“No, I mean even before that.” She looked around, but no one seemed to be near enough to overhear. “He loved her. I mean, really loved her. No, don’t pull that face—I know how it sounds, but he did. I think that’s why he’s been protecting you all this time. He hates you for your father, but he protects you for your mother.”

“Hermione, that’s just crazy! Snape and my mum? What makes you think that?”

“I can’t tell you, but trust me. Oh, Harry, you can’t tell anyone what I said! But I thought you at least should know.”

Harry pursed his lips. Hermione knew that look. She had a good idea what Harry was thinking. He didn’t want to believe it, but if it was true it would make certain things easier to understand.

“Fine,” he said after several long seconds. “I promised I wouldn’t tell anyone, and I won’t. But I do need to ask one thing.” Before she could respond, he called, “Remus! Do you have a minute?”

“Harry!” Hermione hissed, but it was too late. Lupin was making his way in from the kitchen.

“What can I help you with, Harry?” he asked.

“You knew my mum in school. Did she ever hang around with Snape?”
Lupin’s eyebrows came together, and he looked at Hermione who, not knowing exactly how much about Lily and Snape Lupin knew, couldn’t give him any answers for the questions that were evident on his face.

“What makes you ask that, Harry?” Lupin asked slowly.

Harry shrugged. “I just realized I’d never really thought about it before, and I wondered if you knew.”

Lupin apparently decided there was no secret meaning behind the question, as he said, “Actually, they were together a lot in our earlier years at school. As much as people from two different Houses could be. I think it was part of the reason James hated Severus so much. He accused Severus of stalking Lily, but that would have been like saying Peter stalked James and Sirius.”

Harry’s lip was curling—unconsciously, Hermione thought. “Snape had a crush on my mum?”

Lupin seemed to consider his response, then said carefully, “They appeared to be very fond of each other, at least until O.W.L.s. We never saw them together much after that.”

“That’s when he called her that name,” Harry muttered to himself.

Lupin looked from Harry to Hermione and back, his eyes sharp and searching. “Was that all, Harry?”

“Yes—no, wait! Remus, do you think . . . Could that have something to do with why Snape has helped protect me, even though he hates me?”

Lupin considered him again, then said, “As you know, Harry, you have your mother’s eyes. Do you think Severus is blind to that resemblance?”

“But, if he—”

“Sorry, Harry,” Lupin interrupted, his eyes on Hermione, “but I’d better get back to my wife. She looked a tad on edge when I left the room . . . not without reason.”

Not waiting for a response, Lupin headed back to the kitchen, where Tonks was already peering around the corner at him.

He knows, thought Hermione. She’d been so sure Snape wouldn’t have told anyone, but she could tell that, somehow, Lupin knew how Snape really felt about Lily. That’s what Severus said to get Remus to come back. He told him about Lily. But what did that have to do with Lupin’s situation? She shook her head, trying to clear it of thoughts that weren’t her business. After all, she had plenty of other things to worry about.

Ron arrived the next moment and handed Hermione a butterbeer. She looked at it and wondered if it would be safe to drink. Butterbeer wasn’t strong enough to affect even teenage humans, but if it was strong enough to get a house-elf drunk, perhaps it was best not to drink it while pregnant.

“Thanks, Ron, but I don’t think I’m thirsty anymore,” she said, handing it back to him.

After a flicker of annoyance crossed his face, he opened it and started drinking it himself. “So, Harry, what have you been up to while we were stuck in school?”

Harry roused himself from his thoughts and looked momentarily like he might tell Ron about Snape anyway, then said, “I’ve been working with Dumbledore. We’ve been trying to figure out
what the other Horcruxes are. I think we’ve got some pretty good leads on them.”

“How is he?” Hermione asked.

Harry frowned. “Not good. Really not good. His face is . . . it’s terrible. A lot of times it’s hard to understand him. His words are slurred because his mouth is going all withered. It’s . . . it’s quite terrifying, actually. I think he’s been focusing so much on helping me because he doesn’t think he’ll be around much longer.”

“Bollox,” Ron stated firmly. “He’s Dumbledore. He’ll find a way to get better, you’ll see.”

“Yeah,” said Harry hopelessly. “Maybe.”

“What do you think the other Horcruxes are, Harry?” Hermione asked, as she didn’t have any honest optimism about Dumbledore’s condition to offer.

Harry glanced around again, just to make sure they were still alone, and said quietly, “Well, Dumbledore figures Hufflepuff’s cup is one, like I mentioned. He managed to track it down somehow. Apparently it’s being kept in the Lestrange’s vault in Gringotts.”

“But that means you’d have to break into Gringotts to get it!” Ron hissed, as if this was a logical reason why it couldn’t be there. “No one can break into Gringotts.”

“Not no one, Ron,” Hermione corrected. “Remember first year, someone broke in trying to get the Philosopher’s Stone.”

“But that was Quirrell and You-Know-Who.”

“That doesn’t mean we can’t manage it.”

“Sure, if we don’t mind using Unforgivables on the guards,” Ron protested.

“It’s the best we’ve got,” Harry broke in. “Figuring out what and where the Horcruxes are is the hard part. Dumbledore sounded pretty sure that the cup was one. Now that we know that, we can work on figuring out how to get the cup out of Gringotts and destroy it.”

“You’re right, Harry,” Hermione said. “That’s brilliant news. Now that we’ve got the information, we can work on a plan . . . . Do you have a plan?”

Harry slumped in his chair. “Not yet. You don’t have any ideas, do you?”

Hermione shook her head. “But I’ll think about it. We’ll come up with something. Have you figured out where the locket is yet?”

“No,” Harry said miserably.

“What about the other Horcruxes?” asked Hermione. “That only leaves two more, right?”

“Well, we’ve got something of Slytherin’s and something of Hufflepuff’s. We’re still thinking odds are one of the Horcruxes is something of Ravenclaw’s, but we can’t think of what,” Harry explained.

“It’s better than nothing,” said Hermione. “Any clues about the last one? You don’t think he’d have used something of Gryffindor’s, do you?”

He shook his head. “Good news and bad news,” Harry said. “The good news is Dumbledore’s got a
fair idea about one of them. The bad news is what that idea means.”

“What does it mean?” asked Ron.

“Dumbledore thinks Voldemort’s snake is a Horcrux.”

“His snake?” Hermione asked. “Is it even possible to make a living creature into a Horcrux?”

“Dumbledore isn’t completely certain, but he suspects it may be. He isn’t telling me why he suspects that, of course, but he seems pretty confident about it.”

Ron’s mouth was hanging open. “But doesn’t You-Know-Who keep his snake with him most of the time? And it’s not a fluffy bunny. That bloody thing almost killed Dad!”

“Yes, Ron, thank you for pointing out, once again, why Harry’s job is difficult!” Hermione snapped at him. “Can’t you say anything helpful?”

Ron and Harry both looked at her as if she’d gone a bit mad. “Are you all right, Hermione?” Harry asked carefully.

Hermione nodded, blushing. “Sorry, Ron. It’s just . . . I think we’re all under a lot of stress right now.”

“S’all right,” Ron mumbled. “You’re right, I don’t really have anything helpful to say. I just wish I knew some easy spell to make this all go away, you know?”

“Yeah, Ron,” admitted Hermione. “I do know.”

When Luna arrived with her father for lunch, Harry and most of the Weasleys were in the middle of another game of pick-up Quidditch. Molly called them all to get cleaned up, and while they were doing so, Hermione had the dubious pleasure of meeting Luna’s father.

Xenophilius Lovegood was an odd wizard if ever Hermione had seen one (and she had seen a few). He wore robes of pea green with pink trim, his white hair was long and stringy, and his expression was nearly as moon-eyed as his daughter’s.

“Pleased to finally meet you, my dear,” said Mr. Lovegood, shaking Hermione’s hand. The movement brought Hermione’s eyes to a small pendant at his neck. She recognized it immediately: the sign of the Deathly Hallows. “Ever since that article you convinced Rita Skeeter to write for us two years ago, the Quibbler’s readership has been higher than ever. Even with precious little information about You-Know-Who, I feel we’ve still done a lot of good. Why, the number of people we’ve reached with the Nargle exposé alone brings a warm swell to my chest. And how goes the Quest?”

“Er . . .”

“The Hallows, Miss Granger!” he prodded. “My Luna’s told me about your interest in them. I trust the information I sent her at school proved useful?”

“Oh, yes,” Hermione blurted. In truth, she hadn’t had much time to think about the Hallows lately. “It was very informative. I do appreciate it, Mr. Lovegood.”

But Mr. Lovegood wasn’t listening anymore. He’d spotted Harry coming down the stairs.
“The man himself!” Mr. Lovegood cried, going to Harry and grasping his hand tightly.

Hermione had seen this sort of thing enough times that listening to their conversation didn’t interest her. Instead, she turned to Luna. “How has your holiday been?”

“Lovely,” said Luna. “I’m very pleased to have been invited. We haven’t been before, you know.”

“Really?” Hermione asked. “You live so close, I’d assumed you would have visited here before.” She glanced at Molly, who was watching Mr. Lovegood’s eager interrogation of Harry with displeasure. *Then again, maybe Mr. Lovegood’s just not the Weasleys’ sort of person.*

“Charming house you have, Ron,” Luna said as Ron joined them.

“Er . . . thanks, Luna,” he replied awkwardly.

“Will you come visit my home after lunch?” she asked. “You and Harry, as well, of course,” she said to Hermione. “You don’t have to, but I think it would be nice.”

“Of course,” said Hermione, without bothering to consult with the two boys.

“Good,” Luna said. “I can’t wait to show you all what Daddy and I have been working on.”

What the Lovegoods had been working on, Hermione discovered a few hours later, was beyond her ability to describe.

In the midst of the small and extremely cluttered circular dwelling the Lovegoods called home, sitting on a small table wedged between a printing press and a stack of blank parchment, was a mannequin’s head. On top of that was such a strange conglomeration of bits and bobs, Hermione didn’t even know what to call it.

“Daddy’s making a diadem,” Luna explained. “He’s trying to recreate the lost diadem of Rowena Ravenclaw. I think he’s almost finished with it now.”

Hermione did a double-take. “The lost what of who?”

“Diadem of Ravenclaw,” Luna said.

Hermione looked at Harry and could tell he was thinking along the same lines she was. Ron just looked confused. Hermione was desperate to tell him, but she couldn’t very well talk about it with Luna standing there.

“Do you have a picture of the original?” Harry asked.

Luna picked up an ancient book from the same table the so-called diadem was sitting on. A page was marked, and Luna opened to it, showing them the picture. It was a very old drawing of Rowena Ravenclaw wearing a beautiful, dainty circlet. It looked nothing like the monstrosity Mr. Lovegood was creating. Harry’s mouth dropped open, and Hermione snatched the book from Luna’s hands for a closer look.

“If we were at Hogwarts, I could show you a better version,” Luna said. “There’s a statue of her wearing it in the Ravenclaw common room.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary,” Harry said, reaching over to run his fingers across the image.

There was no doubt at all in Hermione’s mind—she’d seen this diadem before. And if Harry had as well, she was certain she knew where to find it.
“You say this is lost?” Hermione asked.

Luna nodded. “For a millennium or so, supposedly. Do you want to see my room?”

“Er, sure, Luna,” said Harry, looking as anxious as Hermione to leave and discuss what they’d seen.

“What’s so special about that barmy headdress?” Ron hissed to Harry as Luna led them up a metal spiral staircase in the middle of the room.

“Later,” Harry hissed back.

Hermione reached the top of the stairs just after Luna. She wasn’t sure what they were meant to see up here at first. The room looked just as cluttered as the lower level, though there was more of an order to the clutter. Once they were all up the stairs, Luna leaned her head back, looking up at the ceiling peacefully. Hermione followed her gaze, and her breath caught.

The ceiling of Luna’s bedroom had been decorated in paintings—of them. Hermione saw one of herself directly above her, as well as ones of Ron and Harry. Neville and Ginny had also had their likenesses painted onto the smooth plaster. A golden chain was painted around the images, entwining them all. But it wasn’t a chain exactly; it was words: friends ... friends ... friends ...

“Luna, this is beautiful,” came Harry’s awed voice beside Hermione.

“It’s wonderful!” Hermione cried, tears filling her eyes.

“Did you paint this?” Ron asked, sounding a bit amazed himself.

“Yes,” Luna said, smiling serenely. “My mum taught me before she died. Do you like it?”

“It’s brilliant!” said Ron.

Harry just looked at Luna, then, quite suddenly, scooped her into a hug. She hesitated for a moment, as if uncertain he was really doing what she thought he was doing, then returned the hug.

“It’s nice having friends,” Luna said after Harry released her.

Hermione laughed, then hugged Luna herself. “I couldn’t agree more.”

#

On their way back to the Burrow, Harry and Hermione filled Ron in on their theory about Ravenclaw’s diadem.

Hermione practically bounced with excitement. “We needed something of Ravenclaw’s, and here’s the only thing we know for certain was hers!”

“But what good does that do us?” Ron asked. “Luna said it was lost.”

“Yes,” said Harry with a grin, “but I know where to find lost things.”

They made a plan to get back to Hogwarts as soon as they could, but before everyone got back from the holiday. It would be much easier to get through the castle undetected while most of the students were gone.

But getting away from everyone to make the trip wasn’t as easy as it sounded. After the way Molly
had acted about going to Diagon Alley, they felt certain she and some of the others wouldn’t allow
them to simply slip out for an unplanned excursion to an unknown location on an unknown
mission.

Their chance to slip away didn’t come until New Year’s Eve. Fred and George had brought a huge
load of fireworks home and planned to spend the afternoon getting them ready to set off once it got
dark. Hermione, Ron, and Harry volunteered to help them, and since they weren’t meant to go
farther than the reach of the protective spells around the Burrow, no one put up a fuss. As soon as
they were out of sight over a small hill, they bid Fred and George goodbye, then Disapparated.

When they arrived at the Hogwarts gates, Harry pulled out his wand, then stopped, looking
suddenly stricken.

“What’s wrong, Harry?” Hermione asked.

“I was about to call Hagrid to come open the gate for us,” he said softly. No one knew how to
respond to that.

“Why don’t you try McGonagall?” Ron suggested after a moment. “She’s in the Order. We should
be able to just tell her it’s a mission from Dumbledore and she’ll let us through, right?”

Harry shrugged, then said, “Expecto Patronum,” and sent the silver stag on its way.

They waited several minutes before they began to see anyone coming. It was snowing out, and
Hermione wished she’d thought to bring a heavier cloak. Finally, a figure approached.

“Twice in one week,” said a cold voice. “To what do I owe the pleasure, Mr. Potter?” Snape
stepped out of the snowy mists on the other side of the gate, looking just as prickly as ever.

“You have a nasty habit of answering other people’s Patronuses, Snape,” said Harry, his eyes
locked with Snape’s. “I hear the last time you did that caught up with you. You might want to
watch it in future.”

Snape glowered and looked between the three of them. “Professor McGonagall is engaged
elsewhere. You had better have a good reason for bringing me out here in this weather.”

“Please, Professor,” Hermione said. “We need to get inside the castle. It’s urgent.”

“You can get inside the castle when you arrive on the train with the other students, Miss Granger,”
Snape barked.

“I haven’t come here as a student,” Hermione said firmly. “I’ve come as an Order member.” She
saw Harry and Ron’s surprised looks and realized she hadn’t told them about that, but stayed
focused. “It’s about what Dumbledore has Harry doing.”

Snape’s expression changed instantly from casual annoyance to sharp suspicion. “And I suppose
you won’t tell me exactly what that is,” he said to Harry.

“Nope,” Harry said.

Snape looked between them again, his eyes narrowed, then he unlocked the gate and pulled it
open. “Be quick about it, then. And don’t let anyone see you who shouldn’t.”

Harry, Hermione, and Ron slipped through the gate without a word. Snape closed it firmly behind
them, gave them one last irritated look, and strode back into the snow, toward the castle.
“You’re an Order member?” Ron asked after Snape had got out of earshot and they’d begun walking toward the castle themselves.

“McGonagall made me one so I could hear what Remus had been doing in the forest,” Hermione said.

“You mean I’m the only one of us not officially in yet?” Ron protested.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Take it up with Dumbledore or McGonagall, Ron. I’m sure they just haven’t got around to it yet.”

“Are you sure—” Harry said, staring intently forward, but stopped himself with a glance at Ron. “Never mind,” he amended, his eyes flitting to Hermione, who gave him a warning look but took his hand in hers and gave a quick squeeze and the tiniest of nods.

When they reached the door to the main entrance, Harry pulled the Marauder’s Map from his bag and made sure no one was around. The coast was clear, so they slipped inside and made their way up the stairs. They only had to duck into an empty classroom or behind a statue a few times to avoid a passing teacher or ghost, but they made it to the Room of Requirement without being seen.

“It’s been here all along?” Ron asked as Harry walked back and forth in front of the blank wall. “Why haven’t we seen it before?”

“We have,” Hermione said. “At least, Harry and I have. You have to know the right room to make it turn into.”

The door appeared, and they went in. Ron’s eyes went wide at the sight. “Look at all this junk! Who’d want to keep this around?”

“It’s not junk, Ron,” Hermione said as they made their way through the mess. “Or it wasn’t when it was put here.”

“It’s a place to hide things,” Harry explained. “I first found it when I was trying to hide the Half-Blood Prince’s Potions book from Snape—” He cut off and shot a questioning look at Hermione.

Hermione, figuring there was no reason not to tell Ron this much, said, “And then I asked him to show it to me when I discovered the Half-Blood Prince is Snape.”

“Really?” Harry said. “Well, I suppose that explains some things.”

Ron’s jaw dropped. “What? But—”

“Yes, Ron, it’s all very shocking. Bear in mind that there’s no rule saying Slytherins have to be pure-bloods, and Professor Snape is very good at Potions, after all.”

Ron pondered this, then shrugged.

“Anyway,” Hermione said, “I thought, since it was his, we ought to give it back to him.”

“Doesn’t seem to have put him in a better mood, does it?” Ron observed.

“I’m not entirely sure about that, Ron,” said Harry, looking thoughtful. “When’s the last time he showed up at your house for a social call?”

Ron grimaced at the memory. “But what’s this got to do with Ravenclaw’s diadem?”
“I set it by the book to mark the place,” Harry said.

“We didn’t have any idea what it was, of course,” said Hermione, “but now that we do, we know right where to find it. See there?” She pointed at the diadem, which was still sitting exactly where she’d last seen it. Moving closer, she picked it up. “This is definitely the same one from the picture.”

She handed it to Harry, who went to put it into his bag, but hesitated, getting a closer look of his own.

“Harry?” said Hermione. “Are we positive this is a Horcrux? Because if we’re not, we could be destroying a priceless artifact for no reason.”

Harry’s face had a slightly pinched expression as he held the diadem. “It is. This may sound crazy, but I can . . . feel it.”

“After everything we’ve gone through, you think anything you say will sound crazy to us?” Ron said, taking the diadem from Harry and shoving it into the bag. “You’ve seen through a snake’s eyes. We passed ‘crazy’ years ago.”

Harry gave him a small smile and led them back out of the room.

“Harry,” Hermione said as she panted after him down the hallway, “how are we going to destroy it?”

“Yeah,” said Ron, his longer legs making it much easier for him to keep up. “We don’t know if a Killing Curse would work on a part of a soul, even if you could manage to use it.”

Harry looked at the map again and led them around another corner. “Dumbledore told me about a couple of ways to destroy a Horcrux. One was Fiendfyre.”

“Harry, that’s—”

“Way too dangerous even if I knew how to do it—yes, I know, Hermione. The other is with Gryffindor’s sword—which we don’t have. It’s locked away in Dumbledore’s office, which no one else can get into. So that just leaves one way to kill the Horcrux, the same way I did the last one: stab it with a basilisk fang.”

“Harry!” Hermione nearly stumbled. “You don’t mean we’re going to—”

“The Chamber of Secrets, yeah. Unless you’ve got a better idea?”

She didn’t, so she followed him until they reached Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom. Fortunately, Moaning Myrtle wasn’t present. Hermione didn’t think she’d care to get screamed at again any more than she’d care to watch a fifty-year-dead ghost flirt with her friend.

Harry approached the sink under which they knew lay the Chamber. Hermione hadn’t seen it the last time, but from what her friends had said of it, she didn’t particularly relish the thought of going down there.

When Harry spoke, it wasn’t in words, but in a horrible hissing sound that still set Hermione’s teeth on edge. But it worked; the sink moved aside, revealing the entrance to the Chamber. Harry stepped forward, preparing to jump in.

“Harry, wait!” Hermione said, grabbing his arm. “This may be silly, but we might as well try it
before going into that awful place.” She pointed her wand at the hole. “*Accio* basilisk fang!”

“Are you mental?” Ron shouted.

“Stand back!” Hermione pulled Ron out of the way just as Harry ducked into a cubicle.

A thundering rattle began to come from the tunnel, and Hermione knew her plan had worked. Except it was more an impulse than a plan, and she hoped it wouldn’t get them all killed.

The rattling grew louder and louder. Suddenly, a stampede of hard, bony objects flew through the opening and slammed into the ceiling of the bathroom. Hermione cast a Shield Charm around them, and Ron threw his arms around her, protecting her with his body. The fangs—one several inches long—rained down from the ceiling, some bouncing off the walls and sinks at odd angles. One glanced off the Shield Charm right beside Hermione’s head.

Moments later, the clattering and crashing had stopped. The floor was littered with fangs. She dropped the shield and pushed herself away from Ron.

“Harry! Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Hermione,” he said, coming out of the cubicle. “You could have warned us first, you know.” But there was a slight upturn to his lips.

Giving both the boys and herself a quick once-over to make sure no one had got hit, Hermione sighed and smiled sheepishly. “Sorry. Usually you’re the ones acting impulsively. I guess I just . . . had an idea and went with it.”

“Ron, could you watch the door?” Harry asked. “I don’t want anyone interrupting us.” As Ron went to the doorway, Harry pulled the diadem from his bag, then reached to the floor and picked up the nearest basilisk fang. He looked at them for a moment, then held them out. “Here, Hermione. I got the last one.”

“But, Harry, you’re the one—”

“We’re a team,” Harry said. “Without you two, I’d never have got this far.”

“Hey, what about me?” Ron asked cheekily.

“You can just wait your turn,” Harry told him, grinning.

Hermione took the diadem and fang gingerly, part of her feeling like either or both of them might strike her at any moment. The diadem was mostly thin, twining pieces of silver and gold, far too narrow to stab very effectively. “I’m not sure how . . .” she muttered, then noticed that the center of it had a piece of ornamental knotwork just wide enough to stab. She hoped it would be enough.

She set the diadem on the floor, front down, and raised the fang above it.

A yowling whine reverberated suddenly around the room, making Hermione jerk back in fright. A mist seemed to come from nowhere, surrounding them. And then a figure appeared from within the mist, wan and pale, his grey eyes accusing.

“Draco!” Hermione gasped.

“Yes,” Draco said, taking a slow walk around her as he stared and sneered. “Draco. The man you murdered.”
“I didn’t—it was an accident!” Hermione looked at Harry and Ron, but they were just staring, open-mouthed, with no more idea of what to do than she had.

“You know that’s not true,” Draco said in smooth, disgusted voice. “You know you’ve hated me for years, how I mocked you, how I made you feel like you were nothing. You wanted to kill me, you had an opportunity, and you took it.”

“No—no, that wasn’t—”

“Hermione!” Harry yelled. “Hermione, don’t listen to him! He’s not real! That’s not really Draco! It’s the Horcrux! It’s trying to defend itself!”

Draco’s head snapped to Harry. “Silence!” He stepped up to Hermione, standing between her and the Horcrux. He was so close, closer than she’d ever let Draco get. He looked down at her and said in a soft voice, “I would have killed you, too, given the chance. In the end, we weren’t so different, were we? Two killers waiting to be made. And you liked it, didn’t you? You wish you could kill them all. You wish you could kill all your enemies as easily as you killed me.”

She shook her head, trying to focus. *It’s the Horcrux*, she told herself. *It’s not true. It’s just the Horcrux.*

Draco leaned closer until his voice was a caressing whisper at her ear. “If only you could just murder them. The Dark Lord. The Minister. You could even be free of your husband. Wait for the right moment, and he wouldn’t see it coming. You know what moment I mean.” There was a lecherous leer in his tone.

“No!” Hermione dove forward, passing right through the image of Draco, and slammed the tip of the basilisk fang into the center of the diadem.

There was a loud, hissing squeal, like an animal being tortured, and the diadem shook violently. The image of Draco screamed, then melted away. She stabbed the diadem with the fang three more times. The mist dissipated. Something thick and blood-like spurted from the diadem’s wound, covering the stone floor around it in a dark stickiness. Hermione backed away from the diadem just as it shattered, scattering pieces over the floor.

Hermione stared at the mess, her heart racing, still shaking from what the image of Draco had said. It was done. She’d just killed a piece of Voldemort. They were one step closer to defeating him.

“Well done, Hermione,” Harry cheered, clapping her on the shoulder. “It wasn’t true, you know, what that thing was saying.”

She nodded. “I know.” Although, at least partly, it was.

Harry kicked the broken shards of the diadem into the tunnel to the Chamber of Secrets. They faintly heard the distant clinks of the pieces landing, now no more than bits of rubbish.

“Let’s gather up the rest of these fangs,” Harry said, already putting some into his bag. “We may need them later.”

Hermione helped him do so, then the three of them made their way out of the castle, unseen and ecstatic.

They arrived back where they’d left Fred and George just before dusk.

“You three look in a good mood,” Fred observed.
“A little too good, I’d say,” George added, waggling his eyebrows.

Hermione slapped George on the arm, unable to rustle up a proper scowl, and Harry rolled his eyes.

“Come over here and say that,” Ron said, pulling his wand.

George looked like he might just do that, but Harry said, “You two all finished here, then?”

“Been finished for ages,” said Fred.

“It was practically done when we started,” said George.

“You three had just been looking like you were itching to do something Mum wouldn’t approve of —”

“So we figured we’d give you an excuse.”

“Oh,” said Harry. “Well, thanks very much. But we’d probably better get back before they come looking for us.”

The five of them walked back to the house with high spirits. Hermione was suddenly quite looking forward to the fireworks. Tonight, they certainly had reason to celebrate.

When they returned, an eerie quiet had settled over the Burrow. The lights in the house were on, but there was no noise coming from inside. They’d expected Molly to be in the middle of making dinner, the others laughing and carousing, maybe having a transfiguration duel or playing Exploding Snap—but there was nothing. Hermione’s happiness melted away into worry.

“Right creepy, that is,” said Ron as they approached the house.

“See what happens when we leave,” Fred said, shaking his head.

George tsked and added, “It’s like they don’t know what to do with themselves.”

“I don’t think this is the time for joking,” Hermione said. “I think something might be wrong.” She looked at Harry to see what he thought, but Harry just stared at the house and quickened his pace. He got to the door first, with Hermione and Ron right behind him.

The tension that met them when they entered was nearly a physical force. Everyone was crammed into the Weasleys’ tiny living room, waiting as if for a hammer to fall. As one, they looked at Harry.

“Professor McGonagall?” Harry asked. McGonagall was sitting in a chair situated between Molly and Lupin. She looked worse than anyone: strands of her hair had come lose from her bun, she wrung a handkerchief with hands tightly clasped in her lap, and her eyes were rimmed in red.

“Mr. Potter,” said McGonagall, but her voice was weak and cracking. It filled Hermione with dread.

Harry looked around. “What’s happened?”

McGonagall didn’t answer right away, but Bill, who was standing by the door, whispered to Harry, “She got here a few minutes ago but wouldn’t tell us until you got back.”

McGonagall stood, gathering herself. When she spoke again, her voice had regained some of its
confidence. “I’m afraid I have . . . terrible news.”

Hermione’s hand had grabbed Ron’s before she knew it was doing so. He squeezed it.

The color drained from Harry’s face. “It’s Dumbledore, isn’t it? He’s dead.”

Molly gasped and everyone’s eyes shot back to McGonagall, hoping for her to deny it.

She didn’t.

“Albus Dumbledore—” A sob broke through McGonagall’s words and she raised the handkerchief to her face, her composure breaking entirely. “. . . passed away this evening.”

Hermione’s hand flew to her mouth to prevent the cry she felt coming up. In the same instant, the room was filled with gasps and curses and expressions of disbelief.

Harry swayed, his eyes not focusing, and Ginny ran to him when his legs collapsed under him. While the others cried or demanded answers or swore vengeance against whoever had killed Dumbledore, Harry sobbed into his own hands and Ginny held him.

Hermione felt her own tears flowing down her cheeks, then turned and buried her face in Ron’s robes. It wasn’t fair! Just when everything was starting to look up, something like this had to happen.

Then something unexpected occurred to her. Maybe this was why Molly and Arthur and Bill acted like they knew about her and Snape. Maybe Dumbledore was trying to prepare others to support the two of them—or even just Hermione—after he was gone.

Whatever else the future held for them now that their leader was gone, Hermione was sure of one thing: Snape had been right. Hagrid hadn’t been the last. More people were going to die before this was over—probably a lot more.
It was the curse, of course, that had killed him. The cursed ring had finally finished the job it had started a year and a half ago.

"Why did he even put on that bloody thing, anyway?" Tonks asked. "I know he wasn’t stupid enough to go around touching cursed objects on purpose."

No one knew the answer to that. Most of them didn’t know why Dumbledore had even dug up the old ring. But knowing he’d been destroying a Horcrux still did nothing to ease the minds of Hermione, Harry, and Ron. It didn’t explain why he’d tried it on.

"Dumbledore had his reasons, I’m sure," Lupin said. "If he didn’t tell any of us, he probably imagined we didn’t need to know."

"Dumbledore may have been a great wizard," said Molly, picking up the tea tray from the small end table and attempting to gather some of the empty cups, "but he was still a man. And no matter the age, men can’t seem to help from doing stupid, reckless things from time to time."

McGonagall smiled faintly, then reached for one of the empty cups. "Here, Molly, let me help you with that." As the two women went into the kitchen, McGonagall said, "There’s a matter I’d like to discuss with you, if you’ve got a minute . . ."

Now that the initial shock was past, the Order was plunging forward as they had too many times before, planning what to do now that another of their number was out of the equation. They’d gone ahead and inducted the rest of those present into the Order who had not yet been official, namely Ron, Fred, George, and Ginny. Molly had given a token protest about Ginny, who was still not yet of age, but as she was married with a baby on the way, no one could really say she wasn’t old enough to decide for herself if she wanted to officially join the fight ("Especially as I’ve been doing it for years already!").

As Tonks, Charlie, and Bill discussed ways Charlie could potentially stay closer to home in case he was needed, Lupin leaned over to Harry.

"Harry," he said quietly, "I wonder if I might have the Map back."

Harry blinked. "Er, why?"

Lupin cocked his head as if he found the question odd. "You haven’t had any need for it, have you?"

Sudden panic twisted Hermione’s stomach as she realized what Harry could have seen if he’d been looking at the Map at certain times.

"No," Harry admitted. "It’s mostly been locked up in my trunk. I take it out now and then, but I haven’t seen anything interesting. It just helps me . . . feel like I’m still there, I guess."

"Stupid," Hermione thought, relaxing. *If he’d seen something, he would have said something, wouldn’t he?*

Neither of the others appeared to notice her reactions. "It would be useful in keeping the school
secure, Harry,” Lupin said.

*And if Remus has it, Harry won’t see something he oughtn’t and wonder why Severus’s dot is so close to mine,* Hermione thought. She jabbed Harry with her elbow. “Give it to him, Harry. It’s more his than yours anyway, in case you’ve forgotten.”

“Oh, right.” Harry blushed. Evidently that fact had slipped his mind. He withdrew the Marauder’s Map from his pocket and handed it to Lupin.

Lupin took it, gave it a brief, wistful glance, and put it in his own pocket. He gave Hermione a subtle look of thanks (though something about it made Hermione sure he’d guessed her primary reason for speaking up) and turned to join Tonks’s conversation.

It had officially been 1998 for an hour and a half by the time anyone noticed. The fireworks Fred and George had prepared went unlit. No one slept easily that night.

When Hermione and Ron boarded the Hogwarts Express, Molly gave them both a hug and said, “See you soon, dears.”

“Soon?” Ron asked. “Since when is six months soon?”

Hermione, however, got the feeling that, Order members or not, they weren’t being told everything. But since Molly was smiling when she said it, she trusted it wasn’t going to be something unpleasant.

They joined Luna and Neville in a compartment.

“Did you have a pleasant holiday?” Luna asked.

“Up until the end,” Ron said.

“I visited my mum and dad again,” Neville said glumly, “then Gran made me de-gnome the backyard and—Wait, why was it bad at the end?”

“Oh, it’s awful!” Hermione said. She got up and made sure no one was standing around outside their compartment, then returned to her seat. “You can’t say anything about this until Professor McGonagall makes an announcement, but . . . Dumbledore died.”

“What?” Neville nearly yelled.

Hermione shushed him. “You’ve seen his cursed hand. It’s been spreading for some time. That’s why he hasn’t been seen around school for months.”

“Was it that bad?” Neville asked, still dazed and disbelieving.

“Yeah,” said Ron. “He’s been in bad shape for a while, but it finally finished him off.”

Luna was staring ponderously into space. “I’m glad I spoke to him when I had the chance, then,” she said, but didn’t elaborate.

There was a long silence as Neville and Luna absorbed this. Finally, Neville asked, “What are we gonna do? Dumbledore was the only reason You-Know-Who stayed away from Hogwarts.”

“As far as I know, things will continue as usual,” Hermione said. “Voldemort hasn’t done anything
overt since last summer. I think—” She stopped herself from saying ‘the Order’. She didn’t know how much of that she was allowed to talk about, even with Neville and Luna. “I think Professor McGonagall has reason to believe he won’t make any moves against Hogwarts yet. I’m sure if that changes, she’ll do what needs to be done.”

No one needed to clarify what she meant by that. They sat in silence the rest of the way to Hogsmeade.

#

Hermione almost envied the other students as they laughed and chattered on their way into the Great Hall for dinner that evening. They were so carefree, so oblivious to the danger that had befallen the school now that Dumbledore was no longer protecting it. It was only a matter of time before Voldemort took advantage of that weakness.

She sat at the Gryffindor table along with Ron and Neville, waiting as usual for everyone else to settle in. As she watched the teachers take their seats at the High Table, Molly’s words at King’s Cross became clear.

“What’s Mum doing up there?” Ron asked, astounded.

Molly was sitting alongside the other teachers—in McGonagall’s usual spot.

“I’m sure we’ll find out momentarily,” Hermione said.

Neville looked up with interest. “That’s your mum? Is she nice? She looks nice.”

“Depends on who you ask,” said Ron, still distracted.

Hermione rolled her eyes at him. “She’s terrific, Neville.”

Gradually, the other students seemed to see the addition to the staff. By the time McGonagall came in and sat down in Dumbledore’s chair, the room had nearly fallen silent.

Once McGonagall had the full attention of everyone in the room, she stood.

“Welcome back, students,” McGonagall said loudly. Her voice was sure and steady as ever. “I’m afraid it is with bad news that this term must start. Professor Dumbledore has been ill for quite a while. You may have noticed he hasn’t been around for several months. He was attempting to save you all from having to see the deterioration of his condition.” The crowd had gone very quiet. Everyone was on the edge of their seat, already seeing where this speech was leading. “It is my sad duty to inform you . . . that over the winter holiday, Professor Dumbledore passed away.”

Noise filled the hall as shouts and gasps and talking burst forth from every corner. With fury, Hermione heard a bark of laughter from Pansy Parkinson.

“Silence!” McGonagall commanded, shooting a poorly-concealed glare at the Slytherin table before continuing. “A funeral will be held this Saturday should any of you wish to attend. I know it will take time to adjust to this news, so classes will not resume until next Monday.” There were no cheers as word of delayed classes would ordinarily have garnered. “I will fill the post of Headmistress until someone is found to fill the position permanently beginning next term. Molly Weasley has consented to fill my former position as Transfiguration teacher for the rest of this term. A word of caution to any mischief-makers among you: Professor Weasley is the mother of seven children, two of whom are Fred and George Weasley. I would not recommend trying her patience.”
“Is she daft?” Ron whispered, glancing at a couple of particularly cheeky-looking Hufflepuff fourth-years. “She may as well have thrown down a gauntlet.”

“Hush, Ronald,” said Hermione, and they listened to the rest of McGonagall’s speech, all of which was much less dramatic than the first part.

Everyone at the High Table looked quite grave. Even Tonks was uncharacteristically subdued (uncharacteristic, at least, considering she was holding hands with Lupin under the table). She’d made her hair a conservative blonde and let it fall past her ears. Snape was typically unreadable, though his brow was a bit more furrowed than usual. Professor Trelawney, who had joined them for this occasion, was fiddling glumly with her napkin.

“I still can’t get over my mum being a teacher,” Ron said when McGonagall sat down and the food appeared. “I didn’t know she knew that much about anything—’cept maybe cooking or cleaning.”

Hermione smacked his arm. “Honestly, Ron! You do know there was a time before she was a mother, don’t you? Or did you think her entire purpose in life was to pop out Weasleys?”

Ron tucked into his food, looking annoyed at the rebuke, but not arguing.

#

Almost everyone in the school made it out for Dumbledore’s funeral on Saturday. There was a whole section reserved for the students, and it was mostly filled. (The Slytherins, to Hermione’s disappointment but not surprise, were under-represented.) There was a larger number of students here than had been at Hagrid’s funeral. Perhaps this was due to the previous loss of Hagrid somehow preparing them for dealing with the shock, or maybe the fact that so few of the students had ever had a great deal of personal interaction with the Headmaster, but there seemed to be less weeping and sadness in the crowd and more quiet respect and a sense of uneasiness.

The teachers (all but Firenze, at least) were sitting in a row in front of the students. Hermione couldn’t see any of their faces, but Lupin had his arm around Tonks’s shoulders. Trelawney kept glancing at them for some reason, and wiping her nose with a tissue. McGonagall sat straight and unmoving for the most part, but Hermione saw her occasionally raise a tissue to her face, as well. Snape—or rather, the back of Snape’s head—was as inscrutable as ever.

“What’s she doing here?” Ron growled, and Hermione followed his glare to see Dolores Umbridge taking her seat beside ex-Minister Fudge and Hammond Havershams, head of the P.E.W.S. program. Hermione put a hand on Ron’s knee to stop him from trying to hex Umbridge from across the crowd.

A number of other Ministry officials were there, though Minister Scrimgeour was not among them. Nor was Percy Weasley. Hermione hoped this was simply to avoid a potential awkward meeting with his family and not because he had that little respect for Dumbledore, but she tried not to ponder it for long.

Almost all of the Order was present, mingled amongst the crowd. Harry and Ginny were sitting next to Bill and Fleur. Hermione didn’t know that it was safe for Harry to make himself so visible now that Dumbledore was dead. It occurred to her that this service might be a highly tempting target for Death Eaters, particularly if they knew Voldemort’s greatest remaining enemy would be here. But she also knew that wouldn’t have mattered to Harry. There was no way he would have missed paying his respects.

As she looked around, she got the sense that someone was missing. She wondered if part of her
was expecting Hagrid to show up, but she didn’t think that was it.

“Where’s Kingsley?” Ron said suddenly.

Hermione looked around and confirmed that Kingsley Shacklebolt was nowhere to be seen.

“That’s a bit odd, isn’t it?” Ron said.

“I suppose he must have got caught up somewhere,” Hermione said uncertainly. “Maybe he got stuck working at the Ministry or is away on a mission.” She knew it must be something like that. Except for something extremely important or beyond his control, she couldn’t fathom why such a loyal Order member would miss this.

Once everyone settled into their seats and quieted down, a strange sound came from the lake, drawing everyone’s attention. The merpeople were singing, and though Hermione couldn’t understand the words, she could understand the sorrow in their voices. It filled her with sadness that non-humans like them had lost another champion in the wizarding community, when they had so few to begin with.

When they were finished, she heard the sound of hooves on grass, and looked back to see Firenze carrying a purple-wrapped bundle down the aisle to the white tomb at the front. With a totally undignified rush of smugness, she saw the scandalized looks from some of the Ministry employees. When Firenze passed between her and Umbridge, the toad-faced woman met her eyes just long enough for Hermione to give her a sweetly venomous smile.

Dumbledore’s body was placed in the tomb, and the lid shut. Another song broke forth, one unlike Hermione had ever heard. It was beautiful and haunting and brought tears up from the deepest part of Hermione’s soul. Fawkes circled the sky above the proceedings, coming to land on the tomb only as his song drew to a close.

He remained perched there until the end. Even when the last of the guests and mourners had wandered off, Fawkes remained on the tomb.

#

Hermione rubbed her head, willing the headache potion to take effect. She’d woken up with a headache the morning after Dumbledore’s death, and it hadn’t gone away since. So far, it had been only a dull sort of throb, but at the moment it felt like someone was pinching the spaces right behind her eyeballs.

“You all right, Hermione?” a quiet voice asked.

Hermione jumped. She thought she’d been alone in the library. She had her Foe-Glass out, at least, so she’d see if anyone who wished to corner her alone was coming. At the moment, all the figures in the glass were still blurry. She glanced up and gave a weary smile. “Oh, hello, Antoinette. No, I’m fine. Just a bit of a headache. Probably stress, I imagine.”

Antoinette closed the book she was reading and moved to the same table Hermione was at. Hermione watched closely as she moved. She’d probably be showing if her robes weren’t so loose.

“Well, you’ve certainly got reason to be stressed. What are you doing in the library when we haven’t even started classes yet?”

“I thought I’d get some work done on a project I’m working on. Just some research for . . . extra credit in Potions.” She still didn’t know what was so important about Wentworth’s Brew, but it gave her something to take her mind off Dumbledore’s death and the impending transfer of her
unborn baby. “What are you doing here?”

Antoinette looked down at her book nervously. “Professor McGonagall asked me to come when she saw you in here without your friends. She doesn’t think you should be alone.”

Hermione nodded, not entirely sure if she appreciated the gesture or not. “How are you feeling?”

“Quite well,” Antoinette said. “It was a bit rough for the first week or so after the transfer, but I think the potions Healer Partridge gave me really helped the transition.”

The potions . . . Hermione remembered what she’d done with the last batch of potions from Partridge. “Antoinette, is Partridge the only Healer you’ve seen about all this?”

Antoinette nodded. “He’s very nice, isn’t he? And rather handsome.”

“He hasn’t come across as odd at all? Maybe . . . almost racist?”

Antoinette pouted in thought. “I don’t think so. Why?”

Hermione went to where the magazines were and found the one that had the article about Partridge and his ideas about what looked like the wizarding equivalent of genetic engineering. Antoinette read it over, then said, “You don’t think he’s doing something to your babies, do you?”

“I don’t know,” Hermione said. “But after reading this, I don’t trust him. I didn’t even take the last batch of potions he gave me. What if he laced them with something?”

“Well,” Antoinette said, setting the magazine aside, “I suppose you could just ask him.”

The statement sounded so naïve, Hermione wasn’t sure at first how to respond. “But if he is doing something bad, he’d just lie, wouldn’t he?”

“Maybe,” Antoinette admitted. “But if he was and he admitted it, it would save you the hassle of digging around after him.”

Hermione couldn’t deny the logic in her suggestion. “All right, then, I’ll ask him. Why not? I’m to see him next Saturday, anyway.” At Antoinette’s curious look, she added, “Another transfer.”

Antoinette gaped. “This is the fourth one! How many more will you have to do?”

“I wish I knew,” said Hermione. “But if I don’t like what Partridge says tomorrow, it may be none.” As things stood, it was mostly an empty threat, but she’d see how things progressed.

“Do you know who the fourth surrogate will be?” Antoinette asked.

“No. If Dumbledore talked to anyone about it before he died, he didn’t tell me.”

“I’m sure he did,” Antoinette said. “It’ll be okay, Hermione. You’ll get them back; don’t worry.”

“And then what?” Hermione wasn’t even positive she’d said the words aloud. Whether she did or not, Antoinette didn’t respond.

After a long, uncomfortable moment, Antoinette said, “We’ve arranged to meet and catch up today —Cecilia and Evelyn and me. Would you like to join us?”

Hermione smiled. “Yeah, thanks. I would like that.”
Hermione and Ron hurried to their Transfiguration class the next Tuesday, keen to get there early. Neither of them had seen Molly for long since her introduction as a teacher, and they wanted to know what was going on with that.

As they neared an intersection between corridors, Hermione only had time to hear a feminine voice say, “If this doesn’t work tonight, then we’re right bloody fu—” before someone nearly bowled her over.

A firm, strong hand grasped her arm to keep her from falling. When her feet were again solid beneath her, she looked up.

“Kingsley!” Hermione looked between him and Tonks (who had, naturally, been the one to run into her). They appeared to have been in the middle of something. “What are you doing here?”

Kingsley released her arm and looked at Tonks. “I just had something to discuss with Tonks here.”

“Sorry about that, Hermione,” Tonks said helplessly. “I’m afraid I’m not even far enough along to blame the baby for my lack of coordination yet.”

“It’s fine.” Hermione waved the apology away, focusing on Kingsley. “Why weren’t you at the funeral? I was a little worried when I didn’t see you there. It must have been something really important to keep you away.”

Kingsley and Tonks shared a glance. “It was, Hermione.”

“You can tell us, you know,” Ron said. “If it’s Order stuff, I mean. We’re in now.”

Kingsley smiled slightly painfully. “Not yet, I’m afraid. For the time being, there must still be secrets even within the Order. It’s for all of our protection.”

Light glinted off of something dangling from Kingsley’s ear, and Hermione choked back a laugh. “That’s . . . a lovely earring. Not quite your usual style.”

For an instant, Kingsley’s eyes went wide, and he reached up and pulled the shiny, bangly earring from his ear. Remarkably, he even seemed to be blushing. “It was a present,” he said.

“Yeah,” Tonks said quickly. “Sorry, Kings. I just thought your style could use a little more pop.” She winked at him, and he raised an eyebrow, smirking. Hermione was struck by how different that expression looked on him than on Snape.

“Well, we’d better go,” Hermione said, feeling somehow uncomfortable to be thinking of Snape’s facial expressions while in the company of others.

“Yeah,” said Ron. “We want to talk to Mum before class. I just hope she doesn’t keep us in the dark for our own good, too.”

Molly, in fact, turned out to be much more forthcoming with information. “Oh, it’s all very simple,” she said as she straightened some things on her desk for what was clearly the umpteenth time. “With Dumbledore gone, Minerva wanted as many Order members at Hogwarts as possible, to keep an eye on things, and this presented her an opportunity.”

“So that’s why Kingsley’s visiting,” said Hermione, “and why Remus hasn’t left the castle since we came back.”
Molly looked askance at her, then said, “Not the only reason, but a dominant one, yes.”

“But why you, Mum?” Ron asked. “Not that I don’t love having you here!” he amended quickly at her look.

“Ronald Weasley, do you not think I’m qualified?” Molly challenged.

“Well—well—” Ron stuttered. “You’re my mum! You’re not a teacher!”

“Who taught you and your brothers and sister until you came to Hogwarts?” she asked, putting her hands on her hips. “Don’t you dare tell me I’m not a teacher.”

Ron was smart enough to keep his mouth shut.

“I never knew you had particular skill at Transfiguration,” said Hermione, more tactfully.

“I got an O on my N.E.W.T.s,” Molly said, puffing a bit. “I also got an O in Defense Against the Dark Arts, Charms, Potions, and Care of Magical Creatures, if you’d care to know.”

“Wow, that’s pretty good,” said Hermione, feeling an unexpected rush of new respect—and then shame at the realization that her opinion of Molly had been low enough that such news came as a surprise.

“Why’d you do it, though?” Ron asked. “Is it just because we’re all out of the house and you’re bored?”

“It does get a bit lonely with no one there during the day, and even with just your father and I at night,” she admitted. “I didn’t have an assignment yet, so I was the logical choice, and it does feel good to have a mission of my own for once. Though I don’t think I’ll ever get used to this business of house-elves doing all the cooking and cleaning.”

“But you went to school here, too!”

“That was then, wasn’t it?” Molly patted him on the shoulder. “You’ll know when you become a parent, dear. Everything changes.” She made a shothing motion with her hands. “To your seats now.”

Hermione and Ron took a seat as other students came through the doors.

“Take your seats, students! Take your seats!” Molly called after the rest of the class made its way in. Most students did as she said, but Blaise Zabini loitered in the aisle, trying to chat up Padma Patil, who was sitting quietly and resolutely attempting to ignore him. “Seats!” Molly said in a stern voice, but Blaise continued to ignore her. She checked her roster, then put her hands on her hips and said, “Mr. Zabini, I will not ask again.”

Finally, Blaise turned to her, looking like he thought she ought to be grateful he’d deigned to do so, and said, “Technically, you haven’t asked yet.”

The rest of the class hardly had time to wonder how Molly would respond to such insolence when she flicked her wand at him and Blaise turned into a chinchilla.

Padma shrieked and nearly toppled off her stool. Hannah Abbot gasped and gave Molly a look that was both scandalized and admiring. Pansy looked like she wanted to protest but was afraid of getting the same treatment, so she just crossed her arms and fumed. Ron, Dean, and Seamus erupted into laughter, and Seamus even started applauding. Hermione wanted to disapprove, but
discovered a grin had found its way onto her face nonetheless.

Molly didn’t acknowledge any of this, but strode to where the chinchilla-Blaise stood looking lost and confused, picked it up, set it on the seat beside Pansy, and returned to the front before pointing her wand and returning Blaise to his human form. Once Blaise realized what had happened, he was too furious to speak.

“Thank you for agreeing to that little demonstration, Mr. Zabini,” Molly said, smiling warmly. “Five points to Slytherin.”

No one knew what to say to that, nor dared to speak up if they did.

“Transfiguration,” Molly said, “as you all know by now, is the art of turning one thing into something else. By this point in your education, you’ve learned how to turn inanimate objects into other inanimate objects, animals into objects and back, animals into other animals, and some elements of human transfiguration. Before today, have any of you ever seen a person be turned into an animal?”

Hermione had seen plenty of people turn into animals. She’d seen Sirius turn into a dog, Peter Pettigrew turn into a rat, Lupin turn into a wolf, and while she hadn’t seen Rita Skeeter turn into a beetle, she’d seen a beetle turn into Rita Skeeter. Of course, she knew none of those was the sort of transfiguration Molly was talking about. A person turning into an animal wasn’t the same as a person being turned into an animal.

“Yes, Miss Abbot,” said Molly.

Hermione looked around, surprised that someone else had beaten her to answering the question.

“Viktor Krum partially turned himself into a shark for the second task in the Triwizard Tournament,” Hannah offered.

I should have thought of that, thought Hermione.

“Five points to Hufflepuff,” Molly said. “Yes, he did, and it was really a very reckless thing for him to do. Can anyone tell me why that is?”

“Because he could have bitten Hermione’s bloody head off?” Ron said, bitterly and without raising his hand.

“Three points to Gryffindor for a partially correct answer,” said Molly, “but ten points off for swearing. I won’t have that kind of language in my classroom, Mr. Weasley.”

Ron’s eyes went wide, then he scowled and slumped in his seat. Hermione raised her hand.

“Yes, Miss Granger,” Molly said.

Hermione had given this a bit of thought after she’d broken up with Krum. “It has to do with the difference between a simple transfiguration and an Animagus transformation. When an Animagus transforms, they keep their human mind, no matter what animal they turn into. When a person is simply transfigured into an animal, they become that animal fully, including their mind. Had Viktor fully transfigured himself into a shark, he would have become a shark. He wouldn’t have even remembered what he’d gone into the lake to do.”

“Quite right,” Molly said. “Five points to Gryffindor. Mr. Zabini, can you corroborate? When I turned you into a chinchilla just now, what were you thinking?”
Blaise glared at her, but didn’t appear willing to risk her anger again. “Didn’t think anything, did I? I just felt cold and hungry.”

“Excuse me, Professor Weasley,” Hermione said, unable to help herself. “I thought teachers weren’t allowed to use transfiguration as a punishment. That’s what Professor McGonagall said when Professor Moody—not the real Professor Moody, of course, but Barty Crouch Junior—turned, er, someone into a ferret.”

“You mean Draco, don’t you?” Pansy sneered, and Hermione winced. She’d meant to say the name, but when she’d come to it, she just hadn’t been able to. The Horcrux’s image of Draco had brought all the guilt she felt over his death churning back up.

“Quite true, Miss Granger,” Molly said, ignoring Pansy’s comment. “But this wasn’t discipline. This was a demonstration.”

“Of what?” Pansy sniped. “Tormenting students because you’re no match for their parents? We all know your husband trumped up charges to try to get Blaise’s dad arrested. Still smarting from that loss, are you? Filthy blood trait—”

“Forty points from Slytherin!” Molly barked. “And that will be quite enough of that, Miss Parkinson!”

Pansy glowered but shut her mouth.

“Despite popular belief,” said Molly, after a moment of tense silence, “it’s not actually illegal, in itself, to transfigure another person or oneself into an animal or object. It’s not commonly done, for various reasons, but it can be useful in certain circumstances.”

“You mean like in battle?” Seamus asked eagerly.

“Perhaps,” Molly said, but her eyes gave a strange twinkle that seemed to say, *Exactly.* “But I’ll leave that to Professor Tonks, if she wants to incorporate such techniques into her teaching. We’ll begin with the easiest: transfiguring a human into another primate. A chimpanzee, perhaps. Can I have a volunteer?”

#

The next morning, Hermione woke feeling unusually good. She was well-rested and had had a night bereft of bad dreams of any sort. She even chatted with Lavender and Parvati as she got ready, the three of them still laughing about the Transfiguration class the previous day.

“I was afraid there’d be some awkwardness with Ron’s mum,” Lavender said, “you know, with me dumping her son and all, but there wasn’t.”

Hermione was in such a good mood that she didn’t point out it was Ron who had broken up with her, and it was unlikely he’d ever mentioned it to his mother, anyway.

At breakfast, she slipped into her seat beside Ron and Neville. Luna had already moved over from the Ravenclaw table to join them, and they chatted happily, telling Luna and Neville all about trying to turn their classmates into apes.

“I got Seamus’s arms to go a bit hairy and longer than normal,” Ron said proudly. “And I couldn’t even see who Hermione’s partner was. Every time I looked over, Hermione was turning some poor girl into a chimp before I saw her face. Did you even give her a chance to try, Hermione?”
“Of course I did,” Hermione lied. She had hoped no one had noticed that. She certainly had monopolized the practice time, but she could hardly let herself be transfigured while pregnant. It was obvious Molly knew about her condition (Molly had seemed to have developed temporary deafness whenever Padma had complained that she wasn’t getting a turn), but Hermione didn’t want her friends to know she was pregnant. If they knew, they’d treat her differently, and one thing she did not need right now was more weirdness and awkwardness in her life. “I’m sure you’re exaggerating, Ron.”

An owl swooped down to deliver the morning paper. Hermione took it, paid the bird, and looked at the front page.

DEATH EATER ATTACK IN DOVER

DOVER—A Muggle warehouse was the site of a brutal battle between Aurors and Death Eaters last night, leaving five injured and one dead. The Aurors had been tipped off about the attack and arrived at the warehouse shortly after the Death Eaters. No Muggles were in the building at the time, though one Muggle vagrant had to be Obliviated. None of the Death Eaters were apprehended. Most injuries sustained by the Aurors involved were minor, but Auror Kingsley Shacklebolt was killed by Fiendfyre cast by former-Hogwarts-teacher-turned-Death-Eater Horace Slughorn. No word yet on why the Death Eaters chose to attack the warehouse, but—

Hermione dropped the paper as a sort of numb despair settled over her. Another death. Another man down. How many more . . . ?

Kingsley had been a brilliant man and an expert duelist. If even he could be taken out, what hope was there for the rest of them?

She shook her head and wondered if she shouldn’t just cancel her subscription to the Prophet.
The ninth of January was, in most respects, an exceedingly average day. Of course, ‘average’ had come to take on an entirely different meaning for Hermione than it once had.

On days like this, when it seemed perfectly routine to be fitting in time to search for a counteragent to a mysterious cure-slash-poison around her studies of high-level magic while mourning the deaths of a colleague (of sorts) and a mentor and attempting not to become overwhelmed with anxiety about the transfer of her unborn child to the womb of an unnamed stranger, it was difficult to believe that once her world had consisted of maths homework, leisure reading, and getting picked on by prettier girls because of her big teeth and frizzy hair. Sometimes, in the quiet privacy between the curtains of her bed, she thought back to those days, before she’d found out she was a witch, before her world had opened up like a flower in bloom. She’d never regretted having magic. In fact, she had always considered getting her Hogwarts letter one of the best things to ever happen to her. Now, she wasn’t so sure.

If she had never joined the magical world, she wouldn’t be caught in the middle of a war with a madman, she wouldn’t be prematurely married to a very difficult and uncommunicative man who also happened to be her teacher, she wouldn’t be pregnant with her fourth child, and she wouldn’t be wondering if she’d ever see any of her children in the flesh. But then, she also likely wouldn’t have found friends she was literally willing to die for, she wouldn’t have had more amazing experiences in a few years than most Muggles have in a lifetime, and she wouldn’t have that feeling of utter certainty that she was where she belonged, for better or worse.

And that was the point of it, really. Despite everything, she was a witch. She belonged here, in this world, with these people. And that was that.

She pulled herself out of bed, hoping her roommates hadn’t got to the loo yet, and threw back the curtains of her four-poster. Lavender and Parvati were both still asleep, so Hermione allowed herself to indulge in a short but relaxing bath before going down for breakfast.

“You smell good,” Ron blurted, apropos of nothing, when she sat next to him in the Great Hall. He turned red and started stuttering an explanation, failed, then shoved a forkful of egg into his mouth.

Blushing, Hermione said a polite, “Thank you, Ron,” and her eyes flitted unconsciously to Snape’s place at the High Table, which she was grateful to find empty at that moment. “I used bath salts. They’re lavender-scented,” she added, the irony not lost on her.

Ron nodded, shoved more food into his mouth, and tried valiantly to pretend he hadn’t said anything.

Neville, sitting across from them, watched with a cocked eyebrow and an expression of awkward amusement.

The weirdness was interrupted by the arrival of the morning post. Hermione got a letter from St. Mungo’s, which she set aside (she confirmed in private later that it was a reminder for her appointment the next day), the Daily Prophet, which she had decided not to cancel just yet and passed to Ron to look at first, and a small folded note. This last, she opened under the table.
Hermione,

Today’s Snape’s birthday. Thought you might want to know. I don’t reckon he’d tell you himself.

Tonks

It took a moment for the news to register. It seemed somehow odd to think of birthdays when people were dying left and right. And what was she meant to do with the information? Still, Tonks was right; Snape would not likely have told her. She stuffed the note into her robes and thought of what she ought to do about it.

Nothing had occurred to her by the time she took her seat in Potions class. It wasn’t as if Snape had done anything for her birthday, after all (though, admittedly, she’d been unconscious at the time). Although things between them had been smoothed over quite a bit by his actions at Christmas, Hermione still didn’t feel like Snape would welcome a gesture from her which suggested they had an intimate relationship—never mind the fact that they most assuredly did have such a relationship, at least from a certain perspective.

What would he even want? she asked herself. The answer occurred to her easily. Peace and quiet and as little aggravation as possible. This she could attempt to give him.

When Snape stormed into class, it was with an air of extreme annoyance. As this was the first class of the day and he hadn’t appeared at breakfast, Hermione could only surmise that Snape was one of those people who saw each birthday as simply being one year closer to death. She’d always pitied people who thought that way. *How miserable it must be to count backwards on your life instead of forwards.*

Snape gave the class instructions on what to do, and Hermione didn’t correct him for saying ‘crushed’ when the book clearly stated the lotus root was to be ‘sliced’. When Ron started to complain about Pansy taking the best leeches and leaving him with the skinny, shriveled ones, Hermione shushed him and gave him hers instead. And when Hermione finished her potion well ahead of everyone else, she bottled her sample and sat quietly until the end instead of taking it up front immediately and making a show of her superiority.

By the end of class, Snape actually appeared to be less agitated. Still not happy exactly (Snape was never happy), but less angry. Hermione took her time getting her things together and told Ron she’d catch up with him, then took her sample to the front, where Snape sat at his desk, marking a scroll liberally in red.

“Happy birthday, Severus,” she whispered, setting the sample with the others. He looked up, and she gave him a small smile.

The tension in his brow eased for a moment as he met her eyes. When he looked back at the parchment he was marking and said, “On your way, Miss Granger,” Hermione couldn’t detect even a hint of scorn in his voice.

#

Saturday morning, Hermione’s head was still aching. It wasn’t a bad pain, but it was persistent. She stopped by the hospital wing on her way to breakfast and took a potion, but it did little to help.

“What’s got you in a snit?” Ron asked after she plopped down next to him at the Gryffindor table. “Don’t tell me it’s something I did.”
“It’s not you, Ron,” Hermione assured him. It was a lot of things, not least of all the fact that today was the day of the next transfer, but it wasn’t Ron. “I’ve got a headache, that’s all.”

“Well, I don’t think you can boss the headache away, if that’s what you’re trying to do,” Ron said, and she made an effort to stop grimacing at nothing in particular. “Why don’t you take a potion?”

“I did. It didn’t help. I’ve been getting these more and more, and the potions aren’t getting rid of them. It’s very frustrating.”

“Huh,” Ron said, then added around a mouthful of biscuit, “Maybe you’ve got a brain tumor.”

Hermione went cold. “What did you say?”

Ron shrugged, his mouth still full. “Brain tumor. Persistent little buggers, I hear. Maybe that’s all it is.”

Suddenly, the reason Snape had her looking for an antidote to Wentworth’s made sense. “Idiot!” she hissed. “Why didn’t I see that?”


But Hermione wasn’t listening. She was running over everything she could remember Snape saying about the potion, everything she’d read, and trying to remember every potion she’d taken in the last eight months. Everything fell into place in her mind. This whole P.E.W.S. program was to build better wizards, wasn’t it? The Ministry had shown no interest in the opinions or wellbeing of those it chose as genetic donors. Was it really so far-fetched that they’d sacrifice their lives in the sake of progress? Who had they chosen to be her Healer, after all? The magazine article about Partridge swam before her eyes, and she saw red.

“Bastard!” she nearly screamed.

Fortunately, there were only about thirty other students at breakfast at the moment, and only Flitwick and Sinistra at the High Table, but every one of them looked at her in shock. Hermione was too infuriated to care, however, and stormed out of the room. On her way out, she heard Ron’s worried voice saying, “Er, it’s all right, everyone. I think she accidentally ate a Profanity Pop. Go back to your breakfasts.”

He caught up with her in the hallway, and she rounded on him. “I don’t want to talk about it, Ron. Not with you, anyway. I’m sorry.”

“Hermione, if something’s wrong, you can tell me,” he insisted.

Hermione shook her head. “Not yet. If I’m right, I will tell you, but I have to make sure first. There’re some other people I need to talk to.”

A dark cloud of bitterness came from nowhere to engulf Ron’s features. “Is it about him?” he spat. “That berk you were forced to marry?”

His outburst stunned her enough to make her forget her own anger for a moment. “Ron—”

“Does he hurt you or something? I know you don’t like to talk about it, Hermione, but I still think about it. I think about it every bloody day, especially when you go around cringing like the fate of the world’s on your shoulders, and I’m bloody well tired of pretending I don’t!”
How had things spun so wildly out of control? “Ron, it’s not—”

“Forget it,” he fumed. “Let me know if you ever decide to tell me what’s going on with you, Hermione.” Before she could respond, he stormed off.

“Ron! It’s not like—” She took two steps to follow him before her own anger came crashing back, stronger than before. “Ronald Weasley! How dare you—”

“Miss Granger,” called a voice from a short distance away. Snape was standing at the end of the corridor, scowling at Ron’s retreating back. “Come. You don’t want to be late for your appointment.”

She turned, a vicious remark already on her tongue, moments away from being spat out, before she realized that, for once, her anger wasn’t at him. “Coming,” she said tersely and strode to her husband, the fire of purpose burning in her veins. *I certainly wouldn’t want to miss my appointment.*

#

“You shite-sucking, troll-humping bastard.”

Partridge froze, his hand still on the door and a dazed expression on his face. He glanced at Hermione’s chart as if it held some explanation for the remark that had greeted him as he’d entered, found none, then took out his quill and jotted something down. He finished closing the door and gave her a once-over. “Didn’t the mediwitch give you robes to change into?” he asked, seeming not to notice the way Hermione was attempting to flay him with her eyes.

“I’m not changing into anything until I get some answers,” Hermione barked.

Partridge smiled, made another note on her chart, and moved closer. “Please feel free to ask anything you’d like. Although I should note that it is not within my power to tell you everything you may wish to know.”

That was not something Hermione wanted to hear, but she’d wait until he’d given her cause before smacking an answer out of him. “What exactly are the potions you’ve been giving me?” she asked, her eyes flaring with barely-reined-in fury.

“Just what I told you before,” said Partridge, his brow furrowed. “Healing potions, potions to help with the health of the baby, that sort of thing.”

“I said ‘exactly’,” Hermione hissed. “Tell me the names of every potion you’ve given me.”

“Very well.” Partridge sighed and consulted the chart. “When you came in for your first appointment, I gave you a dose each of Madam Mumbi’s Miracle Mummy-Maker, Long-Lasting Contra-Contraceptive Potion, and Quick-Conception Potion. On your next appointment—”

“When you didn’t bother to tell me I’d got pregnant,” Hermione interjected.

“Again, I’m quite sorry about that. I *did* think I’d told you,” he replied, sounding sincere. Hermione just grunted disbelievingly and let him continue. “Yes, at that appointment, I gave you a Bruise and Scrape Soother, Morning Sickness Mitigator, and Pregnancy Potion Number Five.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes. “What was that last one?”

“A blend of my own invention: a cocktail of fortifying potions to help both you and the baby stay...
strong, the same as I’ve been sending to you after every subsequent conception,” he said.

*Got you. “A ‘cocktail’? Of your own invention?”* Hermione asked. “And just exactly what is in this cocktail?”

Partridge sighed. “Really, Hermione, does it matter? There are at least a dozen different potions that go into it, and I’d have to check my notes to verify what most of the ones in that particular blend are. People don’t normally demand such detailed information.”

“Most people don’t pay as much attention as they should,” Hermione said. “Why is it, Healer Partridge, that you’re so reluctant to tell me what you’ve been putting in my body?” Like a teapot beginning to steam, Hermione’s anger was becoming impossible to keep quiet, her voice rising with every question she asked. “Have you been giving me something I wouldn’t approve of? Something which you might think will help my babies, even if means tampering with them? Something like Wentworth’s Brew, perhaps?”

A moment of thick silence met the end of her tirade as her words rang in her ears. Then, to her astonishment, Partridge laughed. She stared, mouth gaping open, as he chuckled heartily. “Wentworth’s Brew?” he asked between gasps for breath. “Why would I do that?”

Hermione’s confidence in her assessment wavered, but she didn’t let him see that. “I read the article in *Medical Magicians*! You’re trying to genetically engineer better witches and wizards! I know Wentworth’s Brew can give a child the knowledge and memories of the parent! Awfully convenient, isn’t it, that I was chosen because of my skill and intellect to be a breeder, and you just happen to be my Healer! If my babies turned out to be some kind of super-wizards, wouldn’t that be quite the feather in your cap!”

Partridge blinked. He wasn’t laughing now. His eyes moved back and forth, unfocussed, like he was considering her words, trying to make sense of them, then he met her furious stare unblinkingly. “But that would kill you.” He sounded so honestly baffled by the suggestion that Hermione slumped onto the bed behind her.

He didn’t do it. She could see it in his eyes. He’d never even considered the idea before she accused him. Still, it was possible he was only a very good actor. “Does that matter?” She tried to say it as forcefully as her allegation, but the strength had drained from her, her anger sapped as the possibility that she’d been wrong grew very real in her mind.

“Hermione, I am a Healer.” The expression in Partridge’s eyes pricked her heart like an ice pick. She’d hurt his feelings. “I’m very sorry this whole process has been hard on you, and I admit that I haven’t been as sympathetic as I probably should be, but I would never, never willingly put one of my patients in danger, much less give them a death sentence. What could possibly have given you the idea that I would?”

Hermione sighed helplessly, trying to rearrange her thoughts now that the conclusion she’d been so sure of just minutes ago appeared to be false. Part of her knew that Snape would likely have called her a fool for believing Partridge so easily if he’d been there—but then, Snape wasn’t the sort of man to appreciate the value of emotions in discerning the truth of something. “I’ve been having headaches the past few days,” she explained. “Bad ones, and the potions Madam Pomfrey gives me don’t help much. We study Wentworth’s Brew in Potions this year. And then I read that article . . . Suddenly it all just seemed to make sense. I guess now it doesn’t anymore, though I suppose that’s a good thing.”

Partridge smiled kindly. He ran his fingers through his hair in an uncertain way that made him look even more attractive than usual. “Yes, well . . . You should have contacted me sooner. The
headaches are probably a side effect of the fortifying potions taken in such quick succession, plus the stress on your body. As far as I know, no one has had so many fetuses transferred in such a short time. There are bound to be some unexpected results. But don’t worry; the headaches may be a nuisance, but they’re not really harmful. I’ll give you a stronger pain reliever for now . . . if you’ll take it, that is.” Hermione nodded, and he looked relieved, as if he’d been worried she’d lost all faith in him. “And since your husband is a potioneer, I suggest you ask him for something once you’re back at school if the headaches continue.”

He took a bottle from the cupboard and handed it to her. She only hesitated a moment before drinking it, and immediately her headache did start to fade considerably. “But you do want to tamper with the genetics of unborn children,” she said disapprovingly, halfway between a statement and a question.

Taking the bottle from her and putting it away, he nodded. “I believe that some of the health issues we face today can be stopped in the womb. And yes, I believe that we may even find ways to make improvements on, shall we say, the existing genetic template. But it’s all theory at this point. I’m years away from developing any practical applications. And you must believe me, I would never perform experiments of any kind of someone without their full and knowledgeable consent.”

Hermione tucked that information away for a future argument, but let it set her mind at rest for the moment. “Er . . . there’s something I should tell you, then,” she said, silently berating herself once again. At his raised eyebrows, she continued. “I didn’t take the last potions you sent me.”

An interesting sequence of emotions passed over his face in the next few moments: surprise, confusion, embarrassment, then finally thoughtfulness. “Well, this may make things more difficult. But, this fetus has had two weeks more than the others did, so perhaps that will compensate for the lack of fortifying potions.”

The reminder of why she was here today was not welcome. Her fears about her Healer may have been eased, but she still wasn’t about to give her baby to some unknown woman without trying to stop it. “Who’s the surrogate this time? Please, Healer Partridge, I have to know.”

Rather than denying her outright, Partridge looked at her and chewed on his lip as if debating with himself. Perhaps her anger today had proved useful after all. “I shouldn’t . . . The rules . . .” Eventually, he nodded. “I’ll ask her. If she’s all right with it, you can see her.”

After he stepped out, Hermione was alone for less than a minute before he returned with a green-robed, blonde young witch in his wake.

“Luna!”

“Hello, Hermione,” Luna said, smiling serenely.

Hermione grinned. “This is what you talked to Professor Dumbledore about.”

Luna simply nodded. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“Mind?” Hermione gave her friend a crushing hug. “It’s wonderful. Thank you, Luna. But, how did you know?”

“You haven’t been hiding it very well,” Luna answered. “I could tell something was different as soon as term started again. You’ve seemed worried about something all year. I do sometimes read the Daily Prophet, even if it’s mostly nonsense, so I knew about the breeding program. With Rita Skeeter’s article, it was obvious you’d been chosen. After the Slytherins cornered you in the
dungeons, you never did tell us why you’d gone down there. And then you kept having more and more reasons to go see Professor Snape after hours.” She shrugged, and Hermione’s stomach twisted at the idea that she’d been so easy to find out, despite the precautions she and Snape had taken.

“Luna, you haven’t told anyone, have you?” she asked frantically.

Luna cocked her head. “Why? Who do you think wants to know?”

At that moment, Hermione was intensely glad her friend had no concept of what made good gossip, nor any interest in spreading it. “Just please be careful not to let it slip. We’re trying to keep it as secret as possible.”

Luna nodded as if it didn’t much interest her one way or the other. “But I didn’t think it was Professor Snape who was making you so unhappy, since you always say nice things about him. Then I saw you crying in the corridor, and Professor Snape told me to help you. I thought if anyone knew what was wrong and how to help, Professor Dumbledore would. So I asked him if there was anything I could do to help you. Luckily, there was. I’m sorry; I know it’s not much.”

Hermione put her hands on Luna’s shoulders. “It’s enough, Luna. It’s more than enough. Thank you.”

Luna just smiled back as if she’d agreed to let Hermione copy her notes, rather than to carry Hermione’s child within her own body to keep it safe.

They were interrupted by Partridge clearing his throat. “If everything’s all right here, may we get on with things?”

Hermione nodded reluctantly. She still didn’t want to do it, but if she had to, this was the best way she could imagine it happening. At least, this time. But this couldn’t go on forever.

The transfer went well, all things considered. Partridge had a bit more trouble with it than he’d had with the others due to the fact that Hermione had not taken the potions after she’d conceived, and Luna spent the rest of the weekend lying in a bed in the hospital wing to help things settle, but she was back in class by Monday. Hermione felt guilty about not keeping her company on Sunday while she was laid up (with what Ron and Neville were told was a bout of twenty-four-hour doxy flu), as she spent the majority of that day in the loo, expelling the lining of her uterus in a most painful and inconvenient fashion.

It was nearly lunch on Tuesday before Hermione realized what the significance of it being Tuesday was. It had been six weeks, three funerals, and one destroyed Horcrux since she had last met Snape for a Ministry-prescribed shag, and in some ways it seemed like forever. Only when she saw the owl land in front of her, nearly knocking over her pumpkin juice, did she remember that Snape had got into the habit of setting their ‘dates’ on Tuesdays.

Things between them had been cordial lately—the trip to St. Mungo’s had been quiet, but at least he hadn’t berated or insulted her for any reason—but she didn’t think she was ready to have sex with him again yet. In part, it was because things had been going reasonably well. This sort of understanding that had begun to settle between them felt fragile, like a thin sheet of glass over a bottomless pit. She didn’t want to damage it by asking it to support too much too soon.

Pursing her lips in nervousness, she untied the bit of parchment from the owl’s leg.
Miss Granger,

Please meet me in my office after dinner tonight to discuss your project.

Professor Snape

She swallowed hard. It seemed perhaps they’d have to have sex tonight whether she preferred to or not. Then she frowned. Where is the potion? On every other occasion, Snape had given her the arousal potion to forestall the need for lengthy contact (physically, if not emotionally, at any rate). Had he forgotten? Was he out of the necessary ingredients? Did this delicate sort of truce between them mean he wanted to give a go at more traditional types of sexual preparation? The thought made her stomach flutter violently.

Her eyes darted to the staff table where Snape sat in polite conversation with Professor Flitwick. For an instant, he looked her way and their eyes locked. But she could read nothing in those black windows, and the next moment he had returned his attention to Flitwick.

Finding it difficult to eat the rest of her meal, she submitted to the small talk Neville instigated in an effort to ignore the palpable tension between her and Ron. Though sitting right next to her, Ron had not said more than five words during the meal. In fact, he hadn’t said much to her since their row on Saturday. She tried to hide how much this hurt her from him, and given how dense he usually was about her feelings, she imagined she succeeded. But she’d seen him in such moods before. It would wear off eventually. It had to.

She left dinner early (not having been able to eat much at that meal either), checked the coast was clear in her Foe-Glass, and made her way to Snape’s office.

“Enter.”

She slipped through the door quietly, not wanting any passersby to give her notice. Snape was at his desk, marking papers. She watched in silence as he ran the red quill over line after line, viciously crossing out words and scribbling things she couldn’t read in the margins. He didn’t seem to be slowing down, so she said, “I think the owl may have dropped the potion before it reached me.”

“What are you blathering about?” he asked as he continued to scribble.

“With your note at lunch,” she clarified. “The, er, potion you usually send wasn’t with it.”

Finally, Snape set the quill and scroll aside, leaned back in his chair, and gave her his full attention. “That is because I sent no potion.”

I was afraid of that. Hermione shifted her weight from one foot to the other. So, they were finally going to try things the old fashioned way. Her stomach gave another angry flutter. “Why is that?”

He steepled his fingers and watched her. After a moment, Hermione began to get the distinct impression that he was enjoying watching her squirm. At last, he said, “Because there will be no need for it tonight—or any other night. The Ministry’s requirements have been fulfilled. We will no longer be required to have intercourse.”

“What?” Hermione’s mouth fell open in shock. A dozen questions sprang to mind and fought for a
chance to be first from her lips. “You mean we’re done?”

Snape nodded. “The Minister has decided that, having produced four offspring for their program, we have fulfilled our civic duty.” His words were laced with a poison she knew wasn’t intended for her. “He has seen fit to release us from our agreement.”

“Which I never agreed to in the first place,” Hermione spat, unable to help herself. “Wait, does this mean we’re not . . .” For some reason, she couldn’t quite make herself say divorced.

“The marriage, such as it is, remains in tact,” Snape said. “The Ministry simply has no further need for our services . . . for the foreseeable future, at least.”

It’s over! An intense, heartbreaking relief flooded through Hermione with such force that she had to put out a hand and grab a nearby shelf to keep from falling to her knees. No more awkward, uncomfortable sex. No more unwanted pregnancies. No more transfers of her babies once they’d been conceived. She could hardly believe it.

Then she frowned. “But if it’s over, why did they force me to transfer the last baby to Luna? Why couldn’t they just have let me carry that one to term?”

Snape raised an eyebrow. “You would have wanted to?”

“Of course!” Hermione surprised herself at the vehemence of her own outburst. “I may not want babies forced on me, but once I have them, I bloody well want to keep them.”

“You’ve been spending too much time around Weasley,” Snape said, frowning, but Hermione thought the potions and pregnancy hormones were likely more to blame for her recent bouts of indecent language. “You fail to see the point. The Minister may not desire any more children from us, but he still has plans for the ones we’ve already produced. They’re to be raised by Ministry-approved families.”

Hermione grimaced. She’d suspected as much. “Well, good. Now that we don’t have to keep making more, we can focus on getting back the ones we have made.”

“I think not.”

“What?” She felt a flash of anger at his careless tossing-aside of the very notion of retrieving their children. “You may not care about them, Severus, but they’re still your children! Surely you can’t just forget—”

“No, I can’t,” he barked. “Twice a week now I teach a class, knowing that fully half of the students before me are unwittingly carrying my children—children conceived, no less, with yet another of my students. Do you have any idea how humiliating—how obscene—that is? And how well do you think I can teach the lesson when I must ensure that none of the potions or ingredients will hurt the fetuses if the carrier is careless? Oh, no, Miss Granger. Forgetting is absolutely impossible.”

Hermione stood stunned. She hadn’t known that Luna, Antoinette, Evelyn, and Cecilia were all in sixth-year Potions. It must, she had to admit, have been very awkward for him. “Luna’s not unwitting,” she said. “She knows you’re my husband.”

“You told her?” Snape bellowed.

“No, she figured it out. It was a shock to me, too. But she is a Ravenclaw, after all. I’ve told her not to tell anyone.”
This calmed him, and he sat back in his chair. "The offspring are safe for the time being. Albus saw to that." He sounded strangely bitter about what Hermione thought was something to be grateful for. "We have a more urgent problem. Or, more accurately, I have a more urgent problem. I only hope your desire to be rid of me is not as strong as your need to help every hungry orphan and lost puppy that crosses your path."

Hermione frowned as a suspicion began to form in her mind. "You've been taking Wentworth’s Brew, haven’t you?"

His eyes narrowed for a moment. "You’ve only now figured that out?"

"But—when you first assigned it, you said—"

"That I’m not a Gryffindor, which is true."

*Of course.* "Why?"

"I did not want to alarm you," Snape said calmly, "but it was part of the agreement I made."

"What could possibly have compelled you to agree to that?"

"That’s between myself and the Minister. Suffice it to say I have my reasons."

"But it’ll kill you!"

"And that, Miss Granger, is where you come in. I believe that with your help, there is a chance I may find a cure. A slim chance, of course, but . . . Given my role in this war, it was always unlikely I would live—"

"Stop it." Hermione’s tone was firm and sure, and Snape looked suitably surprised. "I’ve had enough of your pessimistic talk. There’s been too much dying already. I’m not going to let you just give up. We’re going to find that cure, and that’s that."

Snape stared at her for a long moment. She almost thought she saw the corners of his mouth quirk up, just for an instant. "You’re a bossy twat," he said, but before she could retort, he went on. "The first tumor appeared several months ago, so we haven’t a great deal of time. Six months, perhaps."

"You’ve seen a Healer, then?"

"There was no need."

"Then how do you know for sure you’ve got tumors if you haven’t got a diagnosis?"

"Because," Snape said matter-of-factly. "I’ve been unable to read since October." As Hermione tried to work out how that statement made any sense, Snape held up the scroll he’d been marking so she could see it. At first glance, it appeared much like his normal marking, if a bit more ruthless. On closer inspection, however, she saw that most of the marks were simply things crossed out and vague comments like *pitiful, try again,* and *troll logic* written in the margins and between lines.

"You haven’t been reading our essays all year?" Hermione gasped, appalled at the idea. "You’ve just been . . . *guessing* our grades?"

"Your sympathy for my condition is stifling."

Hermione felt heat rise to her cheeks. "Sorry. I didn’t . . . That’s why you’ve had me reading all those books! Why you needed my help! You couldn’t read them yourself. But wait—if you can’t
read, how did you write the notes you sent me?”

“I used a Dicta-Quill, charmed to match my own handwriting. However, I am not completely unable to write. There are certain things which I’ve written so frequently as to become muscle memory.” He flashed the essay at her once more for emphasis.

“But you really haven’t been reading our essays at all?” Hermione asked, unable to banish from her mind the idea that a teacher had been giving anything less than fair marks.

“There is precious little variation in the work quality of most students,” Snape stated. “Though my brain can no longer process written language, I can still recognize handwriting. I give people the same sorts of marks they’ve always got. Classwork is, of course, also a determining factor.”

As there was nothing to be done about it now, Hermione tried to accept that—for the time being, at least. Taking a step closer to him, she said, “Thank you, Severus. I don’t understand why you agreed to take that potion, but I’m glad you told me. We’ll find a cure.”

Snape’s jaw clenched, but he gave no response.

“Is that all? I have Astronomy tonight, and then I’d like to get back to my research.”

“That’s all,” Snape said.

Hermione took out her Foe-Glass, made sure no one was coming, and went back to Gryffindor tower.

#

As they hadn’t been assigned much work yet and Ron was still not talking to her, Hermione was able to spend most of Wednesday evening in her room, researching Wentworth’s. Though she had been wrong about her own life being in danger, the knowledge that Snape had taken the potion spurred her on to comb every potions book she’d acquired in the hopes that she’d find something she’d previously missed.

When she realized that she had half an hour left until curfew and still hadn’t gleaned anything useful, her frustration got the better of her. If the answer was here, she wasn’t finding it. She needed more books. But where could she get more books in the castle? She’d already long ago searched through everything in the library, she had the books Snape had got her at Flourish and Blotts, and she had the Dark Arts book on blood poisons Snape had given her (she’d even given it a cursory read-through).

Then she remembered. And if she was quick, she still had time to make it there and back before curfew.

In a matter of minutes, she was pacing in front of the Room of Requirement, thinking about somewhere to hide something. A door appeared, and she entered, going straight to where she’d seen the largest grouping of old books.

Many of the books had got moldy, but Hermione knew spells to rejuvenate and clean them, which she employed. Looking longingly at the rows of leather covers, she wished she had more time to peruse them and resolved to return when she had more time. For now, she quickly read the spines and grabbed those that seemed to have anything to do with potions, pregnancy, or brain maladies.

Five minutes later, with a stack of eight old and tatty books in her arms, she hurried back to her room. She read long into the night, but still didn’t find anything of immediate significance.
Hermione awoke later than usual the next morning, and there seemed to be an anxious excitement in the air when she went down for breakfast.

More students than usual were reading the *Daily Prophet*, and most of those that didn’t have one were crowded around those that did. There was wild chatter everywhere—mostly shock with equal amounts of anger and rejoicing scattered throughout. Hermione heard snippets of conversations as she walked down the line of tables.

“What are they gonna do about—”

“—about bloody time someone—”

“—git deserved it, I think. My mum’s been saying—”

“—just walking in and finding that—”

“What’s going on?” Hermione asked, slipping into her seat between Ron and Neville. They’d been huddled together with a paper Hermione assumed was hers (she made a mental note to repay whichever of them had paid the owl).

Whatever the news was, it had evidently caused Ron to forget he was angry at her. “Look, Hermione! It’s bloody madness! Dad says the Ministry’s in a complete frenzy!”

Fearing the worst, Hermione looked at the front page.

*MINISTER MURDERED*

Nearly dropping the paper in shock, she hastened to read on.

*LONDON—Minister for Magic Rufus Scrimgeour was found dead in his office yesterday afternoon. Investigators believe he was hit with the Killing Curse. There are no official suspects at this time, but the Minister’s personal assistant, Percy Weasley, was seen fleeing the scene shortly after the murder was believed to have occurred.*

“I didn’t think nothing of it at the time, of course,” said Laurence Littlebottom, a member of the Minister’s personal staff. “Just thought he’d forgotten to file a briefing request or something. Always was an uptight one, Percy. But he never came back after that. About half an hour later, I went in to tell the Minister I was going home, and I found him. Just lying there on the floor, still as can be, his eyes buggy and shocked-looking. It was right terrible, I tell you.”

*There is, of course, no hard evidence as of yet, but Percy Weasley is wanted for questioning.*

Scrimgeour was dead. Hermione couldn’t pretend she’d never wished something awful would happen to him, after he started this horrible P.E.W.S. program, but she wouldn’t have wanted him dead (despite what the Horcrux-Draco had said). Among other things, a dead Minister for Magic meant an unstable Ministry, and an unstable Ministry was ripe for Voldemort’s picking.
“But Ron! This makes it sound like Percy’s killed him!”

Ron looked as appalled by the suggestion as she felt. “I know. I mean, sure he’s a git, but Percy couldn’t kill anyone! He must have seen whoever did it and run away. But now they can’t find him to ask him about it, so they think he did it.”

“He’s probably afraid whoever did it is still in the Ministry,” Neville suggested. “If he did witness a murder, he might be a target. Maybe it’s good that he’s staying hidden.”

“He’s just covering his own arse,” Ron growled. “I’ve had a letter from Dad. He said they called him in and questioned him for over an hour last night, and still don’t believe him that he doesn’t know where Percy is.” His eyes went to the staff table, where Molly’s seat was empty. “Must have owled Mum, too. I haven’t seen her yet.”

*Probably crying her eyes out with worry,* Hermione thought.

“But that’s not the worst of it,” Neville said, nodding at the paper. Hermione skimmed further down the article.

*Until a special election can be held to select a replacement, Dolores Umbridge will take over duties as interim Minister for Magic.*

Hermione felt her stomach drop into her feet. “Umbridge is the new Minister?”

“I know,” Ron said hopelessly. “We’re buggered.”

#

To Hermione’s great surprise, Molly showed up to their Transfiguration class after lunch. She looked ten kinds of heartsick, but she made a valiant effort to disguise her emotional turmoil.

“Today’s lesson,” she announced as soon as they’d taken their seats, “will move us beyond the realm of primates. Today, we’ll be learning how to turn people into dogs. Dogs are more difficult than apes, but as large dogs at least are somewhat size-comparable to humans, the transfiguration is not as difficult as, say, turning humans into gerbils, and easier still than turning humans into lizards. Now pair up and try this spell on one another.” She flicked her wand and the word *Canino* appeared on the board behind her.

Padma, who had been Hermione’s partner the week before, evidently decided she’d had enough of Hermione hogging all the practice time, and paired with Seamus before Hermione could say anything to her. Hermione found herself paired with Ron. He wasn’t completely hopeless at it, managing to give her a tail on one attempt. Hermione, of course, turned him into a terrier on her third try.

The little dog ran to Hermione happily and jumped up as if he wanted to play. Hermione laughed and patted it on the head. The dog actually looked remarkably like Ron’s Patronus, and Hermione was about to ask about this when the door burst open.

Molly, who’d been nearly smiling at the sight of dog-Ron chasing his tail in circles, looked horror-struck at the man who’d interrupted the class.

“Bill! What is it? What’s happened?”

Bill Weasley stood in the doorway. The students stopped what they were doing and stared. Given several of them were currently partially canine, it must have been an odd sight—but not much
oddler than a several-years-graduated former Head Boy bursting into class. “Sorry for barging in, Mum, but”—he glanced around warily—“I’ve brought someone who needs to see you.”

“Class dismissed!” Molly yelled, already racing toward the door.

Hermione hurriedly transfigured Ron back to himself. “Hurry, Ron, let’s go!”

“What’s going on? Was I just a terrier?”

“Yes,” she hissed. “You were adorable. Now let’s go. Bill’s here, and I think he brought Percy.”

Ron needed no further prodding to gather his bag and follow her out the door, hot on the heels of Molly and Bill.

They caught up with Ron’s mum and brother quickly, but he wouldn’t explain what was going on until they found themselves at the gargoyle statue that guarded the way to the Headmaster’s—Headmistress’s—office.

“Toadstool,” said Bill, the gargoyle moved aside, and the four of them hurried up the stairs.

McGonagall’s office was already full of people when they entered. Molly spotted Percy at once, ran to him, and engulfed him in a hug. Percy didn’t resist, but after a stunned moment, hugged her back and began crying into her shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Mum!” he bellowed. “I’m sorry for everything! I’ve been—I’ve been a prat!”

“Shh, hush now,” Molly said, crying as well. “All is forgiven, love. Whatever’s happened, we’ll get it taken care of.”

Hermione looked around as the scene played out, once again feeling like she was intruding on something private. But at least she wasn’t the only one.

Bill still looked hurried, as if this was more or less the reaction he’d expected. Ron’s face was stuck somewhere between anger and relief. Fleur was there, as well, tense and expectant. She stood beside Tonks and Lupin, who appeared empathetic. McGonagall sat behind her desk with a stern expression, and Snape stood in one corner, glowering.

Finally, the reunion calmed down enough for Percy to take a seat, but he didn’t stop crying. Molly sat beside him, nestling him under her arm and continuing to make soothing noises.

“What’s happened?” Hermione asked the room at large.

Percy whimpered and buried his head in his hands. Hermione looked at Bill.

“He came to Shell Cottage last night, completely hysterical,” Bill explained. “He wouldn’t calm down enough to tell us what happened until this morning. Once he did, we brought him straight here.”

“Percy,” Lupin said in his most soothing tone, “we saw the paper. Do you know who killed the Minister?”

“Yes,” Percy said and sobbed again. “I did.”

This pronouncement was met with a chorus of stunned speechlessness. “Why?” asked Snape, the only one other than Bill and Fleur who took the news in relative stride—and they had the benefit of having already known.
Percy lifted his head from his hands and looked at Snape with desperate, wild eyes. “I don’t know!”
McGonagall stood and looked over her glasses at Percy. “Mr. Weasley, please give me your wand.”

With shaking hands, Percy pulled his thin elm wand from his robes and held it out. Lupin took it and passed it to McGonagall.

The Headmistress inspected the wand with pursed lips, then pointed it to the ceiling and said, “Priori Incantato.”

A wisp of green shot from the end of the wand, the ghost of a Killing Curse. Hermione gasped, and Molly let out a startled yelp then clutched Percy tighter.

“Delitrius,” McGonagall said, and the green wisp disappeared. She set the wand carefully on her desk and sat down. “This is a very grave situation, Mr. Weasley.”

“It isn’t true!” said Molly, shaking her head vigorously. ‘Someone’s tried to frame him!”

“Yeah,” said Ron. “Someone must have taken his wand, murdered Scrimgeour, then given it back to him and made him think he did it.”

“That’s what we said,” Bill offered, “but—”

“But I did do it,” Percy protested helplessly.

“Impossible,” insisted Molly. “You’re not capable of it, Percy, not even if you wanted to.”

“He would be,” said Snape without raising his voice, and everyone looked at him, “if he were under the Imperius Curse.”

All eyes turned to Percy again, considering the possibility with suspicion and horror. Hermione caught herself looking for the hint of the Curse in his eyes, but saw nothing.

“Why don’t you tell us what you remember,” said Lupin.

Percy took a shuddering breath, then sat up straighter, attempting to gather some dignity. “The last thing for a long time that I remember clearly is walking down the corridors of the Ministry. I had heard a rumor that Fenrir Greyback had been captured, and I wanted to find out for myself if it was true.” He glanced at Bill. “That was the second of July. After that, it’s all sort of a haze until yesterday.”

Molly put her hand to her mouth, and tears leaked from her eyes. Ron’s face was oddly tight like he was holding in some undirected anger. Bill’s jaw was set in a sort of resolute patience.

“Did you see who cursed you?” McGonagall asked. Percy shook his head. “What do you remember next?”

“It’s sort of fuzzy still,” he said, his face contorted like it was a great effort to retrieve the memories. “I was in the Minister’s office. He was yelling about something. He was nearly deranged with anger. He was going to . . . do something. I don’t know what. Change something, I think. He wanted me to contact . . . someone, to set up a meeting. Then I just got this stray thought,
like a tiny voice saying, ‘Kill him,’ and it seemed just like the thing to do, so while his back was
turned I raised my wand and . . . ” He couldn’t finish. He didn’t need to. “Then I came back to
myself. I saw him lying there, and I was scared, so I ran. What am I going to do?” He started
crying again, and Molly rubbed circles on his back.

A meaningful look passed among most of those present. “Percy, listen to me,” said Lupin. “It
wasn’t your fault. Someone put you under the Imperius Curse. You aren’t responsible for what you
did. I think we can all just be grateful that the shock of it allowed you to shake the curse off. You
were right to go to your family and to tell us what happened. We can help you.”

“You’re not going to turn me in?” Percy asked in a high, pleading voice.

“We can’t,” said Tonks. “Even if we would have before, we’re dealing with Minister Umbridge
now. There’s no way she’d see reason about it. Honestly, I wouldn’t be surprised if she’d been the
one to curse you.”

“Engaging in unfounded speculation will not help the situation,” said McGonagall, “but
Nymphadora is correct. You’ll stay here, Mr. Weasley, until we can decide what to do about this.
We certainly aren’t going to toss you to the likes of Dolores Umbridge.”

“Minerva,” said Snape, taking a step toward Percy, “perhaps it would be prudent to relieve Mr.
Weasley of his memory of this event.”

Percy looked at him with a mixture of fear and hope. “You mean Obliviate me?”

“Obliviating you would do nothing but erase the only evidence of what really happened,” said
Snape. “No, Mr. Weasley, I am suggesting you give us the memory. We can then see for ourselves
what the truth of the matter is.”

“But I still wouldn’t remember it, would I?” Percy asked.

“You would not.”

“Does that work?” Hermione blurted. “I mean, since he was Imperiused, would the memory still be
clear and accurate?”

“It would be somewhat hazy,” Snape answered, “but it would be clear and accurate enough.”

“Do it.” Percy had got to his feet. “Please, take it out. Do whatever you want with it, but take it
out!”

“Are you certain of this, Mr. Weasley?” asked McGonagall. “Memories are very personal things.
Of course, you would be able to get it back once—”

“I don’t want it back,” Percy insisted. “Please, just take the damn thing out!”

“Very well,” said McGonagall. “Severus, if you would.”

Snape withdrew his wand and a small vial from his robes. Percy flinched when Snape pressed his
wand to Percy’s temple, but forced himself steady. “Focus on the memory you want to give me,”
said Snape, and Percy closed his eyes tightly and remained very still. As Snape’s wand drew back
from Percy’s skin, a thin, silvery strand appeared between them. The memory came out easily, and
once it was out, while Snape was putting it into the vial, Percy slumped into his chair.

“Are you all right, dear?” Molly asked, putting her arm around him again.
Percy rubbed his forehead, then looked at her. “Yes,” he said, and he indeed looked much better, as if a great weight had been lifted from him. “I . . . I can still remember that I did it. I remember everything after I ran away—going to Bill’s, coming here and telling you all—but . . . I can’t see his face anymore. I can’t remember saying the words . . . ” He sighed heavily and looked up at Snape. “Thank you, Professor Snape.”

Snape looked nonplussed, as if he had no idea how to respond to genuine gratitude. So, he simply gave a terse nod and passed the vial containing the memory to McGonagall. As he did so, Hermione glanced at Lupin, who she was surprised to see smiling an amused, knowing little smile at Snape. He really is going to have to get used to people appreciating him, she thought, finding a small smile had found its way onto her face, as well.

“What ’appens now?” asked Fleur.

“Remus and I will have a look at this memory,” said McGonagall. “Hopefully once we do, we’ll have a better idea where to go from here. Bill, Fleur, you need to get home. If you’re gone for long, someone might come around asking questions to which you don’t have appropriate answers.”

“Er,” said Bill, wrapping his arm around Fleur’s waist in what seemed to be an unconscious movement. “We weren’t exactly stealthy in coming here. I don’t think anyone saw Percy, but I probably made an impression on a few kids in Mum’s class.”

“Then I’m sure you’ll be able to think of a reason to explain your presence here,” said McGonagall, “as long as it doesn’t include any mention of the former Minister or your brother.”

“Arthur!” Molly said suddenly. “I should tell Arthur what’s happened.”

“You can’t, Mum,” said Ron. “If Dad knows anything, he could be in danger.”

“He’s right,” added Hermione. “It’s called plausible deniability. If Mr. Weasley’s not hiding anything, he can’t get in trouble. And he can’t tell anything he shouldn’t if they decide to use Veritaserum.”

Molly looked like she wanted to protest for a moment, then nodded.

“Molly, Nymphadora, Severus, you’ve all got one more class to teach today,” McGonagall said. “Get back to them before the students start thinking anything is wrong. You have another class as well, if I’m not mistaken, Miss Granger.”

“I do,” said Hermione, feeling a strange mixture of disappointment and relief that she wouldn’t be watching the memory of the murder.

“I’m done for the day,” said Ron apprehensively.

“Your brother requires a place to stay for the time being,” McGonagall told him. “I trust you can think of a suitable room.”

Ron nodded. “Come on, Perce. We’d better go before the rest of the classes get out.”

Looking at him as if uncertain what to expect from Ron once they were alone, Percy got up and went to him. For a half-second, Ron didn’t seem to know quite how to treat him either. Then he gave a crooked smile and awkwardly patted Percy on the back. Percy grinned with relief and followed him out.

When she went to her next class, Hermione had a hard time concentrating on herbology.
“What’s wrong, Hermione?” Neville asked after the Venomous Tentacula they were tending nearly bit her.

“What isn’t wrong?” Hermione mumbled. She wanted to tell him about Percy, about what was going on with her children, about the fact that her husband had given himself a terminal disease and only had a matter of months to live—but Neville wasn’t cleared to know any of that. Not yet, anyway. So, instead, she just said, “Umbridge is Minister for Magic. Isn’t that enough?”

“What do you think she’ll do first?” Neville asked.

Hermione frowned. “I don’t know, Neville, but you can bet it won’t be to our benefit.”

#

Neville’s question was answered one week later, when Hermione opened her copy of the Daily Prophet.

LYCANTHROPY OUTLAWED

LONDON—Minister for Magic Dolores Umbridge has passed a law making it illegal to be a werewolf. It’s a bold and promising first move in her new (and as-yet-temporary) office, but one which she has been trying to accomplish for many years. Werewolves, also known as lycanthropes, are dangerous Dark Creatures which have been tolerated by the Ministry so far only because of bleeding-heart supporters like the late Albus Dumbledore, who insist that these monsters are people. With this new regulation, Minister Umbridge, who has always known these beasts’ true nature, has taken an important step in making wizarding Britain a safer place for witches and wizards of all ages.

The first step outlined in the Werewolf Eradication Act calls for the Department of Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures to submit their Werewolf Registration records to the Werewolf Capture Unit for examination. The werewolves whose identities and whereabouts are on file will be tracked down, captured, and humanely euthanized.

“Hermione? You okay?” Ron snatched the paper from her hands, which had been shaking so badly with fury that she’d begun to tear the pages.

“They can’t just—The absolute nerve of those—” Hermione literally could not find words to express the rage that was boiling inside her. That Umbridge could condemn people who’d committed no crime to death—and that the Wizengamot and the public would go along with it—was so outrageous a situation that her brain had a hard time processing all the thoughts and emotions it evoked.

“Bloody hell!” shouted Ron, who’d taken a look at the article himself. “They can’t do that! Can they?”

Neville took the paper from him and read it. His reaction was more or less the same as Ron and Hermione’s had been. “Where’s Professor Lupin?” he asked, looking at the staff table.

*They haven’t got him already!* Hermione thought, horror-struck, as she looked at the line of teachers. Lupin and Tonks were both missing.
“Remus is fine,” Tonks told them when they arrived early to D.A.D.A. after breakfast, though from the sound of her voice, she was even less happy about the news than they were. “He’s hiding in the Room of Requirement for now.”

“Will they find him?” Hermione asked, thinking that it might have been smarter for Lupin to flee the country.

“Not any time soon, I don’t think,” said Tonks. “Mad-Eye’s got himself assigned to the task force meant to be capturing them. Remus doesn’t like hiding out and doing nothing, but I told him, much as I do enjoy flaunting my trophy husband, he won’t do the baby and me any good by getting himself exterminated.”

“Professor Moody?” Neville asked. “Isn’t he retired? How’d he get assigned to a Ministry task force?”

“After losing me and Kingsley, the Auror Department brought him back on temporarily.”

“And they trust him to hunt werewolves?” Hermione asked.

“The fact that he’s got one for a friend isn’t well-known,” Tonks answered. “His hatred for all things Dark, on the other hand, is nearly legend.”

“Won’t they realize he’s not bringing any werewolves in?” Ron asked.

Tonks nodded, her face grim. “Eventually. We’ve got to come up with another plan before that happens.”

“What about the centaurs and mermaids and other non-human beings?” Hermione asked. “You know Umbridge’ll be coming after them next.”

“We know. But McGonagall thinks we should deal with the problems we have now before we worry about the ones we might have later.”

Hermione didn’t find her mind particularly settled by this. It meant that the sensation of being smothered by a never-ending avalanche of problems wasn’t limited to Hermione herself. If even McGonagall and the rest of the Order were so swamped with things to deal with that they didn’t have time to spare for contingency planning, things were even worse than Hermione had thought.

Two days later, representatives from the Werewolf Capture Unit arrived at Hogwarts to arrest Lupin. Despite their best efforts, the two junior Aurors were unable to find him, and Lead Auror Moody decided it would be a waste of time and resources to sit around and wait for him to show up, and they’d just have to try back later.

#

Someone was screaming. As Hermione ran down the corridor, the sound filled her ears until she couldn’t even hear her own footfalls. Louder and louder, coming from all around her—until she realized they weren’t screams. They were howls. Or maybe they were screams. If wolves could scream, they would sound like this.

Then there were more. Not howls, but not quite screams either. Cries of pain from inhuman voices. They were dying.

She turned the corner to what should have been the library, but instead she found herself on the lawn in front of the castle. The grass was blood-red and strewn with bodies. Werewolves, centaurs,
merpeople . . . even house-elves. Firenze lay a short distance away with his head beside him. She saw Tonks lying beside a mutilated wolf, a silver spike through her pregnant belly.

**Hermione screamed at the sight and backed away, shaking her head.**

“It’s no use,” said a voice behind her, and she backed into Snape before she could stop herself. “Just be glad they weren’t humans.”

She turned to look up at him, and a rebuke died on her lips. The top of Snape’s head was gone. His face simply ended above his eyebrows.

He looked down at her. “The worst is yet to come.”

Hermione awoke with a scream.

**Oh, this has got to stop.** As if her life wasn’t bad enough when she was awake, she had to have horrible nightmares on top of it.

“Merlin’s pants, Hermione!” Lavender was awake, but groggy. “Are you trying to wake the dead?” But from the third bed, Parvati snored on.

“If only,” Hermione mumbled.

“What happened?”

“Nightmare,” Hermione admitted. “Sorry if I woke you.”

Possibly sensing something in her tone, Lavender got out of her own bed and drew back Hermione’s curtain. “Are you okay?”

Hermione sighed. “No. I’ve been having nightmares off and on all year, and I’ve no idea how to make them stop.”

In a strangely friendly gesture, Lavender sat on the side of Hermione’s bed. “Do you think they could be prophetic?”


Lavender frowned in thought for a moment. “You should see Tiresias.”

Hermione tried to place the name. “Who?”

“Professor Trelawney’s husband,” Lavender said, her eyes lighting up. “He’s completely brilliant. I’ll bet he can tell you what your dreams mean.”

“I don’t want to know what they mean,” Hermione said, refraining from scoffing in her face. “I just want them to go away.”

“Maybe he can help you with that, too. If you can understand what they mean, or what your brain is trying to tell you, maybe you can find a way to make them stop.”

Hermione thought about it. Maybe it was the fact that she’d just woken up, but it didn’t sound like a completely ridiculous idea when she put it that way. “Maybe . . . Where did you say he was?”

Lavender bounced, gesturing with excitement. “He stays in Professor Trelawney’s quarters. Sometimes he comes into her classroom when there isn’t a class. He says staying removed from
everyone else keeps his inner eye focused. Parvati and I caught him in there once, and he let us visit him again whenever we wanted if we didn’t tell anyone about finding him in there. Oops. Well, I’m sure he wouldn’t mind if you went and saw him. You’re in need, and he’s very wise. He’ll help you; I know it. You can usually find him in Professor Trelawney’s classroom during lunch. He sits up there and looks into his crystal balls. He’s a bit shy at first, but just tell him I sent you.”

I have truly hit rock bottom, Hermione thought later as she climbed up the ladder to Trelawney’s classroom. She could hardly believe that she was giving a moment’s credit to Lavender’s midnight ramblings or that she was wasting half her lunch period seeking out someone who sounded even loonier than Trelawney herself (after all, he’d agreed to impregnate the silly woman, hadn’t he?). As she ascended, she wondered what to expect. A dazed expression and airy speech that made no sense whatsoever, she was sure. Yet, she kept climbing. It was a long shot (a very, very long shot), but if there was any chance that this Tiresias could help her figure out how to get rid of her nightmares, it would be worth swallowing her pride a little.

The door at the top of the ladder was locked, and she knocked firmly. It unlocked itself almost instantly. She climbed up, closed the door behind her, and went to the middle of the room.

A figure she presumed was Tiresias sat on a poof with his back to her, hunched over something. An airy, yet strangely familiar voice said, “Ah, Miss Brown, I really don’t have time for—”

In a single instant, Hermione felt her world go into a tailspin. Tiresias had turned to her as he spoke, and had fallen silent as he’d met her eyes.

“Kingsley?” she gasped. Surely it couldn’t be true. It was too good to be true. Yet the man called Tiresias—the man sitting in a strangely dignified way upon a ridiculous purple poof, the man covered in bright, exotic robes and wearing so much jewelry he jingled with every movement—was indeed the spitting image of Kingsley Shacklebolt.

But her doubt was shattered when Tiresias—Kingsley—wiped the surprised expression off his face and shrugged. “Have a seat, Hermione.”

“But you’re dead!” Hermione yelled.

Kingsley withdrew his wand and pointed it at the door, locking it once again. “Well, yes, that was the idea.”

Stunned, Hermione walked closer to him and took a seat in a chair. Kingsley appeared totally comfortable on the poof. She thought about questioning him to make sure it was really him, but she couldn’t think of anything she knew that an imposter couldn’t reasonably know as well, and if he’d secretly been Tiresias this whole time, surely McGonagall and the others knew about it. With a flash, she remembered seeing the unusually bangly earring he’d worn when she’d run into him and Tonks, and she chastised herself for not considering it sooner.

“Why did you fake your own death?” she demanded, more forcefully than she’d meant to.

He smiled. “A necessary precaution. I’m sorry to have deceived you, but it was imperative that as few people as possible know I’m here.”

“Why are you here?” she asked. “Wait, does this mean—are you really Professor Trelawney’s husband?”

He leaned toward her confidentially. “Did you think you were the only one affected by the
marriage law?"

Hermione gaped. She’d known she wasn’t, but the only other two couples she knew of were ones who probably would have got married eventually anyway. She hadn’t known of any others who had been paired as precisely as her and Snape. She tried to fathom what sort of logical thought process could possibly result in the conclusion that Kingsley and Trelawney made a good match.

Kingsley sighed. “I suppose there’s no harm in telling you, now that you know I’m here. But you have to keep it to yourself, do you understand?”

She nodded, desperate to hear the explanation for this.

“You know about the prophecy Sybill made concerning Harry, correct?”

“Yes, but—”

Kingsley held up a hand. “Then you know that Voldemort has wanted to get his hands on her for a while. Now that the prophecy is destroyed, Sybill is the last remaining means by which Voldemort can find out what the rest of the prophecy said—or so he believes.”

“That’s why Dumbledore didn’t let Umbridge kick her out when she fired her,” Hermione said. “He kept her here to protect her.”

“Yes,” Kingsley said, then went on. “When the marriage law passed, Sybill was chosen as one of those to be married off. She was paired with another Seer, a reclusive man who hardly anyone had ever seen in person. Dumbledore thought this situation was intolerable. It would have taken Sybill away from Hogwarts and put her with someone who wouldn’t have been able to protect her. So, he asked me to step in and play Tiresias. The real Tiresias took an extended holiday to South America, and I married Sybill.”

Hermione gasped, shocked that Dumbledore would really ask someone to go that far, and even more shocked that Kingsley would agree to it. “Then you are really married to her!”

Kingsley gave a self-deprecating smile. It looked like he was trying not to grimace. “Very much so.”

“Then . . . you’re the father of her child?”

He winced, but covered it quickly. “In the past, I had considered the possibility of one day having children. I’d never imagined it would happen like this.”

“I know what you mean,” Hermione said self-consciously. Quite unbidden, an image came into her mind of Kingsley and Trelawney together. Comparatively, being Snape’s wife wasn’t all that horrible a fate.

“The look on your face right now,” Kingsley said, and laughed. “Don’t feel sorry for me, Hermione. As trying as Sybill is, it could be much worse. And she does have her good qualities.”

“Like what?”

“She isn’t clingy,” Kingsley said, with a vague gesture at the empty room. “She can be pretty entertaining once you know not to take her too seriously—of course, you can’t let her know that you’re not taking her seriously. And, oddly enough, she does seem rather taken with me.”

“Who wouldn’t be?” Hermione said before she could stop herself.
Kingsley raised an eyebrow. “What does that mean?” he asked as if he knew. He may not have been as vain as Gilderoy Lockhart, but Hermione was quite sure Kingsley knew how attractive he was to women.

“Only that if I’d been given a choice between you and Severus . . .” she started, but didn’t finish. Even jokingly, it felt somehow disloyal to say it.

Kingsley laughed again. “But that would have left Severus with Sybill.” He didn’t need to elaborate on what a ridiculous notion that was. Hermione found herself laughing along when she imagined it. “Besides,” Kingsley said, “Severus isn’t nearly so horrible as he makes himself out to be. I imagine you’ve found that out by now.”

“Yes,” Hermione said thoughtfully. “I imagine I have.”

Kingsley looked at her, a wry smile still on his face. “Fate’s a funny thing, isn’t it?”

“Fate?” she asked. “More Dumbledore than fate, isn’t it? In your case, at least.”

Kingsley hummed but didn’t say anything. Hermione was still trying to accustom her brain to the idea of Kingsley and Trelawney being married when he continued. “At first I was able to just stay here when I was off duty. Sybill didn’t mind my being gone, and the students didn’t really expect to see much of me anyway. But when Dumbledore died—”

“That’s why you didn’t attend the funeral,” Hermione blurted. “If you’d gone as Tiresias, people from the Ministry would have questioned you, and if you’d gone as yourself, Trelawney would have blown your cover.”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“Would you have wanted to go? Even after he made you marry Trelawney?”

“Dumbledore knew, as I do, that sometimes sacrifices have to be made in the fight against evil,” Kingsley said. “And considering the sacrifices some have made, I can hardly complain.”

She found his words oddly comforting—knowing she wasn’t alone, that someone else had had to marry someone they didn’t want to (someone other than Snape, that was). In that moment, she felt a strange sort of kinship with Kingsley.

“As I was saying,” he went on, “after Dumbledore died, Minerva wanted as many Order members at Hogwarts as possible. I tried to find excuses to spend more time here, but I just couldn’t do it while I had my Auror duties as well. So, it was decided that we’d fake my death to allow me to do Order work full time. If we win, I can simply reveal that reports of my death had been a mistake and return to my job. If we don’t win, early reports of my death will not likely matter.”

Hermione felt a bit better for a moment, knowing the lengths to which the Order was going to protect the school and its students. She felt as if she should be doing more herself, but another realization interrupted this line of thought. “But the Prophet said Slughorn killed you with Fiendfyre!”

“There are less harmful things which can be made to look like Fiendfyre,” Kingsley explained, “if one is sufficiently predisposed to see Fiendfyre regardless.”

“But—if it wasn’t really—” For the second time in a matter of minutes, hope sprung in Hermione’s chest. “Does that mean Slughorn’s not really a Death Eater?”
Kingsley held up a hand to cut off that line of questioning. “That’s another matter, and one which I don’t think it’s prudent to go into right now.”

With difficulty, Hermione held her tongue.

“Why did you come up here, anyway?” Kingsley asked. “From what I’ve heard, you’re the last person I’d expect to see in this tower.”

“Lavender told me to come see you—that is, to see Tiresias,” she admitted, feeling foolish. “I’ve been having nightmares, and she thought the great Seer might be able to help me figure out what they mean.”

To her relief, he didn’t laugh at her. “Dreams are just your mind’s way of trying to make sense of a crazy world. With all that’s been going on these days, I’m not surprised you’re having nightmares.”

“I know,” she said. “I guess I hoped there’d be a way to get them to stop.”

“Have you tried Dreamless Sleep?”

“Yes, but I can’t take it every night, and I never know which nights I’ll have a nightmare.”

Kingsley shook his head. “Sorry, Hermione. Maybe a real Seer could help you, but”—he jingled his bracelets—“this is just a costume.”

Something Lavender said once made Hermione frown. “Then how did you know?”

“Know what?”

“Months ago, Lavender said she talked to you and that you told her she had ‘The Sight’.”

Kingsley chuckled. “I was just telling her what she wanted to hear so she’d leave me alone.”

“But she does! I mean, she made a real prophecy.”

“Did she?” asked Kingsley, looking quizzical. “Well, I suppose even fortune cookies have to be right once in a while. What did she say?”

Suddenly Hermione was sorry she’d brought it up. The prophecy didn’t matter, right? She’d put it out of her head. So why was she mentioning it now? “Oh, something about four princes ruling with Voldemort,” she said, trying to brush it off. “Probably a load of rubbish, now I think of it.”

He looked at her intently, and she knew he was going to launch into his own round of questions. But she didn’t want to answer. The prophecy was rubbish. It had to be. Because if it wasn’t . . . No. It was.

“I’d better get to class,” she said, going back to the trap door. “Lunch is probably over by now, and I don’t want to be late. Don’t worry; I won’t tell anyone I saw you. I am glad you’re not dead, though, Kingsley.” She flashed him a smile, and he smiled back.

“I’m glad to not be dead,” he said.

He cast the spell to unlock the trapdoor, then turned back to what he’d been doing when Hermione had entered. Hermione took hold of the handle and—

“No!”
She spun around. Kingsley had leapt to his feet, the poof knocked aside and ignored. She ran toward him. “What is it?”

Kingsley grabbed a scarf from a nearby chair and wrapped it around his head, covering the lower half of his face, then grabbed his wand. “I’m coming with you. Now’s not the time for you to be alone in the corridors.”

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Look,” he said, stepping away and stripping off a few of the more ridiculous pieces of his costume.

His movement revealed what he’d been looking at. “A crystal ball?” But no. As she looked closer, she saw something was different about it. “It’s a Foe-Glass! I’ve never seen a spherical one before . . .” She trailed off as she recognized two of the faces in it. Bellatrix Lestrange and Antonin Dolohov. The images were clear as day. “They’re here?”

“Come on,” Kingsley said. He was already across the room with the trapdoor open. Hermione was quick to follow. “That Foe-Glass has a wider range than most. While most only tell you when your enemy is nearly in the room with you, that one covers all of the school.”

“So, two Death Eaters are in Hogwarts?” She jumped down, skipping the last three rungs of the ladder, and followed Kingsley at a sprint down the corridor. He didn’t answer her question, which was all too much answer in itself.

Luckily, the first people they ran into were Ron, Neville, and Luna. “Ron, where’s Professor McGonagall?”

“I just saw her leave the Great Hall,” said Ron, looking in confusion from Hermione to Kingsley, who still had a scarf tucked neatly around his face. “I think she was heading for her office.”

Kingsley gave Hermione a serious look and whispered, “Stay with them,” then ran off before she could say anything in response.

“Hey,” said Ron, staring after Kingsley in disbelief, “was that—”

“Yes, but don’t tell anyone!” snapped Hermione. “Now, come on. Bellatrix and Dolohov are somewhere in the school.”

“What?” shrieked Neville, drawing his wand immediately. Luna also drew hers.

“I saw it in a Foe-Glass,” Hermione explained. “I don’t know what part of the castle, though.”

“Most of the students are still in the Great Hall,” said Luna. “We should get down there to protect them.”

This course of action was quickly agreed upon, and the four of them took off after Kingsley. When they reached the Great Hall, they heard the scuffling of feet headed toward the Entrance Hall. Ron and Neville took off after the sound immediately, but Hermione grabbed Luna’s arm.

“Stay here with everyone else,” she said firmly, and glanced at Luna’s belly. “Stay safe, Luna.”

Luna nodded and said, “You too, Hermione.” When Hermione was sure she wouldn’t follow, she ran off after the boys.
They didn’t find anything in the Entrance Hall. Even when they caught up with the teachers, there was nothing new to learn. McGonagall ordered all students rounded up and kept in the Great Hall until the threat could be found. Hermione, Ron, and Neville helped the Head Boy and Girl and the prefects in rounding up students, then were ordered to the Great Hall themselves.

It took nearly an hour, but eventually every student who could be found was crowded together with the others in the Great Hall. Most of the teachers were still out searching for the Death Eaters, but Tonks and Trelawney (by virtue of being pregnant) had been left to keep order and organize a head count. Trelawney was no use at all, but Tonks swiftly ensured the exits were sealed and gave a vague announcement intended to alert everyone to the seriousness of the situation without throwing them into a panic. Hermione looked to see if any of the Slytherins had knowing, amused, or particularly smug expressions on their faces, but none did.

Ron and Neville were pacing. “Why won’t they let us help?” asked Ron irritably. “It’s not like we haven’t proven ourselves against Death Eaters before.”

“You are helping,” said Tonks, who had appeared in their midst without Hermione noticing. “If somehow Dolohov and my dear Aunt Bella”—Neville hissed something rude under his breath—“make it through these doors, I need to know I have fighters I can count on in here with me.”

This placated them somewhat—Neville took a seat, and Ron managed to stand still for more than ten seconds together—and Tonks turned to do a counting spell over the crowd. Then she frowned and did it again. She pointed her wand at her throat and said, “Sonorus,” then got on top of the nearest table (with such gracelessness, thanks to her natural talent for it combined with her enlarging belly, that she nearly toppled over twice and had to be helped up by Ron).

“Oi! You lot!” she called over the crowd. She got almost everyone’s attention at once. “Someone’s missing. Look around to see if you can’t find one of your friends.”

A great bustling and calling out of names ensued, rising and then finally dying down to a low murmur when someone called out, “Where’s Hannah?”

#

By the time McGonagall and the other teachers returned and let everyone go to their common rooms, it was night, and Hannah Abbot still had not been located.

“They’re gone, then?” asked Hermione. She, Ron, Neville, and Luna had lingered in the Great Hall until the rest of the students had cleared out.

“Yes,” McGonagall said. “We don’t believe they even made it to the castle itself. The last anyone knew, Miss Abbott was walking to Greenhouse Three for Herbology. We don’t know how they made it onto the grounds, but that seems to be as far as they got.”

“But why take Hannah?” Neville asked. “Does it have something to do with why they killed her mum?”

“We don’t know.” McGonagall shook her head. “I’m sorry, but you four will have to go back to your common rooms. There’s nothing more you can do right now.”

Neville and Luna obeyed, leaving reluctantly, but Hermione was looking around. “Where’s Professor Snape?” she asked. “I haven’t seen him since we got locked down in the Great Hall.”

McGonagall pursed her lips, then glanced around. She motioned them over to one corner, cast Muffliato to deter eavesdroppers, and said softly, “Professor Snape was called away during our
Hermione gasped, real dread seeping into her bones. “You mean . . .”

McGonagall nodded.

“Do you think it had to do with Hannah?” asked Ron.

“I don’t see how it couldn’t,” admitted McGonagall. She was allowing more of her fear to show on her face than she had in front of Luna and Neville.

“I’d like to wait for him to get back,” said Hermione, more a polite demand than a request.

McGonagall hesitated a moment, then nodded. “Very well. But it could be some time.”

“If she’s staying, I’m staying, too,” said Ron.

“Of course, Mr. Weasley. But you shouldn’t stay here. Go to the staff room. Professor Tonks will let you in.”

Ron made to walk away, but Hermione didn’t follow. Something had occurred to her. “Professor McGonagall,” she ventured. “If things go badly, the Order might need as many wands as it can get.”

“What are you suggesting, Miss Granger?”

“Luna and Neville have fought Death Eaters just as often as Ron and I have. They fought alongside the Order when the Death Eaters broke in last year. And they’re both of age.”

McGonagall thought about this for a long moment. “Do you believe they would both be willing to make that commitment?”

Hermione nodded. “Absolutely. As you know, Luna’s already made quite a commitment, and as for Neville . . . I know he’d want to.”

“Very well, then. Go get your friends, and bring them with you to the staff room, but do not tell them anything they don’t already know. I’ll be along shortly.”

“Thank you, Professor,” said Hermione, then ran to meet Ron where he’d paused to wait for her. She told him what McGonagall had said, and the two of them hurried to catch Luna and Neville before they got too far away.

“What do you want?” asked one of the stone gargoyles that guarded the entrance to the staff room when they arrived outside of it.

“Professor McGonagall sent us,” Hermione explained.

“She did, did she?” asked the other gargoyle, which was even uglier than the first.

“I wouldn’t say it if she didn’t,” snapped Hermione.

“Is Professor Tonks in there?” asked Luna. “We’re to wait with her.”

The two gargoyles leaned together and conferred, then moved back into place. “Oh, very well, then,” said the first one. The door unlocked for them, and the students hurried through. Ron closed the door quickly behind them.
“Wotcher,” said Tonks bemusedly from where she sat in one of the old chairs.

“Is he back yet?” Hermione asked—too eagerly, as she realized a moment later from Ron’s questioning look.

Tonks shook her head. “Not yet. McGonagall should be back soon and—”

The door swung open again, and McGonagall and Molly came through. “I’ve set Filius to make sure all the students return to their dorms.” McGonagall looked at Hermione and the others. “Present company excepted, of course.”

“Sorry, Professor,” said Neville, “I’m a bit confused. What are we waiting for? Do you think Bellatrix Lestrange will come back tonight?”

“Why don’t we all have a seat,” said McGonagall, and they did so. “Before I can tell you why you’re here, I must ask you something.” She focused her attention entirely on Neville and Luna. “I trust the two of you know what the Order of the Phoenix is?”

Molly, never a fan of letting schoolchildren fight wars, gave a small huff of disapproval, but otherwise remained silent.

“Of course,” said Neville. Luna nodded.

“Would you like to join?”

They both seemed too surprised by McGonagall’s blunt question to respond right away.

“It would be a great risk, you must understand,” continued McGonagall, “and if you wish, you can walk out right now.”

“As they ought to,” Molly said, unable to contain herself. “They’re children, Minerva.”

“No, we’re not,” said Neville, standing. “We’re both of age, and we’ve fought Death Eaters twice before—fought them with the Order, actually. Besides, my parents were in it, weren’t they? I want to join.” His undaunted conviction took Hermione aback, even though she’d expected it. In that moment, there was nothing remotely childish about him.

McGonagall stood to look him in the eye. “Very well, Mr. Longbottom,” she said, her voice landing meaningfully on his last name, a fierce pride in her eyes. “Welcome to the Order.”

Neville nodded and sat back down. Hermione grasped his hand and smiled encouragingly, and Ron clapped him on the back. He relaxed and grinned self-consciously at them. It was a look she’d seen many times before, a look which made his enemies (and even his friends) underestimate him, a look which said *I’m not at all certain about what I’m doing.* But Hermione knew better. Everyone in the room knew better.

McGonagall turned to look at Luna. “Miss Lovegood?”

“The Order of the Phoenix,” Luna said. “It’s like a grown-up D.A., right?”

“In a certain manner of speaking,” McGonagall said, sounding like she didn’t think Luna was taking this seriously enough.

“Then I want to join.”

“Miss Lovegood, you understand this is not a club,” McGonagall persisted. “We are fighting a war
against deadly enemies. Your very life would most certainly be at risk if you joined us.”

Luna hummed softly, a hand coming to rest on her flat belly. Hermione didn’t know if it was an unconscious move or not. “I know, Professor. But like Neville said, we’ve already put our lives in danger.”

McGonagall’s eyes flicked momentarily to Luna’s hand. “Very well, Miss Lovegood. If you’re certain you know the risks—”

“I am.”

“—then welcome to you, as well.” Her expression softened and some of her weariness showed through. “We’re fortunate to have you.”

“So, what are we waiting for?” Neville asked again.

“Snape,” Tonks announced.

“Where’s he gone?”

“Professor Snape is a spy,” Hermione explained. “He was a Death Eater in the first war, but he switched sides and he’s been spying for the Order ever since.”

Neville frowned. “Professor Snape is a Death Eater?”

“Was a Death Eater,” McGonagall corrected sternly. “He’s been a loyal Order member for nearly as long as the four of you have been alive.”

Neville’s eyes hardened. “Did he have anything to do with—”

“No.” McGonagall cut him off before he could build up any steam. “Professor Snape had nothing to do with what happened to your parents, Mr. Longbottom.”

“Is that where he is now?” Luna asked. “With the Death Eaters?”

“He was summoned not long after Bellatrix and Dolohov got away from us,” Tonks confirmed.

“Blimey,” Neville muttered. “And I thought he was scary before.” It wasn’t fear in his voice—not really, anyway. It sounded more like grudging respect.

“What does You-Know-Who want with Hannah Abbot?” Luna asked with innocent curiosity, having already jumped several steps ahead of the conversation.

“We don’t know,” Molly said, her voice ringing with a mixture of anger and worry that, to Hermione, seemed oddly strong for someone Molly barely knew. But then, it was Molly. “As soon as—”

SLAM!

The door burst open with such force that it crashed against the wall, making everyone in the room jump. When they looked toward it, they found Snape panting in the doorway and Kingsley right behind him.

Snape’s piercing gaze went straight to McGonagall. “We have a problem.”

Hermione felt the blood drain from her face. She searched her husband with her eyes, looking for
injuries (she found none), as he came in and slumped into the nearest chair. Kingsley followed him in, closing the door behind them and checking that the privacy spells were still in place.

“What’s wrong, Severus?” McGonagall asked the obvious question. “Where is Miss Abbot?”

“Dead,” said Snape, earning several gasps from those assembled. “But that wasn’t the problem I was referring to.”

For the next several seconds, there was a hectic rush of questions toppling on top of one another from everywhere in the room and Snape answering none of them. Finally, Kingsley said, “Why don’t you start at the beginning, Severus?” His booming voice quieted everyone down, though no one looked happy about it.

Before beginning, Snape looked around. “Minerva?” he asked, eyeing Ron, Neville, and Luna with distaste.

“Go ahead, Severus,” she said. “There are only Order members present.”

Hermione half-expected him to protest, but he took the news in relative stride. He took a deep breath, rubbed his left forearm, and began. “Bellatrix and Dolohov did grab the girl, on the Dark Lord’s orders. They were not yet there when I arrived. There were only a dozen of us at the meeting place, counting the Dark Lord. He appeared . . . eager, as if he’d uncovered a very great secret and was about to share it with us. When Bellatrix and Dolohov arrived, they carried the girl between them and threw her at the Dark Lord’s feet. He took one look at her and flew into a furious frenzy.”

“She wasn’t the one he’d wanted,” Tonks guessed.

Snape nodded. “The Dark Lord Crucioed Dolohov for ten minutes straight, saying they’d ruined his plans, spoiled his only shot at catching the Seer unawares.”

“Seer?” Molly asked.

“It wasn’t Trelawney he was after,” Snape said. “He seemed to think this was a new Seer, a young one. He was raving. From what I gathered, he had been made aware of a prophecy—another one, that is, which for some reason he thought was relevant to him.”

When she glanced away from Snape, Hermione saw Kingsley looking guardedly at her. “What did Miss Abbott look like?” Kingsley asked.

It was Neville who answered. “Blonde. About Hermione’s height. Pretty.” There was a regretful look about him, and he added quietly, “She was nice.”

This seemed to be the answer Kingsley was expecting. He was still looking at Hermione. “Can you think of anyone else who fits that description?”

“Only about thirty or so girls,” Ron said unhelpfully, but Hermione knew which girl Kingsley was thinking of. Lavender.

“We’ll explore that issue later. What happened then?” asked McGonagall, getting back to Snape’s report.

“The Dark Lord killed Miss Abbott,” he said, his tone laced with remorse. “I could do nothing to stop it. Then he took out his frustrations on her corpse before finally setting it aflame. Eventually, he released us, saying he needed to think of a new plan to make up for Bellatrix and Dolohov’s
failure.”

Tears came to Hermione’s eyes as he spoke. She hadn’t known Hannah well, but she’d done nothing to provoke an attack, let alone such a ruthless one—except, perhaps, fitting the same general description as someone else. Another innocent caught in the crossfire, Hermione thought. And a Hufflepuff, as well . . .

“Very well,” said McGonagall with an air of steadfastly moving forward despite tragedy. “Thank you, Severus—”

“I’m not finished yet,” he said coldly. “Before I was able to leave with the others, the Dark Lord called me forward. He wanted a report, in private, on my activities here.”

“And you gave him nothing of value, showing him only what useless information would satisfy him, as usual, I trust,” said McGonagall, but her tone said she suspected differently.

“I . . . tried,” Snape admitted with difficulty. “I had . . . a moment’s lapse. It was enough. It was too much. The Dark Lord saw my true loyalties. I barely escaped with my life.”


Snape’s eyes slid to Hermione, then back to McGonagall. “I do not know. I make no excuse for my failure. I am sorry.”

Hermione frowned at him. She knew what the likely cause of his ‘lapse’ was. He couldn’t read, for heaven’s sake. Surely his Occlumency skills would be affected, as well. Why didn’t he just say that? Unless the Order doesn’t know . . .

McGonagall sighed and rubbed her forehead. “It’s all right, Severus. Frankly, I’m amazed you’ve lasted this long without being detected. You have nothing to be sorry about.”

“Besides,” said Kingsley, taking the scarf from around his face, “it’s not as if we haven’t still got a spy in Voldemort’s ranks.”

“What?” Ron asked. “What do you mean? Also, why aren’t you dead?”

“They faked his death so he could stay here to help protect the school,” Hermione explained. “Slughorn was supposedly the one who killed him. That means Slughorn’s the spy.” She turned to McGonagall. “I’m right, aren’t I?”

“Yes, Miss Granger,” McGonagall said.

“Slughorn?” Ron asked dubiously. “But how’d you get old Sluggy to do it? I thought he was terrified of You-Know-Who.”

“He is,” said Hermione, remembering the look on Slughorn’s face when she’d been allowed to leave Voldemort’s presence. Like he’d wanted me to take him with me . . .

“The question is: how’d Dumbledore get him to do it,” Tonks said. “And the answer is: we don’t know. He never told us exactly how he did it, but we all know Dumbledore could be convincing when he wanted to be.”

There was no argument to this assessment.

Nymphadora and Kingsley. Retrieve Remus and our guest from the Room of Requirement.”

Ron and Neville were filled in on Kingsley’s role so far on the way. Ron called him a nutter for agreeing to marry Trelawney (or, as he referred to her, “that loon”), and Neville changed the subject by asking Tonks if she’d come up with any names for the baby yet (“Something dull; if it’s a boy, Ted, after my father, and if it’s a girl I’ll probably just flip a Knut between Mary and Emma.”)

When they arrived, they found the Room of Requirement had taken on what was, to Hermione, its most appealing form yet. The walls were lined with bookcases, all of them full of books both Muggle and magical. The floor was covered in a plush carpet of red and gold, and two beds were on opposite sides of the room along the far walls. There was a roaring fire in the center of the wall opposite the door, with two very comfortable-looking armchairs on either side. These were occupied by two thin, lanky men—one with red hair and reading glasses, the other with shaggy, light brown hair streaked with grey—curled up with large books in their laps. It was a scene of such blissful serenity that Hermione wanted nothing more than to pluck a book off the shelf, Conjure another armchair, and join them. She could relax with a nice novel, let the warmth of the fire caress her . . .

“Oi! Layabouts!” Ron shouted, snapping Hermione out of an exceedingly pleasant daydream. “Time to go!”

Hermione gritted her teeth to refrain from slapping him as Percy and Lupin put their books down and came to the door.

“What’s happened?” Lupin asked, tossing a worried look to Kingsley (who had, at least, put his scarf back over his face for the trip through the corridors).

The return trip was spent filling Lupin in on what had happened—or at least as much as was possible with a non-Order member present. When they returned to the staff room, Molly hugged Percy, failing in her attempt not to seem worried.

“Come here, Percy,” she said, leading him to a seat. He followed easily enough, but seemed to pick up on the tension in Molly’s demeanor. “We think we’ve found a way to make it so that you won’t have to stay hiding.”

“Really?” Percy asked, astonished. “What way?”

Molly shared a look with McGonagall, then turned back to her son. “It would require something on your part, if you’re willing. You know about the Order of the Phoenix, Percy?”

“Yes,” Percy said hesitantly, looking around at the others in the room for the first time.

“What you may not know is that the rest of us are all a part of it.”

“Us?”

“Your family, Percy.” Molly’s tone was growing stern. “Your father and I, all your brothers . . . even Ginny.”

“Ginny?” Percy asked, astonished. “Mum! That’s—”

“It was her decision,” Molly said, not without some difficulty. “And now it’s your decision, Percy. Are you on your family’s side?”
A pained expression fell across Percy’s face. “Mum, you know I am. I said I’m sorry. I know the way I was acting—”

“This isn’t about that anymore.” Molly cut him off. “I mean . . . ”

“She’s asking you if you’re ever going to show any of that so-called bravery you Gryffindors are so famous for,” Snape said and got a glare from Molly for his trouble.

But Percy had taken the hint. “You . . . you want me to join the Order?” he asked his mum.

“It’s your decision, Percy. We’ll respect whatever choice you make.”

“But if I do join, you would be able to . . . to help me?”

“There is no guarantee our plan would succeed,” McGonagall said, “but if it did, you would need to take on a task for us.”

Percy looked suspicious. “What task?”

“Gathering information,” said Tonks. “Now that Kingsley and I are gone, Mad-Eye and your dad are the only Order members in the Ministry, and neither of them are anywhere near the Minister herself. We’d like another pair of eyes and ears.”

To Hermione’s surprise, Percy scoffed. “Even if they couldn’t prove what I did, do you really think they’d let me keep my old job?”

“You haven’t been officially sacked,” said Tonks, “though given how much time you’ve missed, that may not be true for much longer.”

“You want me to . . . to spy? On my employers?” Percy asked, scandalized.

McGonagall nodded. “Could you do that?”


Molly smiled and cupped his face in her hands. “Good boy.”

This seemed to be the highest praise he could have hoped for, as he put his hands over hers and smiled back. Hermione even saw tears filling his eyes before he pulled Molly’s hands down and looked at McGonagall. “But how would you get them to take suspicion off me? People saw me fleeing the scene of the crime!”

Tonks sauntered a step closer to him, grinning. “No, they didn’t.” She basked in Percy’s confusion before continuing. “They saw me.”

“What?” Lupin was staring at his wife in stunned horror. “Dora, no!”

“The law has already decided you shouldn’t be allowed to exist, Remus,” Tonks said, giving him a don’t mess with the Auror look. “How much longer do you think it will be before Umbridge convinces everyone a Metamorphmagus is a danger to public safety, as well?”

“You want me to tell them . . . ” Percy started, trying to figure it out.

“That I kidnapped you, locked you up somewhere, and you only just escaped,” Tonks explained as if it was self-evident. “They’ll assume I made myself look like you, snuck in, and killed the
“Minister.”

“But why?” Hermione asked. This whole plan was sounding reckless and problematic to her. “What motive will they think you had?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Lupin said, hanging his head in defeat, already given over to this madness. “Arresting Percy wouldn’t be a victory for Umbridge. She’d just see it as a nuisance, maybe even a wasted opportunity. She’d love to hear that a ‘half-breed’ is behind Scrimgeour’s murder. Umbridge will take the opportunity to declare Tonks a dangerous fugitive to be killed on sight. Even if Umbridge was the one to put the Imperius on Percy, she’d pretend to believe him.”

“Spare a pawn to take a rook,” Ron said, his brow furrowed seriously.

“Exactly.” Lupin looked from Percy to Tonks. “It’s a good plan. You shouldn’t do it.”

“We’re doing it, Remus,” Tonks said calmly. She knew she’d already won. “That is, if Percy agrees.”

All eyes turned to Percy. He looked from one to another of them, uncertainty mixing uncomfortably with determination in his features. “If that’s the plan,” he said finally, “I’ll do it.”

Lupin sighed dejectedly, and Tonks put her arms around him from the side, resting her head on his shoulder. “As if I’d want to be anywhere you couldn’t go, anyway,” she said softly. “Silly man.”

This got a chuckle from Lupin, and he wrapped his arm around her. “One of these days I may learn to stop trying to convince you not to put yourself in the line of fire,” he said. “But not any time soon.”

“But Professor,” Hermione said to McGonagall, “where will they go? Tonks can’t keep teaching here if she’s a fugitive from the Ministry.”

“That won’t be an issue.” McGonagall looked at each of them in turn, her face set in grim resolve. “Things have changed tonight—drastically. A student has been taken from school grounds and murdered. The plans Albus made have proven to no longer be sufficient to ensure the safety of those under our care. If Albus were here, perhaps he would have another plan already prepared for this contingency. Or perhaps we were his contingency plan. The fact of the matter is we don’t know whether he foresaw these problems or not. As such, we must assume he did not. We cannot rely on his plans any longer. We must form our own. As much as it pains me to say it, we must lose no time in taking the first step.”

“What is the first step of our new plan, then?” Ron asked.

McGonagall opened her mouth to answer, but once again Luna had jumped several steps ahead.

“They’re going to close the school.”
The headache was coming back. Hermione could feel it creeping up on her like a spider returning to its nest. The potion Partridge had given her for it had helped, but she’d had to ask Snape to make it for her several times since then. It wasn’t bad now, but she knew it would be before long.

It was an annoyance, but it didn’t frighten or worry her. She knew now what the cause of it was and hoped that, when more time had passed since her pregnancies and since she’d last taken the other potions from Partridge, it would go away. She needed to let her body reacclimatize to its normal rhythms. (After learning that no more children would be required of her, she’d owled Partridge, and he’d sent a counter-potion to the fertility potion he’d given her. It annoyed her that he hadn’t thought of it himself, but at least he hadn’t insisted upon her continuing to have weekly periods for no reason.) If she’d had her preference on the matter, she’d suffer through the headache for as long as it lasted without taking any potions, in order to more quickly get her body away from the effects of all the potions and the painful way they interacted, but she didn’t have time to be distracted by headaches now. For now, it was manage the pain and focus on more urgent problems. Later, she could see about getting her body back to a natural, potion-free state.

“Professor Snape,” she said carefully.

In the corner of the room, Snape sat holding open a book which Hermione now knew to be merely a prop. He raised his eyes to her.

“When we’re done here, I think I’ll need more of that pain-relief potion.”

Snape nodded once and went back to not-reading.

“You okay?” Ron asked her. He was sitting beside her on the loveseat which the Room of Requirement had provided. In what was probably an unconscious gesture, he put his hand on hers where it rested on the seat.

She pulled her hand away. “I’ll be fine,” she told him, not wanting to get into it.

Luna was in an overstuffed chair across from them, reading an old book on plants of some sort, and Neville was looking around uncertainly from his place in the chair beside her.

How much longer will this take? Hermione wondered. McGonagall had decided that an emergency Order meeting had to be called immediately. As tired as they all were by this point in the evening, it simply couldn’t have waited until morning. She’d sent some of them to the Room of Requirement to get it ready (they couldn’t risk leaving the school vulnerable to attack, so going to the Burrow or Grimmauld Place was out of the question), and others were to find and alert the non-Hogwarts members of the Order. The Room of Requirement had decided to take the form it had when Percy and Lupin had stayed here, with the addition of a great deal more seating, most of which was currently empty.

It was awkward, sitting there in silence with both her husband and her . . . well, her could-have-been in the room. She’d thoughtlessly sat on the loveseat because it was nearest the fire and she was chilly, but Ron had plopped down next to her before she’d even realized how that might irk Snape. But it was too late, and changing now would look odd. Snape had made no mention of it, merely going to sit in the chair the farthest away from everyone else, but she’d seen him cast a
toxic glance in Ron’s direction on his way there.

The door latch echoed in the stillness, and Tonks and Lupin walked in. Tonks was gripping Lupin’s arm like a child cuddling her favorite teddy, and Lupin refused to meet anyone’s eyes.

Hermione exchanged a curious look with Neville. Tonks and Lupin had only been sent to send some messages to Bill and Fleur and some of the others. She couldn’t imagine what about that would make them look so squirrelly—at least, she didn’t want to imagine.

“What happened to you two?” Ron asked, voicing what everyone was thinking.

“Er, I . . .” Lupin began.

“His Patronus changed,” Tonks said, beaming. “Show ’em, Remus.”

“Oh, I don’t really think they’d be interested in—”

“I’d like to see it,” piped up Luna, evidently oblivious to Lupin’s discomfort. “I find Patronuses quite fascinating. They can say so much about a person, don’t you think?”

Self-consciously, Lupin drew his wand and said, “Expecto Patronum.”

A flash of silver issued from his wand, and it took Hermione a moment to realize what it was. It was much smaller than the Patronus she’d seen before, and, astonishingly, it looked almost like—

“A butterfly!” Ron blurted out and then doubled over in laughter.

A large silver butterfly drifted toward the fireplace, flew around between the four of them sitting there, then fluttered back to Lupin. It perched on his shoulder a moment before dissolving out of existence.

“When did that happen?” Hermione asked, jabbing Ron with her elbow to make him stop laughing.

Lupin shrugged. “I’m not sure. Until a few minutes ago, I hadn’t tried casting a Patronus since . . .”

“Since Hagrid,” Hermione guessed, and he nodded.

“It’s very pretty,” Luna said. “I think it suits you, Professor Lupin.”

Lupin didn’t seem quite sure how to take that, so he just said, “You can call me Remus, Luna. I haven’t been your teacher for some time. That goes for you, too, Neville.”

Hermione, who was the only one of the students who knew what Lupin’s previous Patronus had been and how he’d felt about it, could see that this change was not likely to help his insecurity on the matter. “Well, I think it’s lovely, Remus,” she said, jabbing Ron again. “It changed because of Tonks, didn’t it?”

Lupin shrugged and glanced at Snape briefly. “One can only assume.”

“I think it’s great, Professor—er, Remus,” said Neville, a bit awkwardly. “It’s, you know, romantic.”


“See?” Tonks said, pointedly ignoring Ron’s sarcasm. “It’s romantic.”
Hermione, who could hardly imagine having with Snape the sort of world-shifting love that was needed to change one’s Patronus, couldn’t quite bring herself to admit agreement.

Tonks’s smile turned cheeky. “It won’t help the rumors, though.”

“What rumors?” Lupin asked, perplexed.

“That our marriage is a sham and you only did it as a grand self-sacrificing gesture to save me from some horrible fate,” Tonks said casually.

“Why would people think that?”

“Oh, you know, there’s the idea going around that you’re . . .”

“That I’m what?”

Tonks whispered something into Lupin’s ear that made his eyes widen in shock. “Who thinks that?”

“Just people. Around.”

“They think that I’m—”

“That you and Sirius were more than just friends and you married me for my morphing ability? Yeah.”

Lupin was turning red very quickly. “Why would they think that?”

Tonks shrugged. “Who knows? I certainly don’t see it. I’d lay odds on someone saying something to Rita Skeeter, though.”

“I wonder who might spread such a lie,” Lupin said, his eyes narrowing and sliding to Snape.

From his corner, Snape snorted. “As if I have any interest in your love life, Lupin,” he drawled, but the tiny smirk that played on the edge of his lips said otherwise.

Lupin thought for a moment, then pulled his arm out of Tonks’s grasp and slipped his hand firmly into place on her hip, pulling her against him and looking into her eyes with a hunger which Hermione found a bit uncomfortable to witness. “Well, we’ll just have to see what we can do to dispel this rumor, won’t we?”

Tonks nuzzled his neck. “I’ll shag you on the High Table in the middle of the Leaving Feast if I have to.”

“Er, please don’t,” murmured Neville.

They ignored him. Tonks’s hand disappeared into Lupin’s robes. Hermione didn’t look too closely at exactly where it went.

“Mmm,” he hummed into her ear. “Now there’s an idea with potential.”

“Hey! Do you mind?” protested Ron, gesturing to Hermione and himself. “Impressionable youth sitting right here!”

Lupin had the grace to look chastised, but Tonks grinned unashamedly when he pulled away from her. “Sorry,” she said to Ron, sounding not at all sorry. “Didn’t mean to sully your innocence with
talk of hanky-panky.”

Unconsciously, Hermione looked to Snape. He was looking at her, as well, but as soon as their eyes met, she looked away. When she looked back to Tonks and Lupin, the two of them were looking between her and Snape, shifting their weight stiffly. After an instant’s confusion, Hermione understood: they felt guilty about showing affection in front of her and Snape, when they knew perfectly well what her relationship with her husband was like. A small part of her was grateful for their consideration, but most of her was embarrassed that she’d made her and Snape’s private business known to them, even if they were her friends.

Ron gave no indication of noticing any of this unspoken exchange—which had only lasted about two seconds at any rate.

The tension was broken a moment later when Harry and Ginny strode in. Well, Harry strode. Ginny had begun to develop a bit of a waddle.

“Blimey, Gin!” Ron exclaimed as she and Harry walked over to the loveseat. “You’re huge!”

Ginny shot him a glare, and Hermione rolled her eyes. “She’s not that big yet, Ronald. She just looks big because—”

“Because she’s my bloody little sister?” Ron yelped. Hermione nodded.

Suddenly reacting to something no one else was aware of, Ginny grabbed the back of the loveseat for balance, then took Ron’s hand and laid it flat on her stomach.

“What are you—” Ron said in a frightened voice, then his eyes went even wider. “Is that—”

Ginny nodded, grinning.

A bemused expression came over him, and he stared at his hand on Ginny’s stomach for a long moment, then looked up at Harry. “You put a person in my sister!” he accused.

“Er . . .” Harry looked around at the others, trying to formulate a response, then said calmly, “Yes. I did,” and everyone but Ron laughed. Hermione was sure she even saw Snape give Harry an amused glance from his dark corner.

The rest of the Order joined them within half an hour. It was a sizable group: all the Weasleys (including Fleur and Harry), Lupin and Tonks, Kingsley, Snape, McGonagall, Luna, Neville, Dedalus Diggle, Elphias Doge, Mad-Eye Moody, Mundungus Fletcher, Hestia Jones, Sturgis Podmore, and even Arabella Figg. An old man who Hermione recognized as the landlord of the Hog’s Head was introduced to the new members as Aberforth Dumbledore (which came as a bit of a shock; Hermione hadn’t even known Dumbledore had any living relatives). As far as Hermione knew, the only Order member not present was Slughorn, who was apparently so deeply entrenched with the Death Eaters that he was unable to get away.

“Hogwarts is no longer safe,” McGonagall announced by way of bringing the meeting to order. Those who were still shuffling or whispering among themselves immediately fell silent. “Tonight, a student named Hannah Abbot has been taken by Death Eaters from the school grounds and killed.” She ignored the scattered gasps. “Furthermore, Severus’s true loyalties have been uncovered by Voldemort. His role as a spy for us has finished.” She raised a hand to quiet the uproar this announcement caused and continued. “We all knew it was only a matter of time before something like this happened. Fortunately, we are not left without a spy in the Death Eaters’ ranks. I believe most of you are aware that Horace Slughorn took on that role some months ago, and I’ve
confirmed with him that Severus’s discovery has not affected his position.” She went on, getting everyone up to speed on what had happened in the last few weeks. When she said Percy had joined them and would be their eyes on the Minister, Arthur clapped him proudly on the back. Hermione listened quietly as the rest of the new members were introduced and waved hello when her name was announced.

“Excuse me,” said Hestia tentatively, looking around at them all. “But . . . since when has the Order allowed in witches and wizards who are still in school?”

Molly, who looked like she was still fighting to accept this alteration, pursed her lips and said nothing.

“I know it’s a drastic change, Hestia,” said Lupin, “and I wasn’t thrilled with the idea myself at first, but the fact is that they’d be no safer outside of the Order. We tried keeping them out of the fight for years, but they still managed to find themselves in the thick of things. At least this way, they’ll have all the information they need and coordinate with the rest of us, rather than doing things on their own.” He threw Harry a look which Hermione found difficult to interpret. Harry, who had squeezed in between Hermione and the arm of the loveseat, seemed to think the same, as he gave Lupin no response.

“It will not be an issue any longer, regardless,” said McGonagall. “Hogwarts will be closing immediately.”

“What?” protested Elphias Doge. “Surely that’s an overreaction, Minerva!”

McGonagall shook her head. “I’m afraid it’s not, Elphias. Two Death Eaters got onto the grounds and kidnapped a student, and we still don’t know how it happened. Hogwarts is no longer safe. I won’t sit by and let villains pick my students off one by one.”

“They got in last year, and the school didn’t close.” To Hermione’s surprise, it was Neville who spoke.

“It very nearly did,” said McGonagall. “But things were different then.”

Lupin leaned forward in his seat and rested his elbows on his knees. “What you have to understand, Neville, is that Dumbledore was the only one Voldemort ever really feared. Now that he’s gone, it’s only a matter of time before Voldemort attacks.”

“Why hasn’t he yet?” asked Fred. “Not that I’m complaining, mind, but if Dumbledore was the only reason You-Know-Who stayed away, why hasn’t he come calling?”

“We have a good idea about that,” said Kingsley. “But the crux of it is that he is only gathering his forces, waiting for some elements of his plan to come to fruition before making a more overt move. Judging by how he’s acted in the past, he’s been focusing entirely on this single plan with little regard for contingencies. Voldemort can be very patient when required.”

“You know what he’s planning?” asked Ron. “What is it, then?”

A look passed among several of the older Order members. McGonagall sighed. “Albus Dumbledore was a brilliant man, but he was not omniscient.”

There was some grumbling around the room at this, but Harry said, “It’s true. He told me so himself after Sirius died. He said if he’d told me what was really going on with my dreams, maybe it wouldn’t have happened.”
McGonagall nodded sadly. “I never liked his policy of giving people only the information they absolutely needed when they absolutely needed it, but I went along with it because I thought he knew best. Recent events have proven that perhaps there were things he did not anticipate, contingencies he didn’t plan for. The reason I’ve called this meeting is that we need to form a new plan—one which builds on the groundwork Albus left, but which has the ability to change and adapt as new information comes in. I do not believe we should remain an Order led by a single mind, but should utilize the experience and knowledge of all members in planning. An individual, no matter how brilliant, might still make a mistake or fail to see something coming. As a group, we are stronger. And that is why I believe that we should do away with Albus’s need-to-know policy of information dispersal. From now on, if you all agree with me, the Order’s policy will be one of full disclosure and the sharing of information among us.”

“Hear, hear!” shouted Fred and George.

“Sounds good to me,” said Ron.

“About time,” said Ginny from her perch on the arm of the loveseat, beside Harry.

This heartfelt approval was voiced by all of the newer Order members—most of whom had protested being shut out of Order meetings a couple years ago. Hermione was only too thrilled with this particular shift in the way things were to be done. She’d had more than enough of secrecy in the past year.

“It’s too dangerous.” Mad-Eye stepped forward, his magical eye swiveling. “What if one of us is captured?”

“The danger of ignorance is greater than the danger of disclosure,” said Kingsley. “Yes, it is possible that one of us may fall into the enemy’s hands and be forced to reveal what we know. But if that happens, there are still alternatives. We can have secondary escape plans, we can schedule times to check in with each other, we can possibly give each other warning. If some of us go running off into danger because the rest of us didn’t give them information that would have been useful, there may not be time to fix the problem. As we’ve already seen, when we don’t communicate with one another, people die.”

Harry flinched as if struck, and Lupin’s face hardened.

Kingsley was right. It was a classic if/then scenario. If Harry, Hermione, and the others hadn’t rushed off half-cocked to fight Voldemort two years ago (If you hadn’t given in to Harry when you knew something wasn’t right, Hermione scolded herself), then Sirius wouldn’t have died. At least, not at that time and in that way. And who knew how many other things would have been different? Perhaps the Ministry and the public would never have admitted the truth that Voldemort was back. Perhaps he’d have been able to use that willful blindness to gain undisputed control of wizarding Britain by now. Or perhaps they’d have found a way to defeat Voldemort before he’d been able to get such a hold of the Ministry. But this was all fruitless conjecture, and Hermione had allowed herself to be distracted by it long enough for the conversation to move forward without her.

“Using a Secret Keeper would be unfeasible, I’m afraid,” McGonagall was saying, apparently addressing a question posed by Harry. “If it were only one secret, that would be an option, but there are a large number of secrets involved, each with multiple facets. Putting each one under a Secret Keeper would be prohibitively complicated.”

“Kingsley’s right,” said Tonks. “Even if it’s not perfect, it’s worth the risk.”

A vote was taken, and it was unanimously agreed upon (though quite reluctantly by some) that full
disclosure would be the de facto policy from now on.

“In light of this agreement,” McGonagall said, looking to Harry, “Harry, would you care to explain the mission Dumbledore gave you last year?”

Harry looked around, startled. “Me? But he said—”

“I know it’s difficult to go against what Albus instructed,” McGonagall said, “but for any of what the rest of us have to say to make sense, your mission must be fully understood.”

“Then you already know?”

“Some of us know. But if you would please explain it to the rest of the Order.”

Harry stood, looking around apprehensively. Hermione knew it went against everything in Harry’s being to disobey Dumbledore, even posthumously. But Hermione wanted to know what was going on, she hoped she’d finally find out what it was that made Tonks and Lupin and McGonagall unable or unwilling to help her stop her children from being transferred, and she was damned if she’d let Harry’s skittishness stand in the way of that.

“You must, Harry,” she hissed. “It’s the policy now. One which you just voted in favor of.”

Harry smiled grimly. “Oh, yeah.” He closed his eyes, steeled himself, then looked around the other faces in the room. “Do you all know what a Horcrux is?”

There was a spattering of different reactions. A few nodded gravely, some frowned with concern, others just looked perplexed. Arabella Figg raised her hand. “I don’t.”

“It’s an object,” Harry explained, “a vessel into which a Dark wizard can put a piece of his soul. In order to make a Horcrux, he has to kill someone. It means that the wizard can never truly die as long as the Horcrux exists. Well . . . Voldemort made one. Actually, he made six.”

Molly gave a small startled cry and her hand flew to her mouth.

Fleur hissed, “Merde.”

Fred and George said, “Bloody hell,” simultaneously.

Harry nodded agreement with these assessments and went on. “Dumbledore told me about them last year. He’s had me tracking them down since then. That’s where we were the night the Death Eaters attacked the school. We were trying to get one of the Horcruxes.” Now that the secret was out, he was speaking with more confidence. He was starting to sound like he did when he was instructing the D.A.

“How many have you destroyed so far, Harry?” asked Arthur.

“You know about Tom Riddle’s diary, from when the Chamber of Secrets was opened?” Several people nodded, and Ginny frowned, the muscles in her jaw tightening. “That was one. I stabbed it with a basilisk fang, killing it before I even knew what it really was. Dumbledore destroyed another, a ring, summer before last.” Snape hissed a curse from his seat in the corner. “Me, Ron and Hermione got another one New Year’s Eve, just a few weeks ago. So, we’ve got three so far.”

“What about the one you said you and Dumbledore went after?” asked Charlie.

Shaking his head, Harry explained, “It was a fake. The real Horcrux had already been taken by
someone else.”

“Who?” asked Bill.

“Regulus Black, Sirius’s brother,” said Harry, to the surprise of more than a few people. “He was a Death Eater, but he turned against Voldemort in the end. Kreacher told us about it.”

“So he destroyed it?” asked Hestia hopefully.

“No,” said Harry. “He sent it with Kreacher, knowing that he wouldn’t escape the trap Voldemort had set to protect the Horcrux. Kreacher wasn’t able to destroy it, though.”

“Where is it now, then?” asked Arthur.

Harry shot an annoyed look at Mundungus Fletcher. “It was stolen from Grimmauld Place,” he said, and no one had to ask by whom. “Umbridge had it at one point, but she doesn’t seem to anymore. Right now, I have no idea where it is.”

Mad-Eye, who was standing closest to where Mundungus sat, smacked him upside the head. “Your sticky fingers will be the death of us all, Mundungus,” Mad-Eye growled.

“I couldn’t know what it was, could I?” asked Mundungus, as if that was any kind of defense.

“What about the others, Harry?” Arthur asked before the general anger at Mundungus could go any farther. “Do you at least know where they are?”

“I think so,” Harry said, nodding. “There’s a cup—one that used to belong to Helga Hufflepuff. Before he died, Dumbledore said he believed it was in Bellatrix Lestrange’s Gringotts vault. Dumbledore also thought that Nagini, Voldemort’s snake, is a Horcrux.”

There was a long silence as everyone digested this.

“So, three down, three to go,” said George cheerily. “You-Know-Who’s practically mortal already.”

“Thank you, Harry,” said McGonagall.

“Unfortunately, you’re wrong on one point,” said Lupin. He looked at Harry with a twinge of pain. “Voldemort didn’t make six Horcruxes. He made seven.”

Harry blinked stupidly. “What do you mean? Dumbledore said—”

“Dumbledore didn’t tell you the whole truth, Potter.” Snape had finally risen and moved to join the rough circle the rest of them had formed. He stood between Lupin and McGonagall with a look of muffled disgust.

“Then what’s the other one?” Harry demanded, letting Snape get a rise out of him. “What’s the other Horcrux?”

“You are.”

No.

Snape’s words rang in the stillness for a split second, then Harry shouted, “You’re lying!”

Lupin sighed. “We can’t say for sure, of course, but it makes sense.”
“Hold on!” Ron leapt to his feet. “You’re saying Harry’s got a bit of You-Know-Who’s soul inside him? You’re daft!”

In a muted, underwater sort of way, Hermione could hear them arguing about it, more people saying it couldn’t be true and Snape, Lupin, and McGonagall insisting it was, but Hermione was too busy rolling it around in her head to pay much attention to the fruitless arguments. To her horror, it did make sense. It had been obvious for years that Harry had a connection to Voldemort—the pains in his scar, the Parseltongue, the dreams he’d had in fifth year—but no one had ever really said why this was. If it was because he’d had a part of Voldemort’s soul inside him . . .

“Then why has Voldemort been trying to kill Harry all this time?” she asked loudly enough to be heard over the arguing. “If Harry’s a Horcrux, wouldn’t Voldemort want to keep him safe?”

“Yeah!” Ron agreed. “What she said!”

“The Dark Lord does not know Potter is a Horcrux,” Snape explained. “It was, apparently, an accident.”

“Accident?” Harry screeched. “How could he accidentally make me a Horcrux?”

“His soul was already so damaged,” said Lupin sadly, “when he killed Lily—Harry, when he killed your mother, what little of his soul that was left in his body was so brittle, a piece might easily have broken off and gone into you without him even noticing.”

Harry was about to launch into another desperate denial—though Hermione could already see the truth of it sinking in—when Fleur interrupted.

“Excusez-moi, but if ’arry is an ’orcrux, wouldn’t ’ee also ’ave to die eef we are to defeat You-Know-’oo?”

Into the silence that met this question, Snape spoke one word: “Yes.”

“No!”

Ginny had jumped up and thrown her arms around Harry as if to protect him from imminent attack. Harry looked as if he’d been hit with a Stunning Spell. He was dazed, his eyes unfocused. Despite the support Ginny tried to give, he slumped onto the loveseat.

“All this time . . .” Harry muttered, then looked at Snape. “How long did he know?”

“Too long,” said Snape darkly. “Far, far too long.”

“Why didn’t he tell me?”

“He didn’t want you to know until it was too late to be helped,” Snape said. “He instructed me to wait until the very end, until the rest of the Horcruxes had been destroyed—though of course he didn’t phrase it quite that way. His instructions were also that it was the Dark Lord himself who must kill you.”

Harry’s fists were balled so tightly his knuckles were white. “All this time, he was . . . using me.”

“No, Harry!” Hermione protested, taking one of Harry’s fists in her hands. “He cared for you. He did, I know it.”

“Yeah,” Harry said bitterly. “Cared for me too much, he told me once. Too much to want to hurt
“He was willing to sacrifice anything and anyone for the greater good,” Snape spat. “You weren’t the first, Potter, nor the last.”

All the energy seemed to drain from Harry’s body at once, and he put his face in his hands.

“Surely Dumbledore was mistaken,” insisted Molly. “Surely he was just . . . guessing . . .”

“Maybe he was,” said Kingsley, “but you know how good Dumbledore’s guesses were.”

Despair descended on the group like a shroud. After a long moment, Harry raised his head. “Well, if I have to die, I’m going to make sure I take Voldemort with me. What’s our new plan?”

Hermione looked at Harry in astonishment. So did everyone else.

“Bloody hell! Just like that?” Ron asked. “Harry, mate, you’re just giving—”

“I’m not giving up,” Harry said. The tears that had threatened to erupt were gone, and the strength was back in his voice. “But I’m not going to just let Voldemort take over the world. If I die, I die. I guess it’s not like I didn’t know this was coming. Neither can live while the other survives, remember? Only now I know why.”

“You’re not going to die, Harry.” The tears that had fled Harry’s eyes seemed to have migrated to Ginny’s. “You’re not going to leave me.”

“Yeah,” said Ron. “You can’t get away from us that easily.”

“We’ll find a way around it, Harry,” Hermione said. She put her hand on Harry’s again. “Nothing says a prophecy has to come true.”

When Hermione raised her eyes to meet Snape’s she saw them filled with confusion and anger. “Bloody Gryffindors,” he swore under his breath and stormed back to his corner.

“Speaking of a prophecy,” said Kingsley, “I think it’s time for someone else to share a secret.”

Several eyes looked to Kingsley in confusion, then followed his gaze to Hermione. Desperately hoping the prophecy she’d heard wasn’t really anything of any great import, Hermione stammered, “I—it was nothing, just a silly—”

“One person has died already because of that prophecy, I think,” Kingsley said. “It seems to me that Voldemort doesn’t think it’s nothing.”

“What’s he talking about, Hermione?” Harry asked.

“It’s stupid,” she said, hoping for some backup from Ron, but he was just looking at her as if he didn’t know what to do about it either. “It’s really—I’m sure it’s nothing.”

“If it’s nothing, there’s no harm in sharing it,” Harry said. “After all, it’s the policy now.” He tried to smile playfully as he threw her words back at her, but didn’t quite succeed.

“All right,” Hermione huffed, and then turned to address the group at large. “A few months ago, I was in my dorm with Lavender Brown when she started acting really strangely. She started shaking, and her voice changed. From what Harry described Trelawney acting like, I think she was making a prophecy. After it was over, she snapped out of it and didn’t seem to know what had happened.”
“Why didn’t you tell anyone?” Lupin asked.

“I did . . . sort of,” she admitted. “I told Ron, but he didn’t think it was anything to worry about. I was going to tell Professor Dumbledore, but he wasn’t available. Then I was going to tell Professor McGonagall, but when I asked her about prophecies, she said that they were nothing to base decisions on anyway, so I decided it didn’t matter.”

“Do you remember the prophecy, Hermione?” asked Bill. “Could you recite it for us?”

She could, but she didn’t want to. She didn’t want the prophecy to mean anything at all, because what the prophecy seemed to say meant really terrible things for her and her family. But everyone was staring at her now, so she spoke.

She told them—every word, exactly as Lavender had said it. She watched the dawning horror on the faces of some, and when she finished, those who weren’t obviously confused were palpably worried.

There was a long, weary sigh, and Hermione turned to see McGonagall remove her glasses and pinch the bridge of her nose. She put her glasses back on and looked at Hermione. “I’m sorry I dissuaded you from telling me about this sooner, Hermione. While I do believe it is unwise to make a decision based on a prophecy alone, it would have been useful for us to know about this earlier.”

“Then . . . you think it’s important?” Hermione asked, fearing McGonagall would say yes.

“Yes and no.” It was Lupin who spoke. “It is important information, but in general it’s nothing we didn’t already know. And the part we didn’t know is vague enough not to be of any real help. What concerns me is how Voldemort even knows about it. Are you certain you told no one else?”

Hermione nodded. “Only Ron.”

“Maybe it has something to do with how the Death Eaters got in,” Neville suggested.

Lupin frowned. “Maybe. We’ll have to find out for sure somehow.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. “All right. I shared my secret. Now it’s time for you lot to share yours. What is it you haven’t been telling me?”

“As near as Dumbledore could tell,” Lupin explained, “it began the night the Death Eaters attacked last year. He was weak when he and Harry returned, but he was able to rouse himself enough to drive the last of the Death Eaters from the castle with us.”

“I know,” Hermione said, irritated that he was being so slow in getting to the point. “I was there.”

“So you were,” Lupin said patiently. “But what you may not know is that the last of the Death Eaters noticed something about Dumbledore. Something they likely reported back to their master that very night.”

“His hand,” Harry guessed. “They saw his cursed hand, didn’t they?”

“Yes,” said Lupin, “but they also noticed that he was weakened far beyond his healthy state. Of course, they didn’t know what this meant, but Voldemort did. Surely you can guess what he figured out.”

“The Horcruxes!” Hermione blurted. “He’d put protections on them, and he recognized the
effects.”

Lupin nodded. “Enough to be suspicious, yes.”

“Wait.” Harry was frowning. “If he knew we were after his Horcruxes, why didn’t he come after us? I’d have thought he’d have stepped up his attacks. Instead, he hasn’t seemed to have done much since then.”

“He has been doing something,” Lupin said carefully. “Dumbledore believed that Voldemort realized how dangerous it was to have mere objects be his Horcruxes; he knew the ring had been destroyed and had reason to believe the locket was as well, though it doesn’t seem he’s found out about the diary. He’d already seen the advantages of having a living host for his soul in Nagini. He decided to transfer the four remaining pieces from the objects they were in into a living receptacle.”

His words were like a physical blow, knocking the wind out of Hermione. A living receptacle. It couldn’t be.

“Babies,” she squeaked, hearing her own voice as through a long tunnel. She looked over to find Snape staring at her. She locked eyes with him, questioning, challenging, begging to understand. He’d known. He had to have known. And even knowing what Voldemort was planning to use her children for, he’d gone along with it. The conversation continued on as her mind raced and she searched for answers in unyielding black eyes.

“What, like Harry?” It was Ron who had spoken.

“Not quite like Harry,” Kingsley said, and the words sounded hollow and far-off to Hermione. “Voldemort didn’t know he’d already done it once, and he was probably arrogant enough to believe even a shard of his soul would be enough to override the complete soul of an infant. But he didn’t want just any children. He wanted brilliant, powerful, magical children. So, he enlisted the most intelligent, the most powerful, and, in the long run, the most expendable of his followers.”

“Why?” she asked, never looking away from Snape and interrupting someone (vaguely, she recognized Molly’s voice). “Why?”

“Hermione,” Tonks said, sounding as if she were trying to talk a jumper down from a ledge, “they just told you why.”

“No,” Hermione said, finally breaking eye contact with Snape to burn holes into Tonks. “Why my babies?” She felt Harry’s shocked jerk on the cushion beside her, and from the corner of her eye she could see Ron’s gaping mouth. They would find out now. They would find out everything. But she didn’t care. “That was Dumbledore’s idea, wasn’t it?” she growled. “I was the logical choice. They couldn’t let just anyone marry Severus, after all.”

“What?” Ron yelled, leaping from his seat to stare at her with betrayal and horror. “Hermione, no! You’re joking!” Fred, George, Ginny, and other voices she couldn’t bother to assign names to were expressing similar outrage and disgust.

“You called him Severus,” Harry said quizzically, and she turned her head to see him looking from her to Snape as if trying to comprehend it.

All of this she registered in a strangely detached way. While once the revelation of her husband to her friends would have warranted no less than her full attention, when the time finally came, she found she was preoccupied with other matters. Ignoring Ron, she looked back to Snape. “It was
Dumbledore’s idea, wasn’t it?”

“Of course it was,” Snape snapped. “Who else would have thought up something so colossally idiotic?”

Having been reminded of his presence, Ron spun on him. “No, I think it was your idea, you pervy old letch! Couldn’t get any women yourself, so you convinced Dumbledore to give you Hermione! You slimy, greasy git! Well, you can’t have her! I won’t let—”

In an instant, Snape’s wand was in his hand and Ron was gesticulating in silence, his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth.

“It’s too late, Weasley,” Snape growled dangerously. “Though I assure you it was as revolting for me as it was for Miss Granger, I have had her.” Ron tried to speak again and only managed to make his face go bright red with the effort. “Miss Lovegood can attest to the evidence of that fact,” he said bitterly, with a glance at Luna.

Snape seemed to take pleasure in watching Ron’s mute expressions of fury and confusion war on his face.

“That’s enough, Severus!” Molly barked, then flicked her own wand at her son and released the spell.

“I’ll murder you, you bastard!” Ron yelled and made to dive for Snape. He didn’t make it half the distance before Bill and Charlie grabbed him and held him back. Snape hadn’t so much as twitched. “Let me go! Did you hear what that snake has been doing to Hermione?”

Charlie rolled his eyes and Bill said, a bit uncertainly, “We did, but it’s not like he raped her or anything, mate. You caught the part where they’re married, right?”

Arthur put his hand on Ron’s shoulder and said something quietly enough that Hermione couldn’t hear. Whatever it was, it calmed him down so that his brothers could let him go, and Ron’s shoulders slumped in defeat.

“You knew about this?” Neville asked Luna quietly.

“Yeah, Luna,” added Ginny. “What did Snape mean?”

Holding up her hand, McGonagall said in a clipped tone, “Let’s take a step back. We’ve got too far ahead of ourselves. If Ronald will kindly refrain from any further outbursts . . .”

Ron fell into an empty seat well away from both Hermione and Snape. He gave McGonagall a petulant look, but kept quiet.

“Voldemort was adamant that Severus would marry and produce children,” McGonagall said. “As you’ve said, Hermione, Albus considered you to be the most logical choice.”

“Then why didn’t he ask me?” Hermione snapped.

“Oh, yes, you would have simply jumped at the chance, I’m sure,” Snape drawled.

“I—” she started, but couldn’t very well lie. “I would have considered it. And even if I’d have said no, that doesn’t make it all right for him to force it on me against my will!”

“It was going to be forced on someone, Hermione,” McGonagall said with a tone of relating an
unpleasant truth rather than making a defense of Dumbledore’s actions. “Dumbledore chose you because he knew you were up to the challenge—and yes, Severus,” she said, her gaze snapping to Snape, “you are a challenge, even on your best days.”

“He could have explained it to me, told me how important it was,” Hermione protested. “Even after the fact, no one ever explained it to me. Do you have any idea how much mental—and physical—agony I went through?”

“We’re sorry about that,” Tonks said. “When Remus and I found out, we did want to help you like we’d promised. We argued with Dumbledore for an hour that you should be allowed to know. But he said that, since you were with Snape, and since Voldemort was trying to use you for one of his evil plots, odds were good you’d have to go before him at some point, and he’d want to read your mind.”

“You’re quite brilliant, Hermione,” Lupin added, “but you’re no Occlumens. We couldn’t let you know what was really going on because if Voldemort looked into your mind and found out that his plan had been discovered and was being worked against, your life would have been forfeit instantly—as would have the lives of Severus and whatever children you’d produced so far, including those carrying them.”

Hermione turned this over in her mind. She was incensed that she hadn’t been told, but Dumbledore’s reasoning had been sound. “I did get taken before Voldemort.”

“What?” yelled Harry, his eyes wild. “Why didn’t you tell me? What happened?”

“I’m fine, Harry,” she said, grabbing his hand to try to calm him. “He didn’t hurt me. I didn’t tell you because I knew you already had enough to worry about, and nothing bad had happened.”

“It’s true,” said Lupin, leveling his steadying gaze at Harry. It seemed to help. “But I still don’t know how you were able to refrain from showing him anything important at all. Even without knowing about his plan for the children, there is still much he could have learned from you. How did you stop him from seeing it?”

Hermione felt heat rise to her cheeks at the memory of Snape’s kiss. “Severus gave me something else to focus my mind on. I guess it worked. Once Voldemort saw that, he didn’t pry much deeper.” Thankfully, no one asked what he’d given her to focus on, though it was likely what they were imagining was more embarrassing than what had really happened.

“Sorry to butt in here,” Fred said, “but I still don’t quite follow.”

“Does this have something to do with that ruddy marriage law business?” George asked.

“It has everything to do with it,” said Kingsley.

Lupin nodded. “After viewing Percy’s memory of”—he cast a glance at Percy, who had nearly flinched, and gave him a tight, wincing smile of empathy—“of what happened recently, we believe we have a fairly clear view of how Voldemort accomplished that particular bit of legislation.”

“We’ve known for years that Voldemort has spies inside the Ministry,” Kingsley said. “Maybe he had one of them do it or maybe he did it himself, but it’s clear Rufus Scrimgeour was put under a very powerful Imperius Curse some time last summer. The marriage law—or the P.E.W.S. program as they’re so fond of calling it—came straight from the hand of Voldemort.”

“When Scrimgeour finally broke the Imperius,” Lupin continued, “he was furious that someone had used him to cause such atrocities. He was going to take action to fix them. Unfortunately,
Voldemort evidently foresaw that contingency. He had another puppet in place, someone to do away with Scrimgeour when he became troublesome. Someone who had no link whatsoever back to Voldemort or any of his followers.”

Percy hugged himself in his chair. Ginny went to him, knelt down, and gave him a hug and kissed the top of his head. He looked at her in surprise but smiled gratefully.

Something that Hermione had been clenching tightly in her heart evaporated, and after a moment she realized what it was. She’d been holding onto her hatred for Scrimgeour for so many months that releasing it now felt like a physical relief. She’d always hated Voldemort. It was freeing to know that she didn’t have to hate Scrimgeour, too. A fleeting pang of regret crossed her mind, that he was dead now and she’d hated him for something he hadn’t been responsible for. But she could dwell on that later.

“We never even knew Scrimgeour was Imperiused,” Kingsley said. “None of us could get close enough to him—probably the work of the Death Eaters working inside the Ministry. I’d wager there are even more than we know about. But apparently Dumbledore knew—or suspected. He decided to let Voldemort’s plan play out enough that Voldemort wouldn’t suspect we knew about it. Dumbledore thought Voldemort would lie low and wait for his plan to come to fruition. Given the sudden drop in Death Eater activity, it seems he was right.”

“As a secondary measure,” Kingsley said, “Voldemort included Trelawney on the list of those who were chosen for the program. He still wants her because of the prophecy regarding Harry—which, fortunately, he still has not heard all of. She was to be married to a reclusive Seer who couldn’t protect her, to get her away from Hogwarts so she’d be an easy target. Nothing Dumbledore said could sway the council on this point. So, he went to plan B.”

As this was already a part of the story Hermione knew, she took the chance to look around the room. The looks of disgust and horror on the faces of Ron and Harry when Kingsley mentioned that he’d been conscripted to marry Trelawney were nearly as pronounced as when they’d found out about her and Snape—which was a bit reassuring. Snape himself was smirking smugly at Kingsley.

“I don’t understand,” said Ginny, once the initial wave of shock had worn off. Beside her, Harry was still giving Kingsley a speculative look. “If Voldemort was controlling the people behind this, why did he make Harry and me—or Tonks and Remus—get married if he knew it would make us happy?”

“Remember, Ginny,” Lupin said, “Voldemort knows nothing of love. To his mind, marriage is nothing but a hindrance, a distraction, and a weakness. He knew that Harry was after the Horcruxes, so anything that would distract Harry from that mission would be an advantage.” Harry gave his wife a sidelong, guilty look. Hermione thought he probably had let himself get a bit distracted. “And as for Tonks . . . he probably hoped I’d end up killing her.”

Tonks smacked him on the arm. “Remus Lupin, everything is not about you! It’s more likely he thought I’d be distracted, too, and become an easier target for Aunt Bellatrix.”

Lupin shrugged. “Either way, the end is the same. He doesn’t see the strength in love or marriage—only the weakness. And that is to our advantage.” His hand slid over to grasp Tonks’s as if to underline his point.

Without meaning to, Hermione looked over at Snape. He was staring back at her. She wondered if he was thinking the same things she was, that their marriage could be a strength to them, if only they could get along enough for it to be. For a moment, something flickered in his eyes. Something
“That’s what the prophecy’s about, isn’t it?” Neville had been quiet for a long time, and only now did Hermione realize he’d been sitting there with an expression of intense thought for several minutes. “You-Know-Who wants Hermione and Professor Snape to have four babies so that he can make them into Horcruxes, then they’ll be his right-hand men when he takes over. Or that’s what he thinks, anyway, right?”

“That does seem to be what the prophecy’s referring to,” said McGonagall. “Which, as I said, is nothing we didn’t already know.”

“But the bit about two people having to die,” Neville went on, sounding worried. “That means the babies would grow up without parents, doesn’t it?”

His words were a sharp prick in Hermione’s heart. Of course he’d pick that bit out.

There was no immediate answer. The adults the question was addressed to looked like they were trying to avoid acknowledging the Crumple-Horned Snorkack that had suddenly walked into the room. Luna, of course, didn’t seem bothered by it.

“Not necessarily,” she said easily. “The way it’s worded, it could be referring to Professor Dumbledore and You-Know-Who.”

“What do you mean?” Lupin asked, giving her a sharp look.

“The two to whom they owe themselves,” Luna repeated smoothly. “If You-Know-Who was the one to come up with the plan and Professor Dumbledore was the one to pair Hermione with Professor Snape, then in a way they’re more responsible for the children existing than Hermione and Professor Snape are.”

Hope leapt in Hermione’s heart. Could it be that simple? Maybe Luna was right. Maybe, even if the prophecy was utterly true, it didn’t mean she and Snape had to die. She thought about it, going over the prophecy again, checking the wording, searching for anything to prove Luna wrong. There was nothing.

Hermione saw Snape frowning in thought, working it through for himself. Tonks, Lupin, McGonagall, Kingsley, and Mad-Eye were all giving each other questioning looks, as if having some silent conversation amongst themselves.

“But it would have to mean that, wouldn’t it?” Harry, too, was frowning in thought. “The prophecy says before the last breathes first. I guess that’s talking about the babies being born. But if Hermione was pregnant and died before her baby was born, wouldn’t the baby die, too?”

“Not necessarily,” said Lupin, sounding like he hated to contradict any line of reasoning that meant someone he cared about wouldn’t die. “If the child is close enough to being born and whatever kills the mother doesn’t directly harm it, it is possible to save the child, at least in some cases.”
“But doesn’t it mean we’ve got a while anyway?” Harry asked. “According to this prophecy, whoever the two people are won’t die until Hermione’s had four children. Unless she has quadruplets or sets of twins or something, haven’t we at least got around four years before it happens?”

Hermione sighed. _Full disclosure_, she reminded herself. “No, Harry.”

More eyes than Harry’s looked at her in confusion. She glanced at McGonagall, Lupin, and the others who knew everything (as far as she could tell), but they all seemed content to let her continue.

“Voldemort didn’t want to have to wait that long, apparently. I only just found out it was him, of course—I thought it was the Minister behind it—but there was another part of this marriage law nonsense which no one else had to deal with. I didn’t know why I was singled out, but I’m glad it was only me now. I wouldn’t have wished this on my worst enemy.”

“What is it, Hermione?” Ron had finally spoken again. His eyebrows met in concern.

She gave him a tight smile which failed to reassure either him or herself. “They’ve been transferring my babies.”

Ron’s jaw dropped at the word _babies_. “You mean you’ve already—”

“Yes, Ron,” she said. “It’s been horrible, but not for the reason you’re thinking.” She could see the way his eyes darted to Snape for just an instant. “I’ve . . . _we’ve_ . . . Severus and I have conceived four children so far.”

“What?” hissed Harry.

“Blimey,” said Neville.

“Merlin’s bloody ballsack!” swore Fred and George in odd synchronicity, and Molly shushed them harshly.

Ron had, for once, not said anything. But the look on his face said it all. It was misery—complete and utter misery.

Hermione stared at her lap, suddenly incapable of facing him or anyone else. “But each time,” she pressed on, “they transferred the baby into another girl. I’d thought it was just the Ministry’s doing, to get as many kids as they could out of me before I died in the war or something, but of course now I know the truth. Voldemort doesn’t want to wait around for me to have them naturally, so he got the Ministry to push me into having four in one year. And this way they’re not in my control anymore. Once they were born, they could have given the kids to whoever they wanted.”

“You were pregnant?” Harry asked. There was something odd about his voice. Hermione forced herself to meet his gaze and nodded. His eyes hardened. “And you had them taken from you?”

Now she recognized that odd quality to his voice. She’d never heard it from Harry before, but she had heard it from a few other men, her dad and Arthur Weasley chief among them. It was fierce and primal and distinctly _paternal_. Then Hermione saw that he was gripping Ginny’s hand tightly as it rested on her rounded belly. Harry’s eyes bored into Hermione’s, green flames behind his glasses, and she realized that while she’d witnessed her friend transforming into a man, she’d completely missed his transformation into a father. _And his child isn’t even born yet_, she thought, feeling an overwhelming swell of pride and love for her friend.
“Help me,” she said, unaware of the tears pooling in her eyes.

“Of course I will,” he replied as if he’d never meant anything more in his life.

“They’re not with Death Eaters yet,” Luna said reassuringly.

“How do you know?” Neville asked her.

Luna laid her hands on her abdomen. “Well, one of them’s with me—”

“What?” Ron shrieked, looking completely mad, as if it had all suddenly become too much for his brain to handle.

“She volunteered, Ronald,” said McGonagall before he could get the wrong idea.

“Luna is pregnant with Hermione and Snape’s baby?” Ron asked, and when he just blurted it out like that, it did sound almost as crazy as he was acting like it was.

“They’re all being protected,” Mad-Eye said. “Dumbledore’s idea. The other three are with girls he felt we could trust. It’ll keep them out of Voldemort’s hands that much longer, at least.”

Harry visibly relaxed at this news, but not completely. “Are they at Hogwarts?”

“Yes,” Hermione told him, then looked at Ginny. “You probably know them. They’re in your year, Ginny. One is Cecilia Smith.”

Ginny’s eyes widened. “Cecilia? Really?”

“Don’t you like her?”

“Oh, no,” Ginny said. “She’s fine. I’m just surprised. She was always kind of quiet about getting involved in things.”

Hermione nodded; she already knew about that. “Also, Antoinette Diggory and Evelyn Rosier.”

“Cedric’s cousin,” Harry said, the ghost of an old wound crossing his face. “And . . . who’s the other?”

“A Slytherin. But she hates Voldemort,” Hermione said quickly, forestalling any argument. “I’ve talked with them all. I really do think we can trust them.” She looked at McGonagall. “But this doesn’t add up. If Voldemort’s the one behind it, if he’s trying to breed his ideal servants to use as Horcruxes, why would he use Severus and me? He’s all about purifying the wizarding race. Wouldn’t he use pure-bloods? Severus is a half-blood and I’m a Muggle-born!”

“Voldemort is a half-blood himself,” Lupin said, shaking his head. “And it wouldn’t be the first time he compromised his principles—such as they are—when it suited him. Presumably, Severus was the most convenient option for this plan.”

“But what about me?” Hermione persisted. “Voldemort knows I’m a Muggle-born.”

“Correction,” said Kingsley. “He knew you were. He now knows differently.”

Ron looked at Kingsley as if concerned for his sanity. “Are you saying she’s not a Muggle-born? I think she knows who her own parents are!”

Kingsley gave a knowing smirk. “She does, but Voldemort doesn’t any longer.”
Something clicked. “That’s how Professor Slughorn convinced Voldemort he was really joining him!” she yelled, startling Harry and Ginny. “He brought him information about me!”

“What?” asked Harry. “What kind of information? And how would that help convince Voldemort he was loyal?”


“The what?” Harry asked, a look of complete befuddlement on his face.

“Aren’t you ever going to read—Oh, never mind.” With a sigh of exasperation (and a deep, secret joy at the familiarity of it), she explained. “It’s how Professor McGonagall knows who to send the owls to at the start of each year. When a magical child is born, there’s an enchanted quill somewhere in Hogwarts that writes their name down on in a book. It also marks down blood status, so the Muggle-borns can be given personal visits to explain things.” She looked back at Kingsley. “That’s it, isn’t it? Dumbledore gave Professor Slughorn a fake registry to give to Voldemort—one that had me put down as a pure-blood.”

Kingsley nodded. “Voldemort was looking for a woman who fit his criteria. From what Severus told him, Dumbledore surmised that you met all of them aside from your blood status. It was a simple enough thing for him to create a false registry for Horace to show him. Voldemort was all too ready to believe his previous information had been wrong about you, if it meant he could use you for his plan.”

Words came back to Hermione’s mind. Voldemort’s words, hissed inches away from her face. That must be why I didn’t see it. After surviving that meeting, she’d known he’d had a plan for her. She was just very wrong about what it had been. For an instant, she was angry at Snape for letting her believe what her mind had come up with at the time—that Voldemort allowed their marriage because he expected to use Snape to sway Hermione, Harry’s friend—but quickly dismissed the thought. He couldn’t have refuted her hypothesis without her demanding to know the truth, and she could see now why they didn’t tell her about everything before, though she still didn’t like it.

“None of the surrogates are Muggle-borns,” said Luna, sounding as if she thought that brought some sense to the matter. “I’m a pure-blood, and so are Antoinette and Evelyn. Maybe You-Know-Who thought we could filter out the dirty blood, like how a Fizzleburp Fish cleans the blood of the larger fish it attaches itself to.”

Hermione was fairly sure there was no such thing as a Fizzleburp Fish, but the basic concept did sound like something just crazy enough to occur to Voldemort. “That’s complete madness,” she said, “but if believing it made Voldemort allow you to be the surrogates, I don’t much care. As long as my children are close and safe.”

“Yeah, but for how much longer?” Fred had said this absently and seemed surprised when everyone turned to look at him. “The school’s closing, right?”

“Yeah,” said George. “How can you be sure the little Snapelings-to-be will be all right when their rent-a-wombs go back home?”

Molly looked like she was about to berate him for his chosen phrasing, but she didn’t get the chance.

“They’re not going home,” announced McGonagall, to general confusion. “And neither are some of you. Now that Albus is gone, Voldemort has become bolder—and worse, he now knows that Severus is not loyal to him. He has probably guessed that Albus has worked out what he was up to
and made plans against him. Voldemort will do everything in his power to get the children as soon as possible. He won’t wait until they’re born now. And if he gets his hands on the surrogates, he will likely kill them once the children are born.”

“Then what do we do?” asked Hermione.

“We need time,” McGonagall said. “We need to keep you and your children safe while others of us work on ways to find the remaining Horcruxes and do what we can to loosen Voldemort’s grasp inside the Ministry. There is hope, but not if Voldemort gets his hands on the children. Once he has them, or at least has the young women carrying them, he’ll have no qualms about setting the rest of his plans into full motion.”

“And that is not something we want to happen,” Mad-Eye added unnecessarily.

“Is that why you’re closing the school?” Neville asked. “Are you planning on them hunkering down here for protection?”

McGonagall shook her head. “As we’ve seen tonight, we can’t be sure of the protections on Hogwarts at the moment. And having all of them in one place is out of the question. They must be split up and put under guard.”

“They’re not the only ones,” Kingsley said. “We know that Voldemort wants both Sybill Trelawney and Lavender Brown. He still hopes to know Sybill’s prophecy, and he has something in mind for Lavender, as well. They’ll need protection, too.”

“I quite agree,” McGonagall said.

“You mean they’re to hide out?” asked Hermione. “For how long?”

“Until Voldemort is defeated,” said McGonagall, as if it was obvious.

Hermione was torn. On the one hand, she’d promised Harry to help him find the Horcruxes. On the other, she had to help protect her children, no matter what. She only hoped she’d find a way to do both.

“Four groups,” said McGonagall. “One for each of the surrogates. We’ll need four or five volunteers apiece to stay with them and keep them safe.”

“I’ll go,” said Hermione before anyone could suggest otherwise. “Send me with whichever one you want, but I’m going.” She wished there was a way she could help protect them all.

Ron leapt to his feet. “I’ll stay with Hermione!”

“I think not!” Snape said immediately. “I will remain with my wife, Weasley, and you’re deluding yourself if you think I’ll let you near her.”

Ron looked about to explode, but Hermione said, “Please, Ron. I appreciate it, but I don’t want to deal with the two of you trying to kill each other for however long this takes.”

He flinched like she’d slapped him, but still opened his mouth to protest.

“She’s right, son,” said Arthur, standing beside him and putting his arm around Ron’s shoulder. “Why don’t you come with us?” He looked from Ron to Molly to McGonagall. “Molly and I volunteer. We can keep one of the young women in the Burrow, if you think it’s a safe enough hiding place.”
“I volunteer, too,” said Sturgis Podmore, his square jaw set.

McGonagall nodded. “Very well. Once the preparations are made, you—Arthur, Molly, Ronald, and Sturgis—will guard Antoinette Diggory.”

Arthur nodded, squeezed Ron’s shoulder, and went back to sit with Molly, looking satisfied. He was friends with Amos Diggory, Antoinette’s uncle, and had doubtlessly seen the pain he had gone through after losing Cedric. Hermione was certain Arthur especially would do everything he could not to let that family suffer another loss.

“One of them can stay with us at Shell Cottage,” said Bill, sharing a nod with Fleur to signal that she was volunteering as well.

“I’d like to keep Sybill there, if it’s all the same,” said Kingsley. “I think the sea air would help keep her calm. This won’t be easy for her.”

“Then Evelyn Rosier will go to Shell Cottage,” McGonagall said. “But I’d like to have one more with you.”

“It had better be me, then,” said Mad-Eye gruffly, and McGonagall confirmed the assignment.

“We want to help,” said Fred. “George and I can stay with one.”

“Having both of you in one guard would be redundant,” Snape said, and Molly shot him a glare.

“Poorly put,” McGonagall said, “but Severus has a point. The two of you have nearly identical skill sets. I appreciate your volunteering, but it would be better to split you up so that two groups can benefit from your . . . particular brand of creative thinking.”

Fred and George looked slightly put-out for a moment, then grinned. “Well, when you put it that way,” said George.

“It’s just your rotten luck there aren’t four of us,” added Fred.

“I’ll join one team,” said Lupin. “I’ll . . . find somewhere to go on the full moons.”

“Then I’m coming with Rem—”

“Absolutely not!”

Tonks looked at Lupin in shock. “Remus, of course I’m coming with you.”

“You’re pregnant,” Lupin reminded her. “I won’t have you putting our child in danger needlessly.”

Tonks’s eyes flashed. “Hermione’s children are in danger, too, Remus! Are you saying—”

“They’re in danger no matter what,” he said. “There’s no reason for Voldemort to send someone after you. You’ll stay safe at your parents’ house until this is over.”

“Remus Lupin! If you think I’m going to just hide out at my parents’ while others are risking their lives—”

“No,” Hermione said loudly, cutting her off. “He’s right, Tonks. I couldn’t bear it if you lost your baby because you were trying to protect mine.” She looked beside her, past Harry. “That goes for you, too, Ginny. Don’t even think about volunteering for this.”
“Hermione!” Ginny protested. “I’m more than capable of—”

“She’s right,” Harry told her. “You need to stay safe somewhere, too. You and our baby are my family, Ginny. Please. I need to help Hermione with this, but to do that, I need to know you’re safe.”

“But—”

“Ginny, dear,” said Molly, “when I was pregnant with you, both of my brothers were members of the original Order. So I know exactly how badly you want to take part in this. But right now, my grandchild’s depending on you more than anyone else. He—or she—is your first priority.”

Finally, Ginny nodded reluctantly. “Okay.”

“You can come with me, Ginny,” Tonks said, defeated. She gave Lupin a stern look. “But we can’t go to my parents’ house. That’s the second place the Aurors will look once Percy tells Umbridge I’m the one who killed Scrimgeour.”

“Stay at Grimmauld Place, then,” Harry said. “They’ll never find you there, with all the protections on it. That way, Remus and I both will know for sure that you’re safe.”

Tonks frowned in distaste, then shared a look with Ginny and nodded. “All right. But someone will have to warn my parents that the Aurors will check that they’re not hiding me under the bed.”

“I’ll take care of your parents,” Lupin said, looking relieved that she’d agreed to Harry’s suggestion so readily.

“I was going to suggest we use Grimmauld Place as a safe-house for one of the surrogates,” said McGonagall, “but I agree that Nymphadora needs to be kept safe and away, as well. But that does leave the question of where to send the third group.”

“I . . .” Lupin started, then hesitated. After being so firm with Tonks, he appeared oddly nervous, rubbing his hands together as if trying to distract himself. “I have an idea about that.”

“Where, Remus?” McGonagall asked.

“My mum’s.”

“Your mum’s?” Tonks said harshly, sounding appalled at the idea.

Hermione wondered what could provoke such a response. She’d never thought about Lupin having a mum, and if pressed would probably have assumed she’d been dead for years. The idea that he not only had one, but that she was apparently the rare type of person to provoke outright hatred in someone like Tonks, was difficult to conceive of.

Lupin looked at Tonks seriously. “Yes. My mum’s.”

“But she—”

“She will understand that this is an emergency, and I can think of no reason why Voldemort or the Ministry would think to look for any of us there.”

“Even you?” Harry asked. “I mean, if she’s your mum, wouldn’t—”

“My mother hasn’t had any contact with the wizarding world since before I went to school,” Lupin said evenly, with a disturbing lack of emotion. “She divorced my father after I . . . well, let’s just
say she won’t care to have us drop in on her, but she’s . . . she’s a good woman. She will help.”

Now Hermione saw why Tonks reacted how she did. And in Hermione’s opinion, any woman who’d divorce her husband and abandon her son in their time of greatest need didn’t qualify as a good woman.

“If you’re certain, Remus,” McGonagall said.

“I am.”

“Then Cecilia Smith will go with you, along with Harry, George, and . . . thank you, Hestia,” McGonagall said, when the plump woman raised her hand.

“But, Professor—”

“You’re in the Order now, Harry, and you’ve already left school besides. You may call me Minerva.”

“Er, right. So . . . Minerva, why can’t Hermione be in my group?”

McGonagall raised her eyebrows at him. “Forgive me, Harry, but I didn’t think you’d care to spend an indeterminate amount of time in close quarters with Severus any more than Ronald would.”

It was true enough. Harry and Snape’s antipathy toward each other was hardly a secret. But Hermione hoped that would change, especially now that Harry knew about her relationship with Snape, and about how Snape felt about Harry’s mother. She knew that there was no hope of Snape and Ron ever getting along well, but surely Snape and Harry could come to some sort of understanding, given time and opportunity.

“Please, Prof—er, Minerva,” Hermione implored, very much wanting at least one of her best friends with her. “I agree that Severus should be there, but . . . well, it’s not as if Harry has any particular reason to quarrel with him on my account.” It was the closest she could get to admitting to everyone the bond that she knew still existed between Ron and herself.

“Yeah. As long as he behaved himself, I’d be fine,” Harry said, shooting a challenging look at Snape.

“And that attitude is precisely why it would be a bad idea, at least at this juncture,” said McGonagall. “You and Severus will have to sort out your issues with one another at another time, when the lives of innocents are not depending upon your doing so.”

Harry had no response to that, evidently recognizing that she was right. He muttered an apology to Hermione, then added, “We’ll keep what’s-her-name and the baby safe. You won’t have to worry about them.”

She nodded her thanks and wondered exactly how miserable she could expect the next however many months to be without her two best friends.

“I’ll go with Hermione,” Neville said to McGonagall. “I don’t mind Professor Snape.”

This was an outright lie, as nearly everyone present knew, but the fact that he had added no caveat to his ability to tolerate Snape apparently spoke well of him, as McGonagall nodded. “In that case, the last group will consist of Neville, Severus, Hermione, and Fred guarding Luna Lovegood and Lavender Brown.”
Hermione relaxed just a bit. She wouldn’t have Harry and Ron with her, but at least she’d have Neville and Luna. Although she couldn’t say she was looking forward to spending very long being trapped in close quarters with either Lavender or Fred. For that matter, she wasn’t altogether certain that Fred was a much better choice than Harry when it came to interacting with Snape, though at least there were no personal grudges between Fred and Snape—at least, not that Hermione was aware of.

“Where will we be staying?” asked Luna.

“What about my house?” offered Hermione.

“That’s the first place Voldemort would look,” warned Mad-Eye.

“No, I mean,” said Hermione, “well, my family . . . we have two houses. There’s the one just outside London, where my parents lived up until I sent them to Australia. But we’ve got a smaller house in Northumberland. We used to go there on holidays and during the summer. It’s quite out of the way and I can’t think of any connections that would let Voldemort know about it. We never even had our post forwarded there because my parents went there when they wanted to get away from everyone.”

The small group of Order members who appeared to have collectively taken Dumbledore’s place at the head—McGonagall, Lupin, Mad-Eye, and Kingsley—thought about this. After a moment, McGonagall said, “You’re certain no one would be able to lead him there?”

Hermione nodded. “My parents never even told our neighbors about it.”

“What about your Muggle friends in the area?” Kingsley asked. “Did you ever tell any of them about it?”

“I . . . I never really had any friends before I came to Hogwarts,” she admitted uncomfortably. “And I was always too busy reading during summer holidays to talk to anyone in my neighborhood.”

“Then it seems we have our final safe-house,” said McGonagall. “Now that that’s settled, we should make preparations to get the students home and our plans in motion as quickly as possible. Unless anyone has any other concerns they’d like to address, I suggest we get back to our rooms and homes. We have a lot of work ahead of us.”

No one had anything else to add, so the meeting was considered closed, and people started breaking off into smaller groups to speak to one another. Hermione briefly considered joining the conversation the Weasleys were having, even going so far as to get up and take a step toward them, but when she saw that Percy seemed to be at the center of it, she figured it was a little too private even for someone as nearly family as herself. With a huge yawn, she decided she was better off going to bed anyway. There would certainly be time for her to see the Weasleys again before they all went their separate ways.

Lupin pulled a familiar bit of parchment from his robes and, evidently seeing no reason to hide it, tapped it with his wand. He looked at it for a moment, then said, “The corridor is clear, only be aware that Mrs. Norris is patrolling three floors down.” He tapped the Map again with his wand and stowed it in his pocket.

“One or two at a time, then,” McGonagall said and opened the door to allow Kingsley to pass through. After about half a minute, Mundungus followed.
As people began to trickle out into the darkness, Hermione was surprised to find McGonagall’s hand on her elbow. “Over here, if you please, Hermione,” McGonagall said in a low voice.

McGonagall led her to a place against the one wall where several of the Order had broken off and were waiting for her. Hermione wondered what McGonagall had to say to her, Snape, Lupin, and Harry that she didn’t bother saying in front of everyone.

“There is a small matter which I did not feel necessary to involve everyone in,” McGonagall explained, then cut off Hermione’s question before she could ask it. “This is not a matter of disclosure, Hermione, as this doesn’t concern Order business. It is, rather, a personal matter involving Albus.” She pulled a scroll from her robes and unfurled it, then looked at those she’d gathered. “He left items to the four of you in his will.”

Harry’s eyes went wide. “He left something to me?” he asked, and it sounded to Hermione as if Harry wasn’t sure whether he wanted something of Dumbledore’s or not anymore, but Hermione knew he did.

“To the four of you, yes,” said McGonagall in a clipped tone. She withdrew a small bag from a hidden pocket, and with a flick of her wand enlarged it until it was roughly the size of a large handbag.

Glancing over her shoulder, Hermione saw Ron, Ginny, and Tonks talking animatedly as others continued to file out. Tonks and Ginny seemed to be doing their best to put Ron in a better mood, but it wasn’t working.

Her eyes returned to the bag in McGonagall’s hand, dreadfully curious what Dumbledore would have left for her.

McGonagall reached into the bag and pulled out the first item.

“What’s that?” Hermione asked, staring at the object in McGonagall’s hand. She was fairly certain Dumbledore hadn’t been a smoker, and if he had been, it was unlikely he’d have used a simple cigarette lighter. Surely it had to be something other than what it looked like.

“Hey, I’ve seen that before,” said Harry. “Mad-Eye used it to put the lights out on the street when I first came to Grimmauld Place.”

“It’s called a Put-Outer, or Deluminator,” McGonagall explained, “and Albus left it to Remus in his will.” She handed it to Lupin, who looked at it oddly.

“Why?” Harry asked. “Did he think Remus would need to be putting out a lot of lights or something?”

“I can’t imagine,” said Lupin, evidently as perplexed by the choice of present as Harry and Hermione. After inspecting it, he shrugged and put it in his pocket. “Handy thing, though. Is that all, Minerva?”

“Yes,” McGonagall said, and Lupin went over to join his wife. McGonagall withdrew the next object and handed it to Snape. “I can’t imagine why he wanted you to have it, Severus, but here it is.”

Hermione caught a glimpse of a ring as it passed from McGonagall’s hand to Snape’s. It was gold, with a large stone in the middle which was bisected by a deep crack. Snape scowled as he took it and held it in his palm, sneering at it. “A broken Horcrux. The means of his death which I was unable to prevent. I’m sure he meant there to be a message in it somewhere.” There was an edge of
boredom in his tone. He shoved the ring in his pocket, glanced at Hermione, and walked away.

Once again, McGonagall reached into the bag, this time pulling out something that seemed too large to fit inside it.

“Gryffindor’s sword!” Harry said, startled.

“Yes, Harry,” said McGonagall, handing it to him. “Technically, it wasn’t Albus’s to give away, but given the circumstances, I see no problem with giving it to you, at least for the foreseeable future. I presume he wanted you to have this because it is one of the few sure ways he knew of to destroy a Horcrux. Just remember, as we said tonight, that task is no longer yours to shoulder alone. You may do what you like with the sword, even if that means allowing others to use it. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Pr—er, Minerva,” Harry said, holding the sword awkwardly in his hand, then finally wrapping it in his cloak. “Still, it feels good to have it.”

“You and Ginny are welcome to stay here until it’s time to break into groups,” McGonagall told him. “But it might be best not to let anyone see you.”

Harry nodded. “Thanks.” McGonagall stared at Harry, not opening the bag or speaking to Hermione, so after a few moments, Harry said, “I’ll just go, er, wait over there with Ginny, then.”

When Harry was gone, McGonagall turned to fully face Hermione and withdrew the last item.

Hermione gasped. “Is that—”

“Albus’s wand,” McGonagall confirmed, holding it out to her.

Trying to think of any reason why Dumbledore would will his wand to her, Hermione reached out, touching it gingerly. It was smooth and pale, in remarkable shape for the age it must surely have been. “I thought they buried this with him,” she whispered.

“We were going to,” McGonagall said, still holding the wand as Hermione worked herself up to taking it. “Fortunately, I read his will before arrangements were finalized.”

Finally, Hermione wrapped her fingers around the wood. “But why would he give it to me?”

“Perhaps,” said McGonagall, “he thought you needed a spare.”

Hermione looked at her sharply, wondering if she was making a joke, but McGonagall’s expression was blank. “Well . . . thank you,” she said and slipped it into her sleeve.

It was such a personal thing, like a diary or family heirloom. To give it to a person who wasn’t at least a direct descendant was almost unheard of. That Dumbledore had given it to her—and not Harry—was completely baffling. Was it an apology for the plot he’d had to work her into? Was it a simple gesture of kindness, a request for forgiveness perhaps? Was it, like the book he’d given her earlier, an attempt to be reassuring? Or was it just as McGonagall had said, that he’d simply wanted her to have whatever protection he could leave her. She didn’t know, and she doubted she ever would.

People were still filtering out a couple at a time. Harry, Ron, and Ginny were talking about something which required a surprising amount of hand gestures. Not in a mood to chat, Hermione slipped past them, hoping that if she left quickly enough, they wouldn’t catch her up.
To her surprise, she found Snape waiting by the door. “Come with me,” he told her quietly, and slid out the door before she could respond. Without looking to see if Harry or Ron had spotted her, she followed him out.

He walked silently through the corridors, and she struggled to keep up with his long strides. “Where are we going?” she whispered, becoming annoyed at the fact that he wasn’t even looking back occasionally to make sure she was still with him.

“My office,” he replied tersely. “You said you needed a potion, did you not?”

Having forgotten entirely about her headache during the meeting, Hermione felt its presence again now that she was thinking about it. “Yes,” she said glumly. She wondered what time it was. Surely the fact that it was the wee hours of the morning by now wasn’t helping her headache.

They continued without speaking all the way to the dungeons. Snape led her through the corridors and staircases without meeting a single person, even though she knew there were other teachers and prefects patrolling the halls. When they arrived at his office, he opened the door and let her go in before entering and closing it behind himself.

Breathing hard from the fast-paced journey from the Room of Requirement, Hermione looked around at the familiar shelves stocked with potions ingredients. Snape stepped deliberately around his desk, looking down to where he was placing his feet before looking back to the shelves against the back wall. _It’s the tumors_, Hermione realized with a start. _They’re affecting his motor functions, too._

Snape found a bottle of red liquid—which was labeled, but Hermione was sure he didn’t actually need to read the label to know what it was—and handed it to her. She drank it, thanked him when her headache receded, and set the bottle back on his desk (which, she was alarmed to note, still bore the two sets of accusing fingernail marks).

“We’re not finished here,” Snape said when she turned to leave.

Hermione turned back to him, her shoulders drooping. “Severus, I’m very tired. Is this something that can wait?”

He folded his arms across his chest and said nothing.

Giving herself over to the inevitable, Hermione straightened up and looked him in the eye. “What is it?”

“Do you know why you only received an _E_ on your essay?” he asked.

“Because you guessed my grade?” Hermione returned, unable to prevent the irritation in her voice.

“Comforting as it must be to blame your shortcomings on me,” Snape drawled, “I was still capable of reading when I set you that essay.”

“Then I give up,” Hermione said, wanting him to get to the point so she could go to bed. “Why was it only an _E_?”

“No, I wouldn’t, Severus. Just tell me.”
He glared at her. “The detail,” he said brusquely, “is that Wentworth’s Brew can be mixed into any other potion without affecting the taste, texture, or efficacy of either potion.”

*What?* Hermione frowned, her mind whirling. Surely such a detail would have been in something she’d read about it so far, but this was the first she’d heard of it. “That wasn’t in the book,” she protested. “You can’t mark me off for something I couldn’t have found out.”

“Weren’t you paying attention tonight?” Snape snapped. “The school is closed, Miss Granger! Your marks don’t matter any longer! It’s time to stop worrying about your grades and start worrying about your life!”

It was like a blow. Hermione stepped back from him, trying not to let him see how his outburst affected her. It was true, of course, but only now had the facts of the matter really hit her.

“If it doesn’t matter,” she snapped back, “why did you bring it up?”

Snape gave a sharp, exasperated exhale and came around the desk toward her. “Think, Miss Granger! Use your brain while you still can!”

Hermione’s eyes flew wide. Was he saying what it sounded like he was saying? *Use your brain while you still can?* “What? Do you—No. I thought of that already. I asked Partridge. He didn’t give me Wentworth’s; I know it!”

“His were not the only potions you took, were they?” Snape asked softly, taking another step closer to her.

She thought back. She certainly wasn’t in the habit of drinking potions given to her by strangers. “No, only the ones he sent me, I’m sure of it. Unless you think Madam Pomfrey poisoned me!” she added, suddenly remembering the headache potions she’d got.

“No,” Snape said slowly. He was all but looming over her now. “But you’re forgetting something.”

She wasn’t. She knew she wasn’t. “The only people I’ve taken any potions from since before term started are Partridge and Madam Pomfrey. And you, of course,” she added for the sake of complete thoroughness.

Snape raised his eyebrows.

Hermione felt as if a gaping hole had appeared inside her body, swallowing up her heart and stomach and leaving her empty.

“Are you . . .” she whispered, forcing the words out from lungs that no longer seemed to exist, “are you saying that you . . . Severus, have you given me Wentworth’s Brew?”

He nodded.

For several seconds, her mind was devoid of all thought. Then the fear that had gripped her suddenly and violently gave way to fury.

“*Why?*” she screeched.

“For the same reason I took it myself,” he said evenly. “I had no choice.”

“You had no choice but to poison me?” she shouted, banging her fist against his chest for emphasis. “You selfish—arrogant—horrible—awful man! How could you?”
He stood unmoving, nonresponsive as she pounded her fists against his wiry, surprisingly tough chest. “Calm yourself, Miss Granger,” he said evenly. “Throwing a tantrum will not help the situation.”

“Throwing a—” she repeated in disbelief. “How dare you?”

Finally, he grabbed her wrists to stop her hitting him. “Do you think I would have chosen a slow, humiliating death if I’d had any other viable options?” he asked harshly. “I assure you, when I say I had no choice, that is not hyperbole. The potion was an important part of the Dark Lord’s plan. If he had not seen in my mind that I was giving it to us both, he would have reacted . . . badly.”

She jerked her arms out of his grip. “I thought you were good at hiding the truth from him.”

“Hiding, yes. But I cannot make new memories to show him things that never happened. And even if I could, I would no longer know the difference between truth and fabrication.”

She sniffed. “It’s not that hard to make new memories. I changed my parents’ memories to make them forget me, so they’d leave the country and be safe.”

“You what?”

“I . . . changed my parents’ memories,” she said in a smaller voice, the shock on Snape’s face sapping her confidence. “I made them think they were different people. People who didn’t know me.”

He shook his head. “That was an unbelievably stupid thing to do. Have you any idea the damage you might have done them?”

“I was trying to keep them safe!”

“And in so doing, might have condemned them to gradual, creeping insanity.”

Hermione’s jaw dropped. “No. I—have I really?”

Snape pursed his lips. “Perhaps not. Obliviation is dangerous enough that it should not be done lightly; creating false memories is more dangerous still. You won’t know if you’ve harmed them until you attempt to reverse the spell. Assuming you’re around to do so—though I hope for their sakes that you ask assistance for that task. If they weren’t already a gibbering mess when you left then, they’re in no imminent danger. I suggest you focus on saving your own mind—and life—first. But no, Miss Granger, I could not simply fabricate memories to convince the Dark Lord I’d given us the potion. Even if I’d done so, as I said, I would no longer have known the difference. I trust you see the problem with that.”

She did, not that she wanted to admit that to him. “Why are you telling me about all this now?”

“Would you rather I hadn’t told you?”

Yes, she almost said, but that wasn’t true. It was terrifying to know, but she’d rather know when there was still time to do something about it than die without knowing why.

“Why now?” she repeated.

“Because there’s nothing to be gained by hiding it any longer.”

She looked up into his eyes, her own on fire. “Do the others know about this?”
“No,” Snape replied. “If they did, they’d only waste time better spent finding a way to defeat the Dark Lord.”

Hermione turned to run out the doorway, but Snape’s grip was strong; he didn’t let go of her right wrist.

“You are free to tell them, of course,” he said, his iron grip on her contradicting his words even as he spoke them. “But do think for a moment first. How much help would they be, really? If you and I have not found the counter-potion, do you really think Potter and Weasley will?”

She bristled at the derision in his voice as he asked what he plainly thought was an obvious question. But she had to admit he had a point. She stopped trying to pull away from him and considered his words.

“But they would try, wouldn’t they?” he continued smoothly. He appeared to know he had her now. “They’d put all their effort into finding a way to save you and forget all about fighting the Dark Lord. Don’t you think that was part of the reason he commanded me to give the potion to you?”

She looked at him sharply. “How long has it been? How many times have you dosed me?”

“Can’t you puzzle that out for yourself?” he asked. She was standing still again, and he released her arm.

“The arousal potion,” she said with horror. “Then . . . since August?”

He nodded.

The reality of it struck her, and she felt weak. “How much longer?” she whispered. “How much time? Will I . . . will I even live to see my children born?”

“That’s up to you, I think,” Snape said, sounding oddly indifferent. “If you had found the counter-potion by now, this would no longer even be an issue.”

“You’re blaming this on me?”

“Merely pointing out a fact.”

Words came to her lips, but she pushed them back. He was right; it would do no good now to rage at him. “I can do it,” she said, her back straightening. “I’ll sort it out.”

“See that you do.”

Hermione wanted to slap the condescending look off his face. He’d poisoned her, given her brain tumors, and he was blaming her for not finding the cure yet when he himself hadn’t been able to either. He really was a bastard.

“I will,” she stated. And then what? They’d been making progress—finally—and now this. Would she ever be able to forgive him for this?

One problem at a time, she told herself. Or as few as possible, at any rate. Finding a way to forge a tolerable marriage could no longer be a priority. It was about life and death now. Hers, her children’s, and her friends’. There was a war on, after all, and Voldemort had more tricks up his sleeve than she’d ever guessed.
She pulled the Foe-Glass out of her robes, checked to make sure the coast was clear, and left Snape’s office without another word.
Parvati Patil was called away at an ungodly hour the next morning by an urgent and mysterious summons delivered by a ragged-looking second-year. The girl had first flung open Hermione’s bed curtains, not knowing which bed belonged to whom, and so Hermione bore ill-rested witness to the hasty exit of Parvati, who blearily followed out the girl whose name Hermione could never seem to remember.

“What happened?” asked Lavender, pulling herself out of unconsciousness a moment too late to see Parvati fly out the door.

Hermione sighed and resigned herself to waking. “Parvati got called away.”

Rubbing her eyes, Lavender frowned. “At this hour? It’s still dark.”

Hermione sat up while Lavender plopped back onto her pillow in what Hermione knew would be a futile attempt to get back to sleep. A few minutes later, the door opened to admit Professor McGonagall. “Is she awake?”

“I think so,” Hermione said. “Or she was a minute ago.”

McGonagall swept her wand around the room. “*Homenum Revelio.*” She paused and then, satisfied, went to Lavender’s bed. “Miss Brown,” said McGonagall sharply, and Lavender woke with such a jerk that she was sitting up before she appeared aware of her surroundings.

“Professor McGonagall!” she cried in surprise. “What—why are you—has something happened?”

“I need a word with you, if you please.”

Lavender looked anxiously at Hermione, then back to McGonagall. “Is this to do with why Parvati was called away? What’s wrong?”

McGonagall Conjured a chair and took a seat near Lavender’s bed. “I called Miss Patil away because Miss Granger and I need to speak to you on a matter of utmost secrecy.”

Now Lavender’s expression was suspicious as she shot a glance to her roommate. “Parvati’s my best friend. I’m sure whatever it was, she could hear it, too.”

“For her sake,” said McGonagall, “it’s better that she does not.”

Coming to grasp the gravity of the situation, Lavender sat up fully in her bed, propped up against her headboard. “Why didn’t you just have me come to your office?”

“Because someone might have seen that,” Hermione said to her, then to McGonagall, “You snuck in as a cat, didn’t you? When Parvati opened the portrait hole.”

McGonagall nodded. “As I have already mentioned, this is a matter of utmost secrecy.”

Lavender frowned. “All right, then. What is it?”

“This may come as a shock, Miss Brown, but I’m afraid we don’t have the luxury of time. I’ll get to the point—you are a Seer.”
Lavender blinked dumbly. “What do you mean?”

“While I admit,” said McGonagall, “that my opinion of Divination is not the highest, even I have been forced to concede that such things as real prophecies and even real Seers do, in fact, exist, rare though they may be. I’m aware of your enthusiasm for the subject, and I would like to assure you that neither your O.W.L. score nor your admiration for Professor Trelawney have anything to do with the fact that you are, as I say, a Seer.”

“I knew it!” Lavender screeched, jumping from her bed. “I knew it all along! Oh, I’ve got to tell Parvati! She’ll just die!” She made a run for the door, but with a flick of her wand, McGonagall made it impossible to open.

“I do not tell you this merely for your own edification, Miss Brown,” McGonagall said sharply. “Sit down and let me continue.”

“But I have so many questions!” Lavender protested. “Is someone else in my family a Seer? How did I get it? How long have you known? Oh, and Tiresias said I have the Sight!”

With a long-suffering roll of the eyes, McGonagall said again, “Sit down, Miss Brown.”

Quite despite herself, Hermione stifled a snigger at McGonagall’s unintended rhyme.

Petulantly, Lavender trudged back to her bed and landed with a flump. Then, very pointedly, she folded her hands in her lap and looked at McGonagall.

“To answer one of your questions,” said McGonagall, all professorial calm now that Lavender was quiet, “I have only known for a very short time. In fact, it was Miss Granger who first discovered your hidden talent.”

“Hermione?” Lavender said, shocked.

Hermione took her cue and stepped forward, coming to perch on the end of Lavender’s bed. “Do you remember a while ago, when you and I were talking one night, and you said that suddenly it looked like I’d moved across the room very quickly, and you accused me of acting strangely.”

Lavender’s lips pursed in thought. “Yeah. I think so.”

“You don’t remember anything at all unusual about how you acted?” Hermione asked. “Saying anything strange? Any . . . blacking out?”

“Not at all.”

“Well, you did,” said Hermione. “We were in the middle of a conversation, and suddenly you went into this sort of trance and you . . . well, you made a prophecy. I didn’t know it at first, but I realized what it was later. You didn’t sound at all like yourself, and what you said made no sense. But that’s what it was: a prophecy.”

“What did I say?” asked Lavender, leaning forward eagerly, her eyes wide.

Hermione looked at McGonagall, then lied. “I . . . I don’t remember exactly. But I do know it was something about a Dark wizard and sounded almost like you were talking about Voldemort.”

Lavender paled. “Was it . . . you know, important?”

“Indescribably,” said McGonagall. “But, it seems, not so much for what was said—rather, for who
“But it was just you and me in the room, wasn’t it?” Lavender asked Hermione.

“I thought so at the time, and I still can’t imagine who else could have been there,” she answered, “but someone else must have heard. I only told Ron, and I know he didn’t tell anyone.”

“Why must someone have heard?” Lavender asked, squinting shrewdly.

“Because someone wants to kill you for it,” said Hermione.

“Wha—what?” This was obviously not at all the answer Lavender had expected.

“It’s quite true, I’m sorry to say,” confirmed McGonagall. “For some reason, Miss Brown, you have unintentionally and unwittingly become a target of Voldemort.”

Lavender’s hands flew to her mouth. “Are you saying You-Know-Who wants to kill me?” she gasped, her voice breaking. “Why?”

“He wants to kill everyone, Lavender,” said Hermione darkly. “Everyone who’s not on his side. But to answer your question, he somehow heard about the prophecy you made and now he wants you. Maybe he hopes if he has you, he can get more prophecies, ones that only he’ll hear which will give him an advantage. I don’t know. But we all know prophecies don’t come on command—even Trelawney says that. If he captures you, he’ll keep you, and if you don’t do what he wants—if you don’t prophesy for him—he’ll kill you.”

“How do you know?”

“Because that’s how he works.”

“No,” corrected Lavender. “I mean, how do you know he wants me? There’s got to be lots of Seers out there. Why me?”

“Not lots,” said Hermione. “Just a few, actually.”

“We know,” interjected McGonagall, “because he has already tried to capture you.”

This shocked Lavender once again, and she looked around wildly as if expecting Voldemort to pop out from behind her wardrobe.

“His Death Eaters, however,” continued McGonagall as if she hadn’t noticed Lavender’s reaction, “snatched the wrong student. They were evidently given a vague description of you which caused them to mistake someone else for you.”

“Who?” Lavender whispered from behind her hands.

McGonagall let out a deep, weary breath. “Hannah Abbott.”

“Hannah! You mean—you mean Hannah was taken because—because they thought she was me?”

“Yes.”

“And where is she now?” Lavender asked, but her tone betrayed her suspicion, and Hermione knew she’d already guessed. “Professor, where is Hannah now?”

“Voldemort killed her,” McGonagall said plainly, prompting another outcry from Lavender, who
flung herself into her sheets.

After several moments in which Lavender sobbed into her sheets, she sat up again, her face dry but her eyes red. “That could have been me! I could be dead now!”

“Someone is dead!” McGonagall snapped. “One of your classmates!”

“I’m sorry!” cried Lavender. “I know it’s awful, but I’ve never . . . I can’t believe . . .” She stopped sputtering and said, “How do you know she’s dead? Did they bring her body back?”

“How we know is not your concern.” McGonagall’s tone brooked no argument. “But our information on this is solid.”

Lavender wrung her hands and looked from McGonagall to Hermione. “So, what now? You’re not going to just let him kill me, are you?”

“Of course not,” said McGonagall. “We’ve made arrangements for you. The fact is, Miss Brown, you are not the only person in grave danger at present. We have arranged a safe place for these others to stay until some of the danger has passed, and it would be prudent for you to go with them.”

Lavender looked at her in confusion. “A place to stay? You mean hide out? Away from Hogwarts?”

“That’s right.”

“But isn’t this the safest place I could be?”

“You’ll remember,” said McGonagall, “that Miss Abbott was taken from the Hogwarts grounds. Somehow, the Death Eaters have got past our defenses. The school is no longer safe.”

“But . . . but it’s almost N.E.W.T.s,” protested Lavender, to Hermione’s surprise. “I’ll fall behind in my classes.”

“No, you won’t,” said McGonagall. At Lavender’s questioning look, she added, “Due to what has occurred, the school will be closing.”

Lavender gasped again. “You can’t!”

“We must.”

Lavender was quiet for a long time as she came to grips with what McGonagall and Hermione were telling her. They waited for her, letting the silence stretch on. Birds began chirping outside as the day relentlessly came forth. Crookshanks scratched at the stone wall, probably irritated by a mouse digging around its nest. Finally, Lavender raised her head and said in a remarkably steady voice, all things considered, “When do I leave?”

“Tomorrow,” answered McGonagall. “Your party and the others will depart once the other students have gone home.”

“Who’s in my . . . party?”

“I am,” said Hermione, and gave her what she hoped was an encouraging smile that she didn’t truly feel. She still wasn’t looking forward to all that time cooped up with Lavender. At least at school they’d only had to share a room to sleep. “And Neville, Luna Lovegood, Fred Weasley . . .” Her
added mumble of, “Professor Snape,” was drowned out by Lavender’s exclamation.

“Fred Weasley? Ron’s brother? But he’s not even in school anymore.”

“He has volunteered to help protect those who need protecting,” said McGonagall, “as have many others.”

Lavender’s face tightened in thought again, and she grabbed a hairbrush by her pillow and began brushing her hair nervously.

“What if I don’t want to go?” she asked finally. “What if I just want to go home, or—or go to Africa or something?”

“You’re perfectly able to make your own decision on the matter,” McGonagall said, her eyebrows raised. “You’re of age, and soon you will no longer be a student under my care. I cannot force you to accept the protection I offer, nor would I. But Voldemort is very resourceful, and he has a way of getting what he wants, particularly from those who don’t know his ways well.”

“Oh, please, Lavender,” urged Hermione. “This isn’t something to trifle with. Professor McGonagall knows what she’s talking about. And I don’t think it will be so bad. I know we’ve never been best friends, but I don’t want to see you killed.” And that, at least, was the complete truth.

For a moment, a flash of defiance flickered across Lavender’s face—perhaps she’d imagined some other, more romantic way for this to play out—then she said, with some trepidation, “It’s not a very Gryffindor thing to do, is it? Hiding away.”

“If it isn’t,” said Hermione, “then maybe Gryffindors can stand to learn a thing or two from the other Houses.”

“Sometimes part of courage,” McGonagall’s voice was gentler now than before, “is knowing when not to fight. There will be plenty of time for fighting before this war is over, Miss Brown, I assure you. But for now, we need to keep safe those whom Voldemort has targeted.”

“All right,” said Lavender, reluctantly, and looked dejectedly at Hermione. “I’ll go with you.”

Hermione wondered if she should say what she had to say next, but better now while they were alone and in private. She just hoped Lavender could keep her mouth shut for a day. Then again, did it even matter anymore if everyone found out? “Lavender, since you’re going to be cooped up in my vacation home with us, there’s something else you may as well know. Er... do you read the papers at all? Have you read about P.E.W.S.?”

Lavender’s eyes lit with interest. “A little. The Prophet keeps hinting without saying very much.”

“Well... I’m part of that program.”

Lavender squealed. “You—” She laughed. “I should have guessed it. All that talk in the Prophet about a bright, promising witch. And—” She gasped and covered her mouth. “Those weird questions you asked, and the bruises—”

“Yes, yes!” Hermione glanced at McGonagall, who was frowning now, and hurried on. “I’ve been having to hide it all term. We... er... we both have.” She looked again to McGonagall, but the Headmistress seemed content to let her struggle through this herself. “You know the Ministry forced me to marry someone it chose. That someone was”—she winced, already fearing Lavender’s reaction—“Professor Snape.”
Lavender shrieked with surprise, gasped in horror, and then stared at Hermione with a slack jaw. “Tell me you’re joking!”

Hermione shook her head.

“He was—” She gasped again. “Snape?” Then in a flash, her expression changed from horror to a coy hunger for gossip. “How is he?”

Hermione almost slapped her in shock. McGonagall snapped, “Miss Brown! That is none of your business!”

Having apparently forgotten McGonagall was in the room, Lavender lowered her eyes as if chastised, only to raise them to give Hermione a We’ll talk about this later look.

“I am not talking about that with you,” Hermione informed her.

“You did before.”

“When you didn’t know who I was talking about.”

“Who was the friend’s boyfriend you kissed, anyway?”

“No one!”

McGonagall clapped her hands to get Lavender’s attention, which was speeding away into an unhelpful direction. “Miss Brown! Miss Granger has not revealed this matter to you for your amusement.”

“I certainly haven’t,” Hermione said. “And you really need to not give Snape any weird looks or make any weird comments when you see him next. Hiding out is going to be awkward enough as it is. And”—she sighed—“there’s more. You know the P.E.W.S. program was about producing children, right?”

Lavender nodded, opened her mouth to make some comment, saw McGonagall’s expression, and remained silent.

“Well, we did, but the Ministry had them transferred into surrogates. Voldemort wants the babies for reasons of his own, so the girls carrying my—our—babies are in danger, so they’ll be hiding out too. That’s why Luna is coming with us.”

Lavender’s eyes were round as saucers. “You made . . . babies . . . with Snape?”

Hermione rubbed her forehead. This was going to take a while.

#

Hermione sat with McGonagall and Lavender as they went over the details of the plan (leaving out what was strictly Order business), and a few hours later, Hermione went down to breakfast. She still felt as if she hadn’t got enough sleep, but she shook it off. There would, she knew, be time for sleeping later. For now, there were still things that needed to be done.

She took a seat between Ron and Neville, watching Lavender closely as she sat down next to Parvati, Dean, and Seamus. Parvati had returned to their room in a snit not long after McGonagall left, complaining that it hadn’t really been an emergency at all. Lavender had looked on the edge of bursting to tell her everything that happened, but she’d held her tongue, not without a few sharp
looks from Hermione. Hermione only hoped she’d continue to do so now that Hermione wasn’t looking over her shoulder.

“Mum says things went well with Antoinette Diggory,” Ron informed her and Neville in a low voice, reaching across them to grab a scone. Molly and Tonks had been sent to speak to Antoinette about the plan. Hermione hadn’t really had any doubt Antoinette would see the necessity for it.

“You guys talked to Lavender?” asked Neville quietly.

Hermione nodded. “She said she’ll come, though she didn’t like it.”

“I don’t like it, either,” muttered Ron, and they left it at that.

Looking around the room, Hermione searched discreetly for the Hufflepuff girl who carried her child. She spotted her, and Antoinette looked over, gave her a sort of nervous, encouraging smile, and continued speaking with a blond boy beside her.

Just as Hermione glanced up to the staff table, she saw Snape walk in and take his seat. At nearly the same time, Evelyn Rosier, looking more grim and determined than any girl had a right to look at breakfast, entered and took her seat on the far end of the Slytherin table.

After a while, more people came in, and an empty seat a few spots down the Gryffindor table was taken by Cecilia Smith, who looked at Hermione unblinkingly for an uncomfortably long moment, then nodded. Whatever Harry and Ginny had said to her, she clearly had got the message.

Hermione sighed faintly with relief. So far, so good. It would have made things difficult if one of the surrogates had insisted on returning home or complained about being whisked away to who knew where. She presumed Kingsley had spoken to Trelawney by now, but since Trelawney was, as usual, not at breakfast, she couldn’t tell whether it had gone well or not.

When nearly all the students and teachers were in the Great Hall and the meal was in full swing, McGonagall stood up from her place in the Head’s chair.

“Attention!” she called, tapping a spoon to her glass. “May I have your attention, please!”

Most of the room quieted down right away, but there were spots (notably among the Slytherins) who took a while to become quiet. McGonagall continued tapping her glass until she had everyone’s attention.

“I have some most distressing news this morning,” she announced. “As you will, no doubt, be aware by now, Hannah Abbot was taken from the school grounds last night. As you may also have noticed, she has not been returned.” There was a hearty murmur from the Hufflepuff table, and McGonagall raised her hand to silence it. “It is my duty to inform you of the truth, even if there are those who would not wish it heard. The fact of the matter is that Miss Abbot was taken from here by Death Eaters and killed by Voldemort himself.”

Those who already knew this sat in silence as the entire student body whispered, talked, and shouted around them. With a surge of fury, Hermione saw several people at the Slytherin table sitting just as quietly, but smiling horrible, gloating smiles, as if anything Voldemort did was a win for them. *Idiots!* she thought. They didn’t even know that Hannah wasn’t the one Voldemort had wanted.

“We have not yet,” McGonagall went on, “determined how the Death Eaters managed to get past the wards and security spells which Hogwarts has in place. As such, since we can no longer guarantee the safety of those living within these walls, Hogwarts will be closing.”
This proclamation stunned the crowd into silence, but after a few seconds, the questions and protests were renewed with vigor.

“Effective immediately,” McGonagall was now shouting above the din, “all classes are canceled. Tomorrow morning at eight a.m., the Hogwarts Express will take you back to London. Owls have already been sent to your families informing them of this development. You have until then to pack your things and say goodbye to one another.” She sat back down and let the students discuss it amongst themselves.

A moment after she sat down, however, McGonagall stood back up—not to make an announcement, but to leave. She walked to Lupin, caught his attention, and said something Hermione couldn’t distinguish. Then she moved off toward the door, and Lupin looked at Tonks meaningfully, kissed her hand, and followed McGonagall out, leaving Tonks watching worriedly after him.

*What are they doing?* Hermione wondered. This had an air of business about it, and it was nothing Hermione had heard of. She knew she should have left them to it, but her curiosity got the better of her. Making a quick excuse to Ron and Neville, Hermione got up and hurried out the doors into the Entrance Hall.

She caught McGonagall and Lupin just as they were about to go outside through the main entrance, both of them wrapped in cloaks.

Not wanting to draw attention to whatever it was they were doing, she didn’t call out to them but hurried toward them until she could tug discretely on Lupin’s cloak.

Surprised, Lupin looked down at her. “Hermione! What is it?”

“That’s what I’d like to know,” Hermione said, looking from him to McGonagall, who had stopped as well. “I don’t mean to pry, but . . . what are you doing? Tonks looked so worried.”

Lupin smiled tightly, but his eyes were soft. “Tonks worries too much,” he said, but Hermione thought Tonks worried just enough, and she suspected Lupin knew it, too.

“If you must know, Hermione,” said McGonagall in an impatient whisper, “we are going to talk to the werewolves.”

Hermione’s eyes went wide. “What for?”

“It’s complicated,” Lupin said, looking at the students beginning to wander through the Entrance Hall around them, “but in short, we’re going to reach out to them one more time before we leave.”

Hermione opened her mouth to ask another question, but was interrupted by the sudden appearance of Snape directly behind her.

“What’s this?” he asked tersely.

With an exasperated roll of her eyes, McGonagall informed him, “We’re going into the forest.”

“What?” Snape spat.

“Calm down, Severus,” Lupin whispered. “I need to speak with them before we all leave.”

“Do what you will, Lupin, but you’re most certainly not taking my—Miss Granger into that den of mongrels,” Snape hissed, conscious of the students not far off.
“No, of course I—” Lupin began, but Hermione didn’t let him finish.

“He is so!” she said, shocking all three of them. “Remus is helping me protect my”—she looked around—“well, you know. If they’re going to try to reach out to the werewolves again, I want to try to help them.” She looked questioningly at Lupin. “Would it help?”

She half-expected him to deny her outright, especially in the face of Snape’s glower, but he actually thought about it. “Maybe . . .”

“I forbid it!” Snape whispered.

“I’m coming,” said Hermione, her resolve firmed by Snape’s proscription.

“Idiot girl!” Snape spat at her, but Hermione didn’t back down. After a moment, he seemed to realize she wouldn’t, as he said, “Then I’m coming along.”

Lupin looked panicked for a moment, but McGonagall stopped him before he could protest.

“Very well!” she snapped. “But Severus, do not say anything to them unless you are directly spoken to. Do you hear me? I won’t have you sabotaging this.”

Snape’s mouth contorted in a sort of snarl, but he said only, “As you say, Minerva.”

With a nod, McGonagall swept out through the front doors. Not wanting to give Snape a chance to catch her up, Hermione followed on the Headmistress’s heels. She heard the quick, soft footfalls of Lupin and Snape right behind her.

By the time they were halfway to the forest, Hermione realized she had perhaps acted in too much haste. She was only wearing her school robes, which were insufficient protection from the biting February cold. She stuck her arms into the opposite sleeves, trying to keep herself warm.

“I should let you freeze, you insolent chit,” said Snape’s voice from right beside her. She shot a glare at him, but the effect was expunged by her chattering teeth. He scowled at her, then in one smooth motion swept off the outermost layer of his robes and wrapped it around her shoulders. She almost refused it on principle, but the sudden warmth was too good to let go of for pride. He’d worn more traditional robes today, so the remaining layer of his robes still covered him completely, but she wouldn’t have been surprised if he’d worn Muggle clothes under them anyway. Lacking a pin, she tied the corners around her shoulders and pulled the fabric around her as they marched on.

After they’d walked for a while through the forest, Lupin began telling them about the werewolves. McGonagall seemed already to know this information, but Hermione and Snape listened attentively. “Their leader—or alpha, as they call him—is a man named Abednego Spears. He’s a wizard: one of the few non-Muggle werewolves I know. He even went to Hogwarts; he’d graduated nearly as soon as I’d entered. Since he was bitten so late in life, he was never able to fully reconcile his lycanthropy with his magic. He was a fair hand in school, but now has trouble with even basic spells.”

“How horrible,” Hermione breathed. The thought of losing one’s magic, especially for such a vile reason, terrified her.

“Indeed,” Lupin agreed. “His mate is a woman named Tessa. As near as I can determine, she was one of Greyback’s first victims. Which, as you might imagine,” he said with a grimace, “means she’s by now rather far out of Greyback’s preferred age range. It’s she who came up with the idea for them to break off and form their own pack. A great many of them had been wanting to leave
Greyback for some time. Even when I was with them before, there were murmurs of doing so, but they had all been too afraid of him. Then when they finally realized that Voldemort was lying, that he wouldn’t even make Greyback a Death Eater, Tessa convinced Spears to lead a group out of the pack.”

*It was a woman who got them to escape him,* Hermione thought with satisfaction. Her hopes for what she’d find when they met the pack rose.

“Tessa’s a Muggle,” Lupin continued, “like most of them. But she’s smart. She knew they couldn’t all just run off with whoever wanted to go. She knew that they needed to make sure Greyback would feel it not worth his time to follow them.” His tone grew hard and hateful, and Hermione feared she knew what he would say next. “They had to leave the children—almost all of them—to Greyback. The children are his favorites, you see. There were nearly three dozen when I was with him. If they’d taken the children, he would have tracked them down no matter where they tried to hide.”

“That’s terrible!” Hermione interjected, unable to help herself.

“That’s Greyback,” Lupin said, his voice ringing with disgust and loathing. “They did take a few of the children, though. Mainly, those with too much spirit, the ones who were so rebellious that they made themselves an annoyance to Greyback. Which also means they’re the most scarred ones. Tessa and Spears thought he wouldn’t miss those, and they were probably right. But they didn’t dare try to bring the ones who’d quickly learned to be submissive—those children, Greyback would kill to keep.”

Hermione felt her stomach turn, and she fervently hoped she’d never come face to face with Greyback.

“Most of the women, also, were submissive to him,” Lupin went on, “to the point of being terrified of attempting escape. Some of the men, too. But most of the men were only afraid enough of Greyback not to challenge him outright. It happens sometimes, of course—I witnessed three instances myself. The challenger... doesn’t fare well.”

“He kills them?” Hermione asked, unable to muster much shock at the idea.

Lupin nodded. “Usually. Sometimes, if they’re teenagers or generally easier for him to handle, he’ll just wound them.”

“Did he ever...” Hermione began to ask, but caught herself. “Sorry.”

Lupin shook his head at her apology. “Did he ever wound me, you mean? Yes. When I tried to join his pack, he wasn’t going to simply let me in. He thought I’d been among wizards for too long, that I wasn’t a real werewolf. He wanted me to prove myself. I wish I’d been able to kill him then, but...” He shrugged.

Hermione shuddered. After what she’d gone through herself and what she’d seen of Snape’s suffering for the cause, she wished she was surprised that Dumbledore had made Lupin go through all that. “Did Spears...”

“No,” Lupin said, with a measure of satisfaction. “Spears may have certain ideas about a werewolf’s place in human society, but he’s not Greyback. But as I was saying, most of the men were as eager to get away from Greyback as anyone naturally would be, and when they found out Spears was organizing an escape, they were only too happy to sign up. They all waited until Greyback had been called away by Voldemort and then ran off. And from what they’ve said, they..."
They’d walked and talked for long enough that the forest had grown thick around them. As Hermione looked around, she realized that she didn’t know where they were. “How much furth—”

A loud, barking howl sounded from above them, and a figure dropped out of the trees to land nearly on top of them. Hermione gave a startled cry, but none of the others showed any sign of fright.

The figure stood, and Hermione found herself blushing furiously. It was a young man in his early twenties, very fit, with a lithe, well-toned body and dark hair that hung in dirty tangles around a savagely handsome face. His eyes, bright blue, looked at all of them with a piercing gaze. He had a sort of crazed grin which showed yellow, chipped teeth, and he moved with a fluid, lupine grace that was more animal than man. This made it difficult to tell how tall he was, since he never stood up straight, but he appeared to be several inches shorter than Lupin.

It was the appraising glance Hermione had given his body which caused her to blush. He was stark naked.

The man looked at the four of them, then, seeing Lupin, stepped up so close that he was nearly touching him. The man sniffed Lupin about the face and chest and sneered. “You’re back.” His eyes flicked derisively to McGonagall and Snape before raking over Hermione’s body in a way that made her pull Snape’s robe more tightly around herself.

“Yes,” said Lupin casually, as if this sort of reception were perfectly normal. “Take us to Spears.”

The man sniffed the air and stuck his nose up, trying to look down on Lupin though he didn’t have the height to do so. “Why should I?”

“Just do it, Scratch,” Lupin said and gave the young man a stern look.

The man hesitated, then said, “I’ll ask him if he’ll see you,” and slunk back through the trees.

“He was completely naked!” Hermione said once the man had gone.

Snape growled quietly behind her, and Lupin looked at her curiously, a strange pinkish tinge in his cheeks. “You haven’t already forgotten . . .” Lupin started to say, but seemed unable to finish the thought.

Hermione’s blush deepened from embarrassment as she remembered Lupin’s startling entrance and his description of how the werewolves didn’t consider themselves human. “You said they didn’t wear much clothing. He wasn’t wearing any.”

Apology flickered across Lupin’s face. “Ah. Right. There was a bad moon after I went back to them. We didn’t hide our clothes well enough, and by morning there were no scraps big enough to even tie a scarf together. I managed a wandless warming charm on the camp area, though, so we wouldn’t freeze. I suppose it must still be active.”

The next moment, two more young men, both as naked and wild-looking as the first, emerged from the bushes. Hermione noticed now how their breath came out in puffs, though they didn’t shiver (and she tried very hard to keep her eyes from wandering to see how else the cold might be affecting their bodies).

“You wait here,” said one, a tall, wiry man with a nose that looked as if it had been broken several times.
They stood in silence, the two werewolves watching them suspiciously. Snape, Hermione noticed, was watching the werewolves with equal distrust, his eyes darting back and forth between them relentlessly. After several minutes, the one called Scratch returned.

“He’ll see you,” said Scratch, sounding as if he disapproved of their leader’s choice. “Follow me.” He started to move off.

“I know the way,” Lupin said firmly and strode confidently past Scratch.

Hermione stared in wonder and threw an anxious glance to the now snarling young werewolf before McGonagall took her by the elbow and moved her along. They followed in Lupin’s wake, and when Hermione glanced back, she saw the three werewolves right behind them. As she looked, Scratch took to the trees and leapt ahead through the branches. Hermione turned her head forward once again to watch Lupin lead them on with a boldness she’d rarely seen from him.

“Why didn’t Remus let that man lead?” she whispered, glancing nervously into the trees. “Is it wise to anger them?”

“He was establishing dominance,” McGonagall whispered back, keeping Hermione very close. “Remember, Hermione, they do not conduct themselves as humans. Civility is generally perceived as weakness.”

“Quiet,” Snape hissed, and Hermione jumped at how close he was. “The wolves have excellent hearing.” When Hermione glanced at the two still following them, she saw that they were smirking.

As they walked, the temperature suddenly changed, as if she’d walked inside, though they were very much still in the deep woods. Her benumbed fingers tingled as Lupin’s warming charm brought life back into them, and soon the dense forest opened into something like a clearing. The trees were still thick overhead, but the trunks were much more widely spaced, allowing room for campfires and primitive lean-tos.

Hermione gasped, horror and pity churning together in her breast. She tried not to stare, but it was impossible.

There were at least thirty werewolves lingering about the place. To a man, they were dirty, scarred, and wore not a scrap of clothing. As Lupin had said, most of the werewolves were men; she saw only four or five women scattered among them. One boy of about fourteen appeared to be cleaning himself with his own tongue, taking no notice of the male and female just feet away who were—Hermione looked quickly away. To her other side, she saw three men squatting around a fire, tearing the limbs off a chicken-sized spider before cracking it open like a crab. Elsewhere, a most striking pair of men—one nearly pitch black, with a matted bush of hair; the other literally albino, with red eyes and snow-white hair—on first glance seemed to be fighting, but their jagged smiles gave away their play.

The passing of a group of humans through their midst quickly drew the werewolves’ attention, and one by one they stopped to stare.

Lupin led them forward with an air of purpose, and McGonagall kept her head high, looking at the werewolves as if they were merely mischievous students. Behind her, Snape’s discomfort was palpable.

They were heading for a cave sunk into a small cliff face. As they neared it, Hermione could distinguish seven or eight people, with one at the clear center of the group. All of them watched
Hermione and the others approach intently. When they were a dozen yards away from the cave, Scratch once again dropped from the trees right in front of them, showing his teeth in a vindictive smile.

This time, Hermione only frowned at him, barely stopping the rebuke on her lips. It was as if the insolent young man thought it was funny to try to scare them.

Lupin merely looked at him in a bored way and said, “Announce us, Scratch.”

Scratch’s eyes flashed, and the smile disappeared. Petulantly, he trudged to the man at the center of the group and spoke to him.

Ah, Hermione thought, suppressing a grin. He’d already intended to be the one to give Spears the news that they were there, but by telling him to do it, Lupin had again asserted his dominance. The sociology of this group would have been fascinating if it weren’t so horrifying.

They were motioned forward and stepped into the shade of the cave.

The man who must have been Spears was large and all muscle; he was also disgustingly hirsute. The hair of his head was brown and cut short in an uneven, careless way, and he had a number of jagged scars on his arms and shoulders. Hermione could see why the other werewolves followed him; he was quite an intimidating figure.

Ignoring Lupin entirely, Spears met McGonagall’s eyes and stood. “Professor.”

The gesture, while respectful, had unfortunately put Spears’s prodigious genitalia on display, and Hermione flinched involuntarily.

Scratch, standing on Spears’s left, sniggered at her.

McGonagall acted as if she didn’t notice any of it. “Mr. Spears.” She nodded acknowledgment. “It’s been a long time since I last saw you.”

“A lifetime ago,” Spears agreed grimly. He resumed his seat on a large, flat boulder. “I’m sorry about Hagrid.”

McGonagall’s mouth tightened. “Thank you.”

“I’m not,” a red-haired boy about Hermione’s age said and licked his lips.

Spears’s hand shot out and boxed the boy so hard on the ear that it sent him tumbling face-first into the cave wall. Though it appeared exceedingly painful, Hermione felt no sympathy for him.

Spears turned his attention to Lupin. “I’m surprised to see you again, especially in the company of humans.” Before Lupin could respond, Spears looked at Hermione and asked, “Is this the mate you mentioned?”

“No,” said Lupin quickly. “My wife”—he emphasized the clarification—“remains at the castle. This is Hermione Granger, a friend.”

McGonagall’s mouth tightened. “Thank you.”

“I’m not,” a red-haired boy about Hermione’s age said and licked his lips.

Spears’s hand shot out and boxed the boy so hard on the ear that it sent him tumbling face-first into the cave wall. Though it appeared exceedingly painful, Hermione felt no sympathy for him.

Spears turned his attention to Lupin. “I’m surprised to see you again, especially in the company of humans.” Before Lupin could respond, Spears looked at Hermione and asked, “Is this the mate you mentioned?”

“No,” said Lupin quickly. “My wife”—he emphasized the clarification—“remains at the castle. This is Hermione Granger, a friend.”

“Hello, sir,” said Hermione, not quite sure what the proper way to act in this situation was.

Perhaps encouraged by Lupin’s denial of any claim in on her, Scratch made a sudden move toward Hermione, his eyes hungry. Hermione fell back from him, but in a flash Snape had placed himself between them, one hand on her wrist, the other hovering over the pocket where he kept his wand.
“Ah,” said Spears, sniffing the air once, “she is his mate. Of course.” Hermione thought to correct his words, but it occurred to her that mate really was a more apt description of her relationship to Snape than wife. “Scratch, leave them.”

With a growl at Snape, Scratch slunk back to his place beside Spears. Snape released Hermione’s wrist and lowered his other hand from his wand but remained tense.

Spears peered at Snape, his eyes narrowed. “I think I remember you. Slytherin, weren’t you?”

“Slytherin I still am,” Snape said in a tight voice.

Spears’s expression darkened. “Greyback said there was a Death Eater at the school. That wouldn’t be you, would it?”

“Severus was serving as a spy among the Death Eaters,” McGonagall said. “He’s on our side.”

“It’s risky telling me that—if it’s true,” Spears observed.

Lupin shook his head. “No, it isn’t. Voldemort already knows. Now.”

Spears gave Snape a penetrating look. “Who are these people you bring into my home, Lupin?”

“Friends.”

“Are they?” Spears raised an eyebrow. “I’m surprised you still have any, if they know what happened to Hagrid.”

“We know he had no control over that,” said McGonagall. “It was obviously a great tragedy, but we know Remus is not to blame.”

The second eyebrow rose up Spears’s forehead to join the first. “You don’t care?”

“Of course we care!” Hermione blurted. “But we know it—it wasn’t his fault.”

Spears’s eyes moved to Snape. “And you, Slytherin? Do you think werewolves are only victims of our own condition?”

For the first time, Lupin looked worried, and McGonagall gave Snape a warning glance.

Snape looked steadily back at Spears. “I think you’re monsters who should all be put down.”

“Severus!” gasped Hermione and McGonagall together.

But Spears nodded. “At least one of you is honest. Though I wouldn’t have thought it to be the Slytherin.”

“We were being honest!” Hermione protested. “We’ve forgiven Remus for his part in Hagrid’s death! Why do you persist in believing the worst of us?”

“Long experience.” Spears’s eyes bored into Hermione, his brows lowered dangerously.

“Enough of this foolishness.” McGonagall’s patience had expired. “Believe us or not, Mr. Spears, but it is the truth. While I won’t deny that there are some”—she shot Snape a glare—“who will mistrust werewolves no matter what, I speak for myself and the rest of the Order of the Phoenix (Severus regrettably—but solely—excluded) when I say that we have forgiven Remus and welcomed him back among us. Furthermore, I wish to personally extend to you and your—your
pack, if you must call it that—an offer of friendship.”

“If we fight your battles, you mean,” Spears observed. “That is what Lupin was sent to us for, wasn’t it? To convince us to join your cause? You’ll find, Professor, that werewolves are not interested in causes other than their own.”

“No,” McGonagall said sharply. “Not if you fight for us. This is an olive branch, Mr. Spears, an offer of unconditional friendship. No strings, no conditions.”

“With respect,” Spears said, “what makes you think we either want or need your so-called friendship?”

McGonagall shook her head sadly. “I never thought I’d see the day when a Hufflepuff questioned the value of friendship.”

“I haven’t been a Hufflepuff for a long time, Professor.”

This was not going well. Hermione wasn’t exactly sure how it was meant to go, but she was pretty certain that this wasn’t it. She studied the werewolves assembled before her. The young men wore expressions of defiance or hatred. Spears had the look of someone who wanted something more than he had, but had long ago given up hope that it was really possible. But there was a woman standing next to Spears who, judging by her age, must have been Tessa. Her body was old and worn, but tightly toned. Her sharp, grey eyes were currently settled on McGonagall, but she was watching all of them with wary interest. Well, Hermione thought, she got them to leave Greyback. Maybe she’ll get them to leave the forest.

“It’s very cold out here, at least beyond the clearing.” Hermione addressed Tessa rather than Spears, which made Scratch paw the ground in irritation. But Spears said nothing, so they let her continue. “What do you do when it snows?”

“Most of the snow doesn’t get through the branches.” Tessa’s voice was hoarse and low. “And Lupin’s charm melts what does.”

“But what about food?” Hermione pressed. She felt more than saw McGonagall and the others watching her, and she wondered why they let her go on. She wasn’t the spokesperson of their group; she barely knew what they were even doing there. “Don’t the animals you hunt get harder to find when it gets cold?”

Tessa shifted her weight and looked at Spears. “It . . . is not easy.”

Finally, McGonagall broke in, but she followed Hermione’s lead in speaking to Tessa. “The castle is well-stocked and warm. Your pack would not need to worry about starvation or hypothermia.”

Spears laughed harshly. “And we would be welcome there. Just as we are.” Scratch and the young red-headed werewolf cackled at the ridiculousness of it. Scratch plopped down near Spears and lounged against a rock, showing off his naked, scar-marred body as if to emphasize his otherness.

McGonagall, completely unperturbed, nodded. “Just as you are.”

Spears’s bitter laugh rang out again, but there was a discordant note of hope in it. “You wouldn’t subject your students to the likes of us.”

McGonagall was silent for a moment. “Perhaps not.”

Spears snarled in triumph, his point proven.
“But the students will not be there.”

This announcement confused the werewolves into silence for several seconds. McGonagall took the opportunity to explain in more detail. “Hogwarts is no longer as safe for the students as it once was, so I am closing the school and sending them home.”

“When?” asked Tessa.

“Tomorrow morning.”

Spears’s eyes narrowed. “How is it no longer safe?”

“Two Death Eaters found their way onto the grounds, and we have not discovered how.”

“It’s unsecured,” Spears said.

“At the moment, yes. We have neither the time nor the resources to find where the weakness lies.”

Spears leaned back and stared at her for a long time. When he finally spoke, his voice was hard. “You want to leave us as guard dogs to protect your property while you’re away.”

Lupin made a move forward, about to protest, but McGonagall laid a hand on his arm. “Yes, Mr. Spears; if you choose to see it that way, that is what we want.”

Scratch growled at her, but Spears only said, “And why would we do that?”

“Because it’s in your best interests,” McGonagall said matter-of-factly. “There is ample food and shelter, and you would remain free to act as you like, so long as you did not demolish anything or hurt any of the other residents.”

“You said the students were leaving.”

“They are, as is most of the staff. But the house-elves will remain. Madam Pomfrey has insisted on staying behind so long as there are any who may require her services. And Professor Firenze is staying; I will be leaving him in charge.”

“Firenze?” Spears said suspiciously.

“He is a centaur.”

This provoked an outcry from many of the werewolves who were standing around. The redhead threw such a fit that he had to be sent out of the cave entirely.

“We will not live under the rule of a centaur!” Spears barked.

“You will, if you accept our offer,” said McGonagall.

Hermione tensed, expecting him to throw them out—or worse. But he growled, harrumphed, and scratched the side of the rock he was sitting on. The lure of food and shelter must have been more enticing than he’d let on.

There was a flash of movement between him and Tessa. It was a girl hiding behind the older woman’s legs—hiding so thoroughly that Hermione had not yet noticed her. She crept out from between them slowly, as if the humans, not the werewolves, were the frightening ones. As she emerged, Hermione got a better look at her. She appeared to be around twelve or thirteen years old. Like the others, her body was heavily scarred, but while most of the others’ scars appeared to be
incidental, all of this girl’s wounds looked deliberate. Forcing herself not to recoil, Hermione noted
the bite marks on the girl’s thighs and chest—she’d clearly been abused horribly. The girl grasped
Spears’s forearm with both of her small hands.

“Not now, precious,” he growled, but it was a gentle warning—one which made Hermione
instantly certain that Spears must have been her father.

“Please,” she told him softly. “Please, Abednego, can we go?”

Hearing her call him by his first name, Hermione questioned her initial impression. Surely there
was something unusual going on here.

Spears looked at the girl with a father’s tenderness in his eyes and covered her hands with his.
“You don’t know what you’re asking, precious.”

Her gaze turned nervously to the humans. “I know. But . . . I don’t think they look so bad. And
Lupin said—”

“Lupin said a lot of things.” Spears looked dubiously to the man in question.

“All of which,” said Tessa in a cool voice, “have been right so far.”

Spears frowned again, looking among the faces of the werewolves gathered around him. Hermione
felt nervous, not really knowing what outcome she was hoping for. Was letting a pack of wild
werewolves loose in the school really better than risking the Ministry taking it? But McGonagall
stood calmly, letting Spears make up his mind.

“All right,” he grunted. “We accept your terms, Professor.”

There was immediate protest from Scratch and some of the other werewolves, but the young girl
leapt to her feet, threw her arms around Spears’s neck, and kissed his cheek. Tessa’s mouth pressed
in a grim line. She didn’t appear to know if this was for the best or not either.

On the way back, Hermione couldn’t help herself. “Who was that girl?” she asked Lupin. “I don’t
know if he’d have agreed if she hadn’t asked him to.”

“Her name’s Precious,” Lupin answered. “Yes, it’s an unusual name. The one who gave it to her . . .
didn’t put much thought into it.”

“Is Spears her father?”

“He and Tessa have adopted her, in a sense. They treat her as their daughter and protect her. One of
the young male werewolves would have already tried to take her for a mate if Spears hadn’t made
it clear she was off-limits.”

“But . . . those scars . . .”

Lupin grimaced. “She got those when she was with Greyback. Mostly, she got those from
Greyback.”

Hermione gasped. “He—! But she’s so young!”

“You cannot overestimate the depths of Greyback’s cruelty and depravity, Hermione.” He
hesitated; and then, as if the words were being wrung from him: “Precious is Greyback’s
daughter.”
Hermione was stunned speechless. There were simply no words she could think of to express her shock and horror.

Lupin apparently took her silence as a request for more details. “It was risky for Spears and Tessa to take her, but they wouldn’t leave her in Greyback’s hands if they could help it. Even among werewolves, there are limits.”

They continued in silence for a long time as Hermione pondered this. Then something unexpected occurred to her. “Remus . . . was Precious born a werewolf?”

For a while, Hermione didn’t think he’d answer. When he did, his voice was strained. “Yes. Her mother was a werewolf as well, Greyback’s preferred female at the time. It wasn’t the first time in the pack one of the females had got pregnant. Usually the child died in the first few months; the transformation would cause a miscarriage. Even if a human child lived to full term . . . a human infant didn’t last long among a pack of werewolves when the full moon came around.”

Bile rose in Hermione’s throat, and she tried desperately not to imagine the scene.

She had not thought it possible for lycanthropy to be transmitted from parent to child like that—that was what all the books said, anyway. This cast Lupin’s discomfort with Tonks’s pregnancy in a new light. Was he afraid the child would be a werewolf? Was he afraid he’d hurt the child if it wasn’t? Or was he, against all reason and evidence, afraid that he’d end up being the same sort of father that Greyback was? She didn’t ask. Some things were too personal, even between friends.

She looked behind her to see if Snape was going to say anything, but he was lost in thoughts of his own, his mouth a thin line.

#

The weather was warmer than usual the next day, the first stirrings of spring winding their way through the air. It’s not right, Hermione thought. The weather should be cold and dreary, not hopeful. But the world moved in its own way, heedless of the comings and goings of the strange creatures that crawled over its surface.

“Feels weird, doesn’t it?”

Hermione looked to her right to find Ron standing there with his brow furrowed. He rubbed his biceps with his opposing hands, the tank top he was wearing too optimistic for the morning breeze.

“Yeah.” She wondered if things could possibly have been any weirder.

They were standing in front of the castle, watching the Thestral-drawn carriages carry most of the students and their possessions to Hogsmeade, where they would meet the Hogwarts Express. It was a sight Hermione had never seen before, and it made her feel terribly lonely. Luna and Neville were with them, staring ponderously at the retreating carriages. When they were nearly out of sight, Harry and Ginny emerged from the castle and wordlessly took their places beside them, and together the six of them bade the last goodbye to their childhood. The kids were going home, back to their parents and families, to stay safe and wait for the danger to pass. But the adults had work to do, and it was nearly time to get to it.

Over the next couple hours, the Order (and those under their protection) assembled on the front lawn. The now-former students were there first, their trunks and animal cages arranged to the side in easy reach. Fred and George arrived soon thereafter, explaining that they’d left the running of their shop to their assistant, Verity, and expressing the hope that she wouldn’t run it into the ground
in their absence. Bill, Fleur, and—to Hermione’s surprise—Charlie were there next. Charlie refused to give an explanation for his presence until everyone had arrived. By the time Tonks and Lupin emerged and took a seat on their trunk (or, almost certainly, Tonks’s trunk; the rainbow flowers motif didn’t strike Hermione as quite Lupin’s style), Harry and all the non-pregnant Weasleys had started playing some kind of single-ball, goalless Quidditch. It made no sense whatsoever, but it was diverting. When Hermione looked around after the final score was pulled out of someone’s rear end, the lawn in front of the castle had got much more crowded.

Evelyn, Antoinette, and Cecilia were huddled near the door, talking quietly and throwing anxious looks to just about everyone in turn. Mad-Eye was speaking to McGonagall and Snape. Kingsley was near them, but far enough that Hermione couldn’t quite tell if he was part of their conversation or not. Trelawney hung on his arm like a scared puppy, and Lavender was trying hopelessly to comfort her, though it was clear that she herself was not at all comfortable. Sturgis and Hestia arrived, and then, finally, Molly and Arthur.

“Sorry we’re late,” puffed Arthur as he and Molly hurried across the lawn with Firenze (who’d been acting as Keeper of the Keys) trailing in their wake. “Had a bit of trouble getting out of work. The whole Ministry’s in an uproar.”

The gaiety which the impromptu game had brought on vanished. “Percy?” Bill asked.

Arthur nodded as they reached the assembled group, then paused to catch his breath before saying, “Umbridge bought his story. He’s been reinstated as aide to the Minister, and Umbridge called for Tonks’s immediate arrest.”

“It’s all right, Remus, this is good news,” said a sighing voice.

Hermione looked back at Tonks and Lupin to see that Lupin had gone slightly pale and wrapped his arm around his wife. He muttered something that no one heard, but it made Tonks roll her eyes.

Molly began to say something reassuring to Lupin, but stopped short when she spotted her second-eldest son amongst the crowd. “Charlie! What are you doing here?”

“I’m staying at Hogwarts,” he announced.

“What?” said George.

“Why?” said Fred.

“To look after Hagrid’s animals.” He folded his burn-scarred, freckle-covered arms across his thick chest. “Someone’s got to take care of them while everyone’s away, and that Grubbly-Plank woman already evacuated with the rest.”

“Charlie, no!” Molly protested, putting her hands on him imploringly. “It will be too dangerous here!”

He looked down at her with a fond, tolerant smile. “It will be too dangerous everywhere, Mum.”

Molly put her hand to her mouth as tears started down her face. “But that’s . . . that’s all of you,” she whimpered.

Hermione understood. Molly’s entire family was being put in danger for the cause, not a single one completely safe. But really, it had been that way for years, ever since Voldemort’s return. It didn’t matter. The Weasleys gathered around Molly and hugged each other, promising that they’d see one another quite soon. The non-ginger members of the group tried not to watch, and Firenze even
walked away, back toward his post at the gate.

But the Weasley Gryffindor spirit prevailed, and soon Molly was warning the twins not to cause trouble while they were on their missions, on pain of Molly-flogging (not her exact words, of course, but that was how Fred explained it later).

Ron walked back to where Hermione and Harry stood and grumbled only half-jokingly. “She’ll be unbearable to live with. All the others are on their own—well, you know, separate from the rest of us—but I get to spend untold months trapped in the Burrow with Mum and Dad.”

“Look on the bright side, Ron,” said Harry, grinning. “She’ll have time to teach you to knit. Maybe you can help her make all the jumpers for next Christmas.”

Ron glowered and punched Harry’s shoulder, then smiled. “It’s not the same not having you around.”

“It’s not the same not being around,” Harry said, then pulled Ron and Hermione into a fierce hug.

As Hermione’s body was crushed between those of her two best friends, it occurred to her that it was possible this was the last time she’d ever see them. Like the Weasleys, they were splitting up, no longer a unit, and they might never be a unit again. She fought the tears that came with that thought and buried her face in Harry’s shoulder, hoping they wouldn’t notice. She held them as tightly as she could, as if she could absorb their essences and take them with her. Her attempt to hide her fear was unsuccessful.

“Hey,” said Harry, pulling away just enough to look at her face. “We’ll be all right. So will your kids. Everyone will be fine. This will work.”

She smiled through her tears and nodded, wishing with all her might that what he said had the faintest chance of being true.

“Mum! Dad!” someone shouted, and the three friends broke apart. Tonks was on her feet, looking out in the direction of the gate; a man and woman were coming toward them. Firenze hadn’t left to give the Weasleys privacy; he’d left because they’d got unexpected visitors at the gate.

The man was blond, with a face that probably would have looked friendly if it weren’t cinched in worry. But it was the woman who drew everyone’s attention: tall and beautiful, with a graceful stride despite her haste.

Harry’s hand was on his wand in an instant, but he stopped just before drawing it. Hermione could tell why. At first glance, the woman looked like Bellatrix Lestrange; after a moment, the brown hair and softer features gave lie to that impression.

Tonks ran toward her. “What are you doing here?” She embraced her parents, and they seemed to relax when they verified that she was safe.

“Bloody Aurors,” said Ted Tonks. “Er, no offense, sweetheart.” He threw a guilty look to Mad-Eye and Kingsley before resuming his agitation. “Came to our house and wouldn’t believe us when we said we didn’t know where you were. Good thing Remus warned us or we’d have slipped up from sheer shock. Murdered the Minister indeed!”

“They tried to arrest you?” Tonks guessed, aghast.

Her mother nodded. “We’ve got a few tricks up our sleeves, though. It’ll be afternoon by the time they realize we aren’t still in the house!”
“I don’t understand,” Hermione whispered to Ron, feeling like she’d missed something. “If the Aurors wanted to arrest Tonks, why didn’t they just come here? They know she’s teaching.”

“They did,” Ron whispered back. “Yesterday, while you were gone. ’Course, then they said it was for ‘questioning’. She hid in the Room of Requirement while the Aurors searched the castle.”

While this exchange took place, Tonks had evidently been catching her parents up, for when Hermione next turned her attention to them, Andromeda said, “Two pregnant women alone in that house? Not bloody likely!”

“Mum, there aren’t a lot of options.”

“What will you do if the babies come? God forbid, what if they come at the same time?”

“They won’t come at the same time, Mum.”

“You can’t know that. And what if something goes wrong? A lot can happen during a birth, and with no one there to get help if you need it—”

“What do you suggest, Andromeda?” McGonagall broke in.

Andromeda glared at her daughter. “If you insist on going back to that bloody place, I’m coming with you.”

“Mum, there’s no need—”

“We’re already fugitives, too, after today.” Andromeda planted her hands on her hips—a gesture made more intimidating on her than on Molly due to her ability to glare down at one with the face of a murderous Death Eater as she did it. “We may as well join the cause. You can’t just expect me to sit by if my daughter and grandchild are in danger.”

“No, Mum, I suppose I can’t,” Tonks said with an air of defeat.

“All right, then.” Andromeda put her arm around Tonks’s shoulders and looked expectantly at the rest of the group. “What are we waiting for?”

A chuckle brought Hermione’s attention to where Ted stood beside Lupin, the two of them gawking at their wives with amused incredulity.

“Looks like I need a job now, too,” said Ted. “Don’t suppose you’ll be needing me—”

“Really, Dad,” Tonks said, “it’s not necessary. Not that I wouldn’t enjoy having you there, but Ginny and I will be fine. You know how good the protections are on that place, and Voldemort’s not even after us.”

Ted frowned, suddenly serious. “What do you think, Dromeda?”

“We’ll be fine,” she said, just as seriously, “if you’d be of more help somewhere else.”

Lupin put a hand on his father-in-law’s shoulder. “Our group’s one person short already, and I won’t be much good for at least one or two nights a month.”

Ted cast one more skeptical glance at his daughter, then nodded. “All right. I reckon I never did get any bonding time with the man who knocked up my daughter. What do you say, Remus? Want to explain why you ran out on Dora, or should we just reminisce about things that were popular when we were kids?”
Lupin removed his hand from Ted’s shoulder guiltily, but Ted was smirking.

“Where are we going?” Ted asked him as they walked toward where Tonks’s trunk sat.

“My mother’s house,” Lupin muttered.

Ted’s eyebrows shot up, but he said nothing.

The group mingled and talked for several more minutes until Andromeda’s voice rose above the chatter again. “Really, what are we waiting for?”

“That, I imagine,” Lupin said, and everyone followed his line of sight to the forest’s edge.

“I’d begun to fear they wouldn’t come,” McGonagall murmured.

Figures emerged from the forest, a few at a time: Spears in the lead, followed by the rest.

Molly gasped. “Are those the—the werewolves? Good heavens, they’re not wearing a stitch!”

“Quite correct, Molly,” Snape drawled. “Of all things, the werewolf’s nudity is its most terrifying feature.”

Several pairs of eyes stared at Snape in shock. Tonks snorfled and refrained from saying anything, but it was clear enough where her mind had gone.

“Now is not the appropriate time for jokes, Mr. Snape,” McGonagall said sharply, addressing him as if he were a misbehaving student.

Snape glowered, but even Fred and George were still too stunned to form a proper remark. Hermione could see their dilemma. They didn’t know whether to laugh with him or at him.

As the werewolves drew closer, McGonagall explained what Hermione had already heard about them staying in the castle while everyone else was away.

“Are you sure they can be trusted?” asked Arthur.

“There are few options,” said McGonagall. “I would rather see Hogwarts in their hands than in those of Voldemort or Dolores Umbridge.”

No one could disagree with this, so they moved to greet their guests. As the werewolves spread out before the humans, Hermione observed their initial reactions. The redheaded werewolf looked at the many Weasleys with a mixture of curiosity and challenge. Scratch sent a lingering look to every female of the group as if analyzing which would be the best mate (judging by the crooked, slightly frightening grin he gave her, he settled on Luna). The somewhat older, black-and-albino pair made barking, wordless taunts and quick movements, and Hermione couldn’t decide whether they were challenging Kingsley and Sturgis to a fight or inviting them to play. A tall, plain-looking woman in her early twenties was eying the scars on Charlie’s arms; her own arms were covered with similar burns, as if she’d fallen into a fire, though that wasn’t where Charlie was looking.

“Mr. Spears,” said McGonagall in welcome. “I’m gratified to see that you did not change your mind.”

Spears acknowledged this with a nod, but looked around the group of humans as if reconsidering his decision. “You said everyone was leaving.”

“We were just about to, yes,” she confirmed. She opened her mouth to say something else, but
didn’t get the chance.

“Abed?” Ted pushed his way past Snape and Mad-Eye to where McGonagall was speaking with Spears. “Blimey, Abed! What in Merlin’s name happened to you?”

For a split second, a look of surprise and—almost—embarrassment crossed Spears’s face. “Ted?”

“’Course Ted,” said Ted. Then he got over his shock, and comprehension dawned. “What’s this? Not enough that you made me look at your hairy arse for seven years, you’ve got to inflict it on the rest of the world now?”

Spears, who had become even more uncomfortable with Ted’s appearance, grinned wryly. “I never made you look at my arse, Tonks.”

Probably spurred by the mention of her own name, Tonks made her way forward, dragging Lupin behind her. “Er, you two know each other?”

“Abed and I were roommates at school,” Ted told her, jerking a thumb toward Spears. He walked closer to Spears, stepping even in front of McGonagall. “So this is what you’ve done with yourself? When I last heard from you, you’d just started working for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. What happened?”

“Didn’t go so well,” Spears said with a lighthearted shrug that, under the circumstances, was astonishingly cavalier. “We all change, Tonks, and not always for the better. Last I heard from you, you were trailing after that pure-blood girl. Whatever happened with that?”

Ted laughed. “I married her.” He pointed to Andromeda and threw his arm around Tonks. “This here’s our daughter.”

Tonks gave a nervous wave with one hand. With her other, she kept a death grip on Lupin’s hand. Spears looked between the three of them, then laughed. “Small world—eh, Tonks?”

“That it is,” said Ted. “So, you lot are going to hold down the fort, are you?”

This sobered Spears, and he looked askance at McGonagall. “It seems we are.”

Appearing not to notice the shift in Spears’s mood, Ted said, “I’d love to stay and catch up, but I’m needed elsewhere. Lots going on these days—bad things, mind.”

Spears cast a lingering look from Ted to Lupin to Tonks, and then appraised the rest of the assembled humans with a dubious eye. Then he smiled and shook Ted’s hand. “Maybe we’ll catch up later, Ted.”


Hermione was shocked to see a faint flush come to Spear’s face, but he punched Ted’s arm slightly harder than would have been entirely playful and allowed Firenze to lead him toward the castle entrance. Several members of his pack continued to look doubtful and cast challenging looks to the Order members, but all of them followed him peacefully.

Once they were inside, Hermione found McGonagall and asked her quietly, “Did you know that would happen?”

“I hadn’t the faintest idea what would happen,” McGonagall answered. “But when the opportunity presented itself, I thought it might be worth the risk to find out. I must say, I’m pleased with the
Hermione didn’t get a chance to respond. McGonagall raised her voice and told everyone it was time to leave.

“Take care of each other,” she said as everyone made final preparations and said their goodbyes. “We’ll be in contact when there is urgent need, but you will be largely on your own.”

McGonagall went to speak to various people in private, and there was a great shuffling as brooms were pulled out and trunks strapped to them. “Aren’t we taking Portkeys?” Hermione asked in surprise.

“Nope,” said Bill, who was closest at the moment. “They’d be quicker, yes, but they’re not safe for pregnant women.”

“Oh.” Unease began to bubble in Hermione’s stomach. She didn’t care for flying. “Apparition?”

Bill shook his head. “There are ways of tracking it. Flying’s really the best way to travel without being detected.” His eyes flicked to a spot near Hermione’s knee. “Well, maybe not the best way.” He moved off to where Ron was attaching another trunk to a broom.

“If Miss doesn’t mind Dobby saying so,” said a small voice, “Miss looks troubled.”

“Dobby! When did you get here?”

“Only now, Miss. Is Miss afraid of flying?”

“Not really, Dobby. I don’t like it, but . . . there’s so many other things to be afraid of right now.”

Dobby nodded gravely, his bat-like ears flapping. “Harry Potter told Dobby, Miss.”

“He told you?”

“He had to tell Dobby, Miss. Harry Potter asked for my help.” He swelled with pride as he said it.

“Oh?”

But Dobby didn’t answer. Ginny came up to them. “Oh good, Dobby, you’re here. We’re almost ready to go.” Before Hermione could ask what Dobby was meant to do, Ginny yelled, “Kreacher! Come here, Kreacher!”

The next instant, the old servant of the Blacks appeared before her with a small pop.

“Kreacher is here, Mistress,” he said with a simpering bow which struck Hermione as not entirely ironic. “How may Kreacher serve?”

“You’ve got everything ready at home?” Ginny asked him. It sounded very odd to Hermione to hear Ginny refer to Grimmauld Place as home.

“Certainly, Mistress,” Kreacher said, looking a little insulted at the suggestion that he might not have.

“Good. Thank you, Kreacher,” Ginny said, her smile only slightly forced.

Hermione followed Ginny and the two house-elves to where Harry, Ted, and Lupin were talking to Tonks and Andromeda.
Harry turned at looked at both house-elves with a kindness that warmed Hermione’s heart to see. “Hello, Dobby. Kreacher. You both understand what I’ve told you?”


“Good. The number’s gone up since I told you what was going on. Andromeda Tonks will be staying with you, as well.”

“Hello,” Andromeda said to them with polite civility.

Both elves looked like they were fighting not to show their emotions: Dobby fear and Kreacher disgust.

Harry frowned at them. “She’s all right. Dobby, she’s nothing like her sisters; and Kreacher, really, I’d thought we’d got past this.”

Dobby smiled shyly and said, “Dobby is happy to serve any of Harry Potter’s friends, sir,” and Kreacher grumbled something and stiffened determinedly.

Harry knelt so he could look them both in the eyes. “Kreacher, protect them—and the babies, if they come before we retrieve them—at all cost, do you understand?”

“Yes, Master.”

“Dobby, thank you for doing this. I can’t order you, but will you protect them as well?”

“Dobby will protect Harry Potter’s friends and family with his life, sir.”

“Thank you, Dobby,” he said and shook the elf’s hand.

Harry, Lupin, and Ted gave their wives one last kiss goodbye, and Hermione waved to her friends and wished them luck, trying not to think that this might be the last time she’d see them, as well. Then Kreacher took Ginny’s hand, Dobby took Andromeda and Tonks’s hands, and the five of them vanished with a pop.

The groups left quickly after that, one after another. There was momentarily some question of Buckbeak being used as transport, but as both Sirius and Hagrid were dead, and Harry and Lupin (who, it could be said, had the second-best familiarities with the beast) were going to a Muggle village where a hippogriff would be out of place in the best of circumstances, Buckbeak was left at Hogwarts in the capable care of Charlie. Thestrals were brought out to carry some of the people who were less comfortable with brooms, and Hermione was shocked to see a huge motorbike had arrived when she wasn’t looking. This, Harry rode, with Cecilia strapped safely into the sidecar. (Lupin insisted Harry have the honor, since he technically owned it anyway, and Lupin had hated it the one time Sirius and James had forced him to ride it with them.) Hermione wondered at the Muggleness of the motorcycle until she saw it lift into the air and fly away.

They all took their various paths away from the castle, until the only ones left standing on the lawn were Hermione’s group and McGonagall.

“And we’ve no idea how long we’ll be in hiding?” asked Hermione.

“If I and the rest of the remaining Order are successful, hopefully not long at all. If we are not successful . . .” McGonagall shook her head. “I’m afraid there’s no way to be certain, Hermione.”

“Making it up as we go along,” Fred chimed in, interpreting McGonagall’s words and the spaces
between them. “Flying by the seat of our pants, as some would say. Which sounds bloody uncomfortable if you ask me, but what can Muggles be expected to know about flying? Speaking of which—” He waved his wand, and his broom came zooming over, with his and Lavender’s trunks already hanging from it. He mounted, then held out a polite hand. “What do you say, Miss Brown? Care to join me?”

She balked and fidgeted, then said, “I—I want a broom of my own.”

The smile vanished from Fred’s face. “You’re no fun at all, Lavender. That wasn’t actually a request.”

She fidgeted again, and Hermione wondered what she was playing at.

“Are you sure it’s safe?” Lavender asked, chin high.

“I’m starting to feel insulted here, Lav. Just get on the damn broom. Unless you’d rather stay here with the werewolves.”

She cast a nervous glance toward the castle, but didn’t move.

“Fine.” Fred dismounted, strode to Lavender, picked her up, carried her to the broom, and sat her upon it. She protested loudly, but made no move to fight him. Fred took up his previous seat on the broom—right in front of her—and gave her only a moment to grab onto him before shooting into the air to await the others some fifty feet above the ground.

Meanwhile, Charlie had led a Thestral over to Luna and Neville. Neither of them were especially good on a broom, but they could both see the skeletal winged horses, so it made a certain sense they should be the ones to ride it.

Neville awkwardly scrambled up, then adjusted himself on the Thestral’s back until he found a comfortable spot.

“Here, Luna.” He offered her his hand. “I’ll help you up.”

“You don’t have to,” she said sweetly. “I mean, if you’d rather fly by yourself, I can take another Thestral.”

“I don’t mind riding with you, Luna.” He frowned disapprovingly. It was an odd expression for him. “I want to be sure I can keep you from falling off if you get tired or faint or ill or something.”

“Oh.” She smiled and allowed him (with some assistance from Charlie) to help her onto the Thestral’s back in front of him.

“At your leisure, Miss Granger!” called Snape in his most sarcastic of tones. He was already mounted on his own broom, their trunks attached. She wondered how a single broom could hold two people and two fully-loaded trunks, but imagined there must have been some charm in place. Snape raised an impatient eyebrow.

Looking at that thin rod of wood between Snape’s legs, Hermione was nearly overcome with a sudden anxiety. She didn’t like flying and had very little experience of it. The prospect of mounting Snape’s broom and relying on him—a man who had no discernible fondness for her and had heretofore evinced a patent disregard for her well-being—to get them to their destination was daunting indeed. But, as with so many things in her life these days, she had little in the way of options. And really, Snape might not have been the most trustworthy when it came to her feelings, but, she reminded herself, she knew she could trust him with her life.
Having no desire to be manhandled onto the broom by Snape as Lavender had been by Fred, Hermione raised her head, marched to the broom, and took her place behind him. She kept several inches of space between them (to the point where she was nearly sitting on the brush) and held only lightly to his loose robes.

“Honestly, Severus,” she said tartly, “they all know we’re married now. It’ll seem weird if you keep calling me Miss Granger.”

In response, Snape leaned forward, and the broom shot into the air. Purely from an acute sense of self-preservation, Hermione instantly pulled herself flush against Snape’s body, latched her arms around his torso, and clung to him for dear life.

The heat of his body, the feel of his hips between her thighs, and the endless flexing movements of his lean abs under her hands kept her quite distracted from her fear for some time.
Boggin-Boffins was a village of less than five thousand people nestled in a pleasant valley, at the lowest point of which flowed a stream. Being rather far north, it was chilly most of the year, but always bearable. There was one main road in town, with only one traffic light and nothing at all in the way of entertainment. To many, it would be an unbearably dull sort of place, but to those looking for a peaceful getaway, it was exactly the thing.

The Grangers’ house was situated on the outskirts of the village at number nine, Puckle Lane, at the very end of a tortuous path which ran very near the stream. It was a quaint, cramped house and contained three bedrooms; all the rooms were on the smallish side, and the hallways were nearly claustrophobic. Several acres of grass and trees surrounded the house.

“Cozy,” commented Fred as they touched down. Lavender slid off the broom reluctantly, and Hermione did the same.

Neville made the most uncoordinated dismount imaginable, then helped Luna get down from the Thestral, not looking at all embarrassed at having a pregnant woman show more grace than he did. He’d no sooner unlatched their trunks than the Thestral flew back the way they’d come. “No one’s home, right?” Neville asked.

Hermione shook her head and tried to work out the kinks in her joints. “My parents are in Australia, and like I said, no one else knows about this place.” She started toward it, but Snape held out a hand.

“Best to check anyway,” he told her. “Weasley!” He signaled for Fred to follow him as he marched toward the house.

“Bossy git, ain’t he?” Fred muttered, but followed, drawing his wand.

They waited in silence, taking in the peacefulness of the scene: the cool breeze, the babble of the stream, the smell of grass and rain. It had been many months since Hermione had last been here, and it felt good to be back.

“All clear!” called Fred, striding back to them. “Nice place, Hermione. Reminds me a bit of home.”

“Where’s Severus?”

Fred pulled a face at the name, then grinned as if something had just occurred to him. “Severus is taking a stroll around the perimeter. Yep, our old pal Severus. Good ol’ Sevy-Sev.”

Hermione glowered at him, for once sorry that she’d used Snape’s given name. “I’m sure you can call him Severus now, Fred,” she said sternly, “but that’s all. You know he won’t like it if you call him nicknames, and we need everyone to get along. We’ve no idea how long we’ll be stuck together.”

“Right, right . . .”

“And that means no pranks, either!”

“What?” Fred looked like she’d proscribed him from using the letter e. “Hermione!”
“Aside from the obvious reasons,” she huffed, “we need to keep magic to a minimum while we’re here. We don’t want the Ministry to detect us, and in the middle of a Muggle area it wouldn’t take much magic to stand out.”

“You might want to tell that to your old man.” He jerked a thumb toward the house. “He’s going wild with wards and protection charms.”

“He’s what?” Hermione sighed and trudged up the little hill. Snape was indeed in the midst of casting protective charms over the house. “Severus, what are you doing?”

“What does it look like?”

“We’re in the middle of a Muggle area. We can’t do too much magic or they might detect us.”

He glared at her as if she were dim. “And we won’t, as soon as I’m finished. Did you honestly expect not to have any wards in place?”

Her brows knit. “No, you’re right. But no more magic except for emergencies. I think Luna and Neville will go along with that, but you’ll have to help me keep Fred and Lavender from trying to sneak.”

“Even away from the school I’m to play nursemaid,” he muttered and pocketed his wand. “Tell the others they can go in now.”

Hermione returned to where the rest of the group was gathered and did so. When she arrived at the front door, she found it unlocked. It swung open with a gentle creek and she stepped inside.

There was a musty smell to the air. As Fred and Neville lugged all the trunks up the small hill by hand, Hermione enlisted Lavender’s help in pulling all the protective sheets off the furniture. It was the work of minutes, then the sheets were stowed and the house was as warm and welcoming as could be expected. She then showed the others around their new residence; given the small size of the house, it didn’t take long.

While Hermione was showing a curious Neville the various appliances in the kitchen, Fred and Lavender fought over who would stay in the bedroom that came first in the string of three on the upper floor. Lavender said she and Luna should take it since it was nearest the loo (claiming that pregnant women had more frequent need of it than most, though Hermione had seen for enough years how long Lavender could take in getting ready to guess that Lavender simply wanted to have an advantage in any race to the door). Fred said he and Neville should take it since the whole point was for them to guard the girls, and anyone coming up the stairs would have to get past them if they meant to get to Lavender and Luna. This display of obstinate practicality Lavender mistook for chivalry, and she made quite a show of acquiescing. The result of this discussion was that, upon Fred and Lavender descending into the kitchen, Hermione discovered that the boys were to take the first, spare bedroom, the girls were to take the one Hermione usually stayed in, and Hermione and Snape were to occupy the master bedroom.

The idea that her friends would naturally expect her and her husband to share a bed was an unpleasant shock to Hermione, made no better by Lavender’s warning that their rooms shared a wall, so she and Snape had better ‘do whatever’ quietly, which Fred punctuated with a silent grimace.

It was no good to insist she share the room that Lavender and Luna were set up in, as that would have aroused unanswerable questions—and anyway, there was only one queen sized bed, which would sleep two girls with marginal comfort but be far too cramped for three—so she said in a tone
made shrill with indignation, “What Severus and I do or don’t do in our bedroom is none of your business!”

This rebuke had little to no impact on either Fred or Lavender, but caused Neville to blush fiercely and take up a sudden fascination with the controls on the stove. Only too late, Hermione spotted her husband standing in the doorway to the living room, his face nearly as red as Neville’s, a vein protruding uglily from his forehead. Hermione didn’t flinch from his glare, but when he leveled it at Lavender, the blonde girl scurried upstairs. Snape seemed unable to find words, so he twirled on his heel and stormed into the living room. All at once, the smallness of the space became evident as Snape reached the other side of the living room (out of sight but not nearly out of hearing) and stopped, having nowhere else to go. Changing directions, he passed once more through their line of sight before exiting through the front door with a resolute slam.

Into the silence that followed, Luna offered helpfully, “I don’t mind if you’re loud, Hermione.”

The next hour or so was spent organizing, straightening, and cleaning—by hand, as Hermione made sure they all understood why casual use of magic now could be potentially dangerous. Hermione herself took the time to make up several lists of chores and rotation rosters for tasks like cooking and cleaning, being careful to schedule in time for the teaching of such things to those of their group who’d never had to do things the Muggle way before.

When it started raining shortly after dusk, Snape came back in, and Hermione wondered if he’d just been sitting outside sulking all this time. Without a word, he marched upstairs and went straight to his—*their*—room.

The rest of them stayed up late that night, enjoying the great novelty of the television. One by one, they grew sleepy and went to their rooms until Hermione was sitting alone in the dark living room. For a moment, she seriously considered just going to sleep on the couch, but she dismissed this idea. It was bad enough having her friends think she shagged her husband on a regular basis. It would be worse for them to know she didn’t.

She turned off the TV, checked the locks on the front door one more time (trusting the wards were still in place), and crept up the stairs. The door to the boys’ room (as she couldn’t help thinking of it, despite the fact that both of its occupants were men now) was open. Fred snored softly as he lay sprawled out on the full-sized bed, the blankets already twisted around his limbs. Neville lay unmovting on a pile of blankets on the floor, but he softly said, “‘Night, Hermione,” as she passed. The door to the girls’ room was closed, but she didn’t hear anything from the other side.

When she reached the door at the end of the hall, she suddenly wished she’d thought to stow some of her things elsewhere so she could change into her sleeping clothes in the loo. *Too late now,* she thought and quietly opened the door.

She had expected to find Snape already asleep—in fact, she’d counted on it, hoping she could slip into bed unnoticed. A small, mad part of her thought he might even play the gentleman and sleep on the floor. A more realistic part of her thought he might purposefully take up the entire bed, forcing *her* to sleep on the floor. None of these things were the case.

Snape was standing by the window, staring at her as if he’d been in that position for hours. The lights were off, but the moonlight coming through the windows cast enough light to set the scene. With a jolt of remembered terror, she was suddenly back in Grimmauld Place, and it was their wedding night.

Forcibly pushing the memory from her mind and trying to focus on the present, she whispered, “Severus? I thought you’d be asleep.”
He moved toward her, and she saw that he wasn’t wearing his robes, but a nightshirt. For some reason she couldn’t understand, that made her feel better. She looked down at his feet, skinny and bony, and she thought how much like Harry’s they were, though more worn.

Her breath caught as he closed in on her, but he only reached past her to shut and lock the door.

“Do try to remember,” he said in a low voice, “that there are others just past this door and no charms to muffle sound.”

Adrenaline surged through her. “I—I don’t understand.”

“Your voice, Miss Granger,” he said, stepping back toward the window. “Keep it down.”

Oh. Her anxiety was replaced by anger as she understood him. He meant to have words with her, and she couldn’t afford to lose her temper at him.

“Why won’t you call me by my first name?” she asked, scowling at him but keeping her voice low.

He ignored the question. “You are no longer a child,” he said as if he thought this was news to her. “You have been given adult responsibilities and trusted with confidences of other adults.”

“Is this about the Wentworth’s?” she hissed. “Are you going to tell me not to complain about being given a death sentence? To just do my job and find the cure that you can’t find? Because it may surprise you to learn, Severus—”

He swooped at her, using his sheer presence to stop her tirade, and glowered. “I expect you to do what you have to to save your own life,” he growled, sounding on the brink of breaking his own stricture against speaking too loudly. “I have told you I had no choice. If you can’t by now imagine what could compel me to submit to doing something I revile, then you are even stupider than you appear. Loathe me for my actions if you must, but you’ll do what you have to. Now, if you will let me finish a sentence, I’ll get to the point I was trying to make before you had the temerity to suppose you know my thoughts.”

Hermione crossed her arms defiantly, but said nothing.

Snape let out a sharp breath through his nose and stepped away from her. Still agitated, he paced as he said, “I haven’t shared a room with anyone since I was in school, so I’ll tell you the same thing I told my roommates then: don’t touch me, don’t bother me, and keep your hands off my things!”

Hermione gaped at him. Could he be any more childish?

“Your—I’m not your roommate!” she hissed.

Snape shot her a cold, furious glare, looked like he might say something angry and petulant, then composed himself with noticeable effort and stood still, gazing emotionlessly down at her.

“Circumstances require us to share this room. You may keep your things on that half, and I will use this half. I have no desire to sleep for what could be months on the floor, nor will I force you to do so. You may make other arrangements if you wish, but I will not stop you from utilizing your half of the bed if you desire. I trust I need not assure you that you have no cause to worry about any . . . advantages being taken, and I expect you to return the favor. I am willing to share a bed with you, if you keep quiet and keep to your own side.”

Even with everything, this was one of the most surreal conversations Hermione thought she’d ever taken part in. She nodded and said tersely, “I can accept those terms. But I want to add one.” She ignored Snape’s raised eyebrow. “You have to agree that if you’re in the room while I’m changing—and you can’t expect anyone not to notice if I always change my clothes in the loo—you’ll look
away or close your eyes.”

His lip curled. “As if I want to see—”

“Is that an agreement, Severus?”

“Of course it is, as long as you do likewise . . . should I ever become enough relieved of my senses to require it.”

Hermione nodded again. “Well, if that’s all—”

“It’s not.” His eyes flicked to the door, then back to her. “I’ll not tolerate being fodder for teenage gossip. Either keep your friends from their torrid speculation or I’ll do so myself.”

“Believe me, Severus,” she said, for once in full agreement with him, “I want that as much as you do. I’ll speak to them.”

Snape had no more to say after that, so they stood in awkward silence for several long moments until Hermione went to her trunk and pulled out her sleepwear—which suddenly seemed indecently revealing now that she was to share her bed with a man. But it was all she had, so there was no helping it. She took a deep breath. *Best to start getting used to it now.* “Turn around, please. I need to change.”

As if surprised she would test their agreement so soon, Snape huffed and turned his back to her. She changed as quickly as she could (keeping an eye on him to make sure his back stayed turned), put her clothes on her trunk for washing, and said, “Okay. I’m done.”

Snape’s eyes went a little wide when he saw her spaghetti-strap tank top, but he said nothing. It suddenly occurred to Hermione that she was wearing trouser-like pajama bottoms while Snape was wearing what Muggles would have been inclined to call a nightgown. Quickly stifling a smile at that, she hurried to crawl into bed and curled up tightly against her edge. A few moments later, she felt the mattress depress, and her mind again rushed back to their wedding night. She lay on her side perfectly still for a long time, until Snape’s soft breathing gave way to a faint whistle. Only then, in the wee hours of the morning, did she drift to sleep.

#

Upon waking, Hermione found her limbs had become much more far-flung than they had been when she’d gone to sleep. She jerked upright, dreading a reprimand from Snape about staying in her own space.

But she was alone. Morning light filled the room, there was a chill in the air, and her husband was nowhere to be seen.

Getting up, Hermione dug in her trunk to find a dressing gown, which she threw on over her sleep clothes. She shuffled down the hallway to the loo (past a still-sleeping Neville) and made her ablutions. By the time she came downstairs, dressed in jeans and a jumper, the house held an oddly domestic scene of what looked like some kind of mismatched family.

“We need food,” Fred told her at once, eating a bowl of dry (and probably stale) Cheerios at the small table. Lavender had the refrigerator door open and was looking inside it as if she didn’t like what she saw. Luna was sitting on the counter eating tiny sandwiches made of Saltines and honey, perfectly content.

“We’ve got food,” Hermione said, confused. “It’s in the pantry.”
“You mean these?” Lavender held up a can of soup. “All right, Hermione, but how the hell are we meant to open it?” She banged it on the counter to illustrate how clearly impossible the task was.

Hermione couldn’t help laughing at Lavender’s frown of frustration. “Weren’t you paying attention when I made dinner last night? Never mind, I’ll have to show you all how everything works anyway. And you’re right; we do need to buy fresh supplies.” A bubbling sound drew her eyes to the coffee pot, which was half full of the hot black liquid. “You couldn’t figure out how to open a can, but you figured out how to make coffee?”

“Not us,” said Fred, and nodded in the direction of the living room. “Dreamboat in there made it. Don’t know why, though. The stuff’s foul.”

“Of course he did,” Hermione sighed. Remembering what she’d promised Snape last night, she said in a firm but quiet voice. “All right, you two, no more jokes about me and Severus. No cutey nicknames, no innuendo, nothing. Do I make myself understood?”

“Sure you do.” Fred nodded. “But come on, Hermione. You can’t honestly expect us to obey you. You and Snape is just about the funniest joke I’ve ever heard. It’s physically impossible for me to leave that alone. Would be like telling me to play Quidditch without a broom.”

“Well, you’d better learn to fly, then,” Hermione snapped. She frowned at him. “Let me put it another way. You are in what is essentially the middle of nowhere with no way to contact the rest of the Order, trapped in a confined space with an easily irritated former Death Eater who could perform any number of curses on you, dump your body, and Obliviate the rest of us before any help could be summoned.”

Fred was silent, apparently thinking this over. Finally, he grumbled something inaudible and hunched over his Cheerios.

Satisfied that the message had been received, Hermione went into the living room to find Snape sitting in an arm chair in the corner, reading a newspaper and smirking. Something about this struck Hermione as being off, and it took her a moment of staring to figure out why. First, the paper was Muggle; second, the paper was from last summer; and third, from what she’d learned, it was entirely impossible for Snape to have been reading it. But of course, the others wouldn’t have known that, so she supposed he was trying to keep up appearances.

“I need to go into town to do some shopping,” she told him.

He lowered the paper. “Send Weasley and Longbottom.”

Now it was Hermione’s turn to raise a skeptical eyebrow. “Send two pure-bloods into a Muggle grocery store? Oh, that’ll go splendidly. They’ll end up paying two hundred pounds for a tin of biscuits and a jar of jam. Besides, they’re meant to be the guards. We can’t leave Luna and Lavender with only you and I here, especially—” She cut off, suddenly aware of the people in the next room. But Snape had got the message.

“What do you suggest?”

It surprised Hermione that he’d ask, especially without a snide tone, but she answered quickly. “I’ll go. People are used to seeing me in town now and then, so I won’t attract attention. I can even make some comments about being back in this house, so if people see the lights on they won’t think it’s burglars.”

“And if they want to come over to visit you? Your family does have acquaintances in town, I
She thought about that a moment. “I’ll tell them . . . I’ll tell them I’m on my honeymoon. No one
will want to disturb us then.”

Snape’s eyebrows drew closer to one another. “And if they ask to meet your husband?” His
meaning was clear. Snape was obviously all wrong for Hermione. If they were seen in public
together, it would be scandalous, and that wasn’t something they needed if they were trying to stay
hidden.

She raised her chin. “Then I’ll give them one. Neville can come with me. No one who sees us
together would have any reason to disbelieve my story, and he’s not so memorable as Fred in case
anyone should ask around.”

It was plain that Snape did not like this idea, though Hermione knew he had to see the logic in it.
Aside from being her age, it was Neville’s utter blandness (at least, in the eyes of someone who
didn’t know him) that made him the perfect choice. Average build, average looks, hair an
unremarkable brown. He truly would be a perfectly believable match to Hermione’s own average,
unremarkable appearance. The thought made Hermione shudder inside. She loved Neville dearly
as a friend but didn’t think she could have borne being married to him.

“Very well,” Snape growled at last.

#

Before they went out, Hermione raided the master closet for some of her father’s holiday clothes.
They were a bit short and baggy on Neville, but nothing too terribly noticeable.

She then opened a wall panel in the master bedroom and opened her parents’ safe, grateful that she
remembered the combination. Her parents never liked to go to the bank while on holiday, so they
kept a stash of cash for their needs. In case something happened to her, she showed some of the
others where it was.

“There must be ten thousand pounds there!” Considering his well-disguised business sense,
Hermione supposed she shouldn’t have been surprised that Fred knew the value of Muggle money.

“I had no idea I’d married into wealth, Miss Granger.”

A stunned silence met this comment, then Fred breathed, “Well, bugger me.”

Snape raised an eyebrow at him, said, “Unlikely, Mr. Weasley,” and swept out of the room.

Fred’s jaw dropped a little farther. “Two jokes from Snape in less than a minute. The world has
gone upside-down.”

There wasn’t a car at the house, so Hermione and Neville rode bikes into town. It was easy enough
for Hermione, who had learned as a child, but Neville fell over a dozen times before he got the
hang of it and remained wobbly all the way into town.

“At least it stays on the ground,” Neville muttered as they parked the bikes outside the town’s
small grocery store. Never having been especially good on a broom, Hermione appreciated the
sentiment.

When the automatic door slid open to admit them, Neville jumped back in shock.
“Hermione! It’s—”

“It’s not magic,” Hermione whispered quickly. “It’s sensors. Technology. See?” She stepped in front of the door a few times, demonstrating.

A smile grew on his face as he watched. “That’s really something. How does it work?”

“You wouldn’t understand if I told you,” she said without malice.

“You’re probably right,” he concurred and followed her inside. She shook her head fondly, reminded of Arthur Weasley. Sometimes she forgot how discovering Muggle technology to pure-bloods could be like Muggle-borns discovering magic.

“Hermione Granger!” called a man nearly as soon as they stepped inside.

Suddenly realizing one thing they hadn’t thought of, she grabbed a startled Neville’s left hand in her right and stuffed her own left hand into her pocket. “Lesley.” She greeted the man with a smile. “How are you?”

“Well enough, well enough,” said the man. “Bit early this year, ain’t you? Your parents here?”

“Not this time. They’re letting us use the house. Nigel and I are on our honeymoon,” she told him, using the fake name she and Neville had agreed on.

The man’s eyes widened. “You don’t say! Congratulations! You’ll have to come round for tea.”

“Thanks, Lesley,” she said, not looking at Neville and trying not to blush as she continued with the alibi. She really wished Lesley were sharp enough not to make her spell it out. “We really just want to spend our time at the house, you know. We’ve only come into town for provisions.”

“Ahh.” The man got a sly smile and winked at Neville. “Say no more. I’ll let you be getting on, then. And be sure to say hello to your parents next time you see them for me.”

When he left, Hermione released Neville’s hand and breathed a sigh of relief. “That went well, I think. Though I hope we don’t have to go through that many more times.”

“Yeah,” Neville said, and she looked up to find him still a bit pink.

By comparison, the rest of the shopping trip was a breeze. Neville became entranced by everything from the frozen dinners to the check-out scanners. He managed to get his bearings after a short while and suggested things that looked interesting, most of which Hermione ended up putting in the trolley. By the time they were finished, Hermione thought they had enough food and supplies for at least a couple weeks, and if the cashier gave her a look when ringing up the prenatal vitamins Hermione had grabbed in a spur-of-the-moment decision, at least she didn’t look interested enough to start rumors.

They managed to fit most of the shopping bags into the baskets on the bikes, and Hermione hung a couple more from her handlebars, resolving to think of a better solution in future. Neville impressed her by not tipping his bike over once on the way home, even with the added weight of the bags, though there were a couple of close calls.

“Oh, good, I’m starving,” said Fred, fishing an apple out of a bag before Hermione even finished setting it on the counter.

“Already? But you had breakfast!”
Fred ignored her and started hunting through the other bags. “What’s for lunch?”

“Either help me put these away or get out,” Hermione scolded. “Then we can talk about lunch.”

Fred tossed a few boxes of pasta into the pantry before grabbing a bag of crisps and ripping it open. Hermione shooed him out, then Neville and Luna helped her put everything away.

“All right,” Hermione said once they were done and Fred and Lavender had been summoned back into the kitchen. “You’re all going to learn how things work in here. I’ve drawn up some schedules, and I expect you all to take your turns cooking, so you’d better learn how.”

There were some groans, but everyone paid attention as she demonstrated the various kitchen appliances.

“Hey,” said Lavender as Hermione was warning them not to put metal in the microwave, “how come Snape doesn’t have to listen to this?”

“Because Severus is a half-blood and already knows all this stuff.” She was about to correct her use of Snape’s last name without his title, then realized in these circumstances she should probably let it slide.

“Snape’s a half-blood?” asked Lavender, who hadn’t been at the Order meeting. “I’m a half-blood, and I didn’t know this stuff.”

_You also didn’t have an abusive Muggle father who probably didn’t allow magic in the house_, Hermione thought, but said, “If he has any questions, he can ask later. But I know you don’t know, so pay attention.”

“Why?” Lavender persisted. “Wouldn’t it be easier if you just cooked?”

“Easier for you,” Hermione snapped, losing patience with her former roommate. “I have no intention of cooking three meals a day by myself for however long this takes.” _Besides, I want you to be able to feed yourselves if . . . _She banished the morbid thought from her head. _One thing at a time._

The four of them sat and watched as Hermione made some simple mac and cheese for lunch. Fred got bored immediately and started flicking noodles at Lavender, and Neville took notes on a small bit of parchment. When it was ready, Hermione yelled to Snape informing him of the fact, not sure where he was or if he’d respond. But he came downstairs a minute later, looked disapprovingly at the meal, and took a bowlful of pasta.

That night, Hermione was shocked to walk into the kitchen and find Snape mixing something in a large bowl, and he told her he was preparing dinner. Fred immediately started taking bets on the outcome of this endeavor. Luna bet in favor of Snape’s skill in Potions transferring to the kitchen, guessing that whatever he was making would be delicious. Lavender pointed out that Snape’s potion ingredients were usually completely disgusting things, so she hoped that there wasn’t a correlation between his potion-making and cooking skills and bet on Snape’s meal being barely edible. In the end, Lavender was the victor—but they were all of them losers, as they were forced to gag down some unidentifiable sludge which Snape insisted on calling a casserole. Hermione’s first thought of this was that Snape had made Hagrid look like Martha Stewart. Her second thought was that Snape could not be said to be at his best at present, so it was probably not fair to judge his skill by this one meal. Her third thought was that perhaps Snape had intentionally botched it so they wouldn’t make him cook again in future. Of the fact that Snape himself showed no signs of finding anything distasteful about the meal he’d prepared, she didn’t know what to think.
After dinner, she enlisted Lavender’s help in cleaning up, and then they retired to the living room to find Fred, Luna, and Neville watching a decades-old rerun of a phenomenally silly show about a man who traveled through time and space via police box. After five minutes of this, Hermione said she was tired, bade them goodnight, and tried very hard not to notice the knowing look that Fred gave Neville.

Hermione found her husband already in bed, propped against the headboard and staring at a book as if he were trying to set fire to it with his eyes. Upon seeing her, he snapped the book shut and said, “I thought you were watching television.”

“I didn’t like the program,” she replied. “Severus, are you—” Well, it was obvious he was. What a stupid question. She amended, “Are you having any luck?”

He seemed to fight with himself about answering her, then said, “None. I can’t make out a word.”

“I could . . . read to you, if you’d like.”

“Like a child!” he spat. “Oh, how very kind of you. Will you also tuck me in and kiss my forehead?” His face went red then, and he set the book aside. “I’m going to sleep. Try not to make a nuisance of yourself.” He lay down and turned his back on her.

Keeping one eye on him, she changed her clothes and slid into bed. If he doesn’t want me to read to him, that’s fine, she decided. But I’m not going to feel bad for reading to myself. She did so for at least an hour before turning out the light. Snape never moved or spoke, but only when she’d once again curled herself up on the edge of the mattress and relaxed into the pillow did she hear his breath turn to soft whistles.

The next few days passed in much the same manner, with the exception that none of them were allowed to stray far from the house. Hermione watched in amusement as her friends who had never lived outside of the wizarding world learned to do everything the Muggle way, and the most everyday things became an adventure. There were, naturally, a few missteps, such as when Lavender failed to separate the laundry and managed to turn both Fred’s and Neville’s robes an unflattering fuchsia. This, coupled with her next attempt which left Luna’s and Snape’s robes several sizes too small, necessitated another trip into town for Hermione and Neville to pick up some clothes at a quaint second-hand shop. They had to guess on sizes for all but their own and managed to do fairly well. She got so close on the articles she chose for Snape that he only had to roll the sleeves up a bit on a dark navy jumper, which he did without comment. The first time she saw Snape in the loose jeans and form-fitting grey jumper she’d bought, she caught herself staring. He was quite thin, but it wasn’t at all an unpleasant effect.

There was very little to do in the house, and since they weren’t free to go around outside lest they should be seen, certain members of their party began to go a bit stir crazy. Fred, it seemed, was physically incapable of keeping himself out of trouble, and Hermione discovered him slipping some unknown object into Luna’s bed. The row this instigated was of such virulence that for a moment Hermione was forcibly reminded of Ron and ended up breaking down into frustrated tears. Fred, mistaking the cause, apologized and said he’d try to be better. Hermione made him promise to at least refrain from pranking Luna, who was in no condition for it, and Fred, ashamed that the fact had slipped his mind, agreed.

But overall, Hermione was pleased with the ease with which their little group fell into a comfortable sort of rhythm, and indeed it did smack of the sort of family atmosphere that Hermione had witnessed but never truly felt a part of. As much as she loved the Weasleys, she couldn’t help feeling like an outsider at the Burrow, no matter how welcoming they were. But here, in her house, it was different. It occurred to her that not only herself, but Snape, Luna, and
Neville were also only children, for whom this type of thing was doubtless new. It wasn’t like at Hogwarts, where there were hundreds of people and one could get away from even one’s roommates very easily. Here, they were stuck with each other—and much to Hermione’s surprise, she found she rather liked it. Perhaps it was because it was her house, perhaps because she occupied the master bedroom or was the only married one among them (aside from her husband, of course), or perhaps because, in large part, they might not have been there at all if not for her, but she began to think of herself almost as the mother of the group.

Not that her peers really needed mothering. They generally found ways to occupy themselves quite well on their own, and after some initial negotiating had even accepted their various household duties with little complaining. As much as they could get on each other’s nerves, as was bound to happen, they preferred to stay together, usually in either the kitchen or living room. Neville doted on Luna, always making sure she was comfortable and had enough to eat (Neville, to general amazement, had proven himself a deft hand at cooking, once he learned how to use the appliances), and Fred amused himself by beleaguering Lavender in the most brotherly of ways—though Hermione thought Ginny had always dealt a much firmer hand with Fred than Lavender was able to manage.

Not that any of this applied to Snape. To Hermione’s confused disappointment, Snape never appeared in their midst unless it was to collect his food, check on the security of the house, or berate them for one annoyance or another. Hermione had no idea what he did do, since he couldn’t read and there was no lab for him to work on his potions.

After two weeks of this, she took it in her head that he must just be sitting in their room, thinking dark thoughts and lamenting on his lot in life. If she were in his position—friendless, cooped up, and deprived of the only pastimes to be thought of—she might very well have done the same thing. She realized this was in part her own fault, for she had made it clear she was still angry at him over the small matter of his poisoning her, and she had hardly spoken two words to him in private after those first couple nights, preferring to wait until he was asleep before going to bed and waking to find him gone every morning. He continued his morning habit of taking coffee and pretending to read a paper months out of date, but as soon as anyone else made themselves comfortable in the living room, he found somewhere else to be. It was as if he were determined to be more solitary than ever.

This, Hermione decided, would not do. Holding on to the anger she felt at his actions was doing nothing to her benefit. If she couldn’t get Snape to open up to her and treat her as a husband should when they were cooped up in the same house together, what hope did she have of doing so once things returned to normal? (And they would, she was convinced, return to normal—or at least as normal as possible considering all.)

And so, at the beginning of the second week of March, after cleaning up the dinner dishes, Hermione went up to her room to find her husband sitting on the bed, still clad in the corduroy trousers, green shirt, and tan sweater vest he’d worn that day, staring morosely at a book which reposed in his long-fingered hands.

“Severus, I want you to come downstairs,” she said without preamble.

He looked at her suspiciously. “Why?”

“You’re moping.”

He laughed humorlessly. “Am I? And what concern is it of yours?”

The question took her aback. “You’re my husband.”
Another laugh, more bitter than the first. “No more than a technicality, Miss Granger.”

“Don’t you ‘Miss Granger’ me, Severus!” Hermione snapped. “You’re not my teacher anymore. You’re a fellow Order member and my husband. We’re peers now, in case you haven’t noticed. And . . . and I’d like for us to be friends.”

He narrowed his eyes skeptically. “What makes you think I want to be your friend?” That stung, but before she could respond, he added, “Why would you want to befriend the man who’s likely killed you?”

“I . . . well, I . . .” She struggled to give words to feelings she didn’t quite understand. “What’s done is done, and we can try to fix it, and I am trying to find an answer, but . . . but I know it wasn’t your idea, and you were only doing what you thought you had to.”

He snorted and looked at the floor in front of him. “How generous of you.”

Her hands went to her hips. “Severus Snape, you’re the most stubborn man I’ve ever met. I don’t pretend to really understand what your life’s been like, but it’s obvious you’re partly to blame for your own misery. Any time someone tries to get close to you, you push them away. You’ve been hurt, I get it. You were teased and mistreated as a child, I get it. But here’s the thing, Severus: so was I. So was Harry, for that matter, and Neville—much of it at your hands. But do we hide in our rooms feeling sorry for ourselves? No! We pick ourselves up and move the hell on with our lives!” She stopped short, surprised by her own language and suddenly aware that she’d been shouting by the end. She was mortified by the fact that her friends downstairs must have heard and fearful of the explosion that she was sure would come from Snape.

But he didn’t explode at her. He was staring, stunned, like she was some horrible monster from the shadows.

She composed herself and continued at a normal volume. “We’re watching a movie downstairs. Join us or not.” She slipped out, closed the door behind her, and went downstairs.

The movie was still on pause in the VCR when she sat beside Luna on the loveseat. She moved with a prim stiffness, her jaw set, and refused to look at anyone, though she could feel their eyes on her. “Start the movie,” she snapped after a moment, and whoever had the remote did so.

Before the opening credits finished, she heard soft footsteps coming down the stairs. In the corner of her vision, she saw Snape move into the room and sit in the first chair he came to. Everyone else seemed to be following Hermione’s lead in pretending to be completely engrossed in the film, but after a moment, Luna passed Snape a bowl of popcorn. He hesitated several seconds, then took it. By the end of the movie, the mood was nearly normal again. Fred had made several snarky remarks and Luna had pointed out at least three completely implausible real-life scenarios she was reminded of. When they turned the lights back on, Lavender looked momentarily startled to find Snape still sitting among them. Awkwardness descended, and everyone immediately found themselves exhausted and in need of going directly to bed. Hermione stood and looked at Snape, who was staring into the empty bowl in his hands. She opened her mouth, closed it, opened it again, then went up to bed.

If Snape had gone to bed that night, he’d done so after she’d fallen asleep and risen before she was awake. When next she saw him, he was sitting in his chair, drinking coffee and pretending to read a newspaper. When she sat down in front of the telly with a pastry and some juice, he didn’t say anything. When Fred and Lavender entered, fighting over who’d used all the hot water, he didn’t get up and leave. Well, that’s something, Hermione thought and turned on the morning news.
Snape did not suddenly become bosom friends with his former students, nor did he ever mention the lecture Hermione had given him, but he did allow himself more and more to be found in their midst. Usually he would sit off to the side, appearing disinterested in whatever was going on, sometimes scowling at their antics. When Hermione one day attempted to explain to Neville a detail of Muggle political procedure, Snape openly mocked Neville’s ham-fisted attempts to grasp a concept which was clearly beyond him, then Luna chimed in with her own unique take on the issue, effectively diffusing what could have been a volatile situation. By placing himself among them so frequently, Snape assured that the novelty of his presence eventually wore off, and like a group of sheep grown used to a frightening but docile dog in their midst, the former students came to accept Snape’s presence.

If Snape had become somewhat more sociable during the day, he remained aloof as always at night. Once or twice Hermione attempted to engage him in conversation about one topic or another, but she got only curt answers and a turned back in response. It was a frustrating circumstance, all the more so because she had failed to make any progress in finding a cure, and her headaches had become nearly a constant problem. Plus, she was beginning to notice a creeping lack of focus which she didn’t feel she could entirely attribute to cabin fever.

“Severus,” she said suddenly one night, struck by a thought, and looked beside her to find Snape still lying awake, “what about bezoars?”

Snape sighed and said with a sort of weary repetition, “Bezoars work on poisons, not cures. Wentworth’s Brew is not a poison.” She deflated at this and heard him utter with a pang in his voice, “As I have told you three times already.”

One perfectly average evening in the middle of March, Hermione was cooking dinner. She got out the cutting board and set a pot of water on to boil. I wonder what Harry’s having for dinner, she thought as she flipped the dial on the gas stove. And Molly, I wonder what she’s making. It was a strange, pointless thing to be thinking about, and it filled her with a nostalgic sadness as she began cutting some meat. Her thoughts drifted in this way, landing on each of her friends in turn, and even some people she wouldn’t have ordinarily thought of. I’ll bet Fleur’s cooking something French. I miss French food. Haven’t had it since I went with Mum and Dad to—

“What’s that smell? Is that gas?” Lavender said, wandering into the kitchen, sniffing the air, and coming to stand near Hermione.

Surprised, Hermione looked down to realize she hadn’t waited for the starter to light the gas on the stove. No wonder the water was still cold.

“I thought I turned that on,” she murmured and reached for the dial.

“No!” Lavender lunged across the space between them and grabbed Hermione’s wrist, yanking it away from the stove. “Are you crazy? You’ll set us all on fire!”

Hermione blinked, then recoiled. What had she almost done? Lavender flipped the dial off and opened the window over the sink. “Let’s all go outside,” Hermione said in a hollow voice.

While they sat under the stars, waiting for the gas to clear out, Neville quietly suggested that she was under a lot of stress and asked to be put in charge of all the meals from now on, since he liked having something to do anyway. Hermione’s fear overrode her pride, and she agreed.

That night, Hermione sat in bed reading potions texts until well past the time when Snape’s
breathing turned to soft whistling.

#

An evening at the end of March found Hermione curled up at one end of a sofa, reading by the light of an old china lamp, rain pattering happily against the glass. She was taking a small break from research to read a novel called *Potions and Passions*. The author was one of the only known Wentworth’s babies, a child conceived under the influence of Wentworth’s Brew. The night before they’d left the school, she’d made one last run to the Room of Requirement, to that cluttered collection of junk, in case there were something she’d missed earlier. She’d been very excited to find five books by that author, hoping there might be something useful to her. There wasn’t, but over the three times she’d read this book since, she’d come to develop a fondness for the story. The author was skilled and certainly knew what he was talking about, and the overly romantic prose had grown on her. The author’s descriptions of the potioneer’s long, nimble fingers, his apprentice’s nervousness and desire to prove herself, all resonated with Hermione in a very peculiar way. She had just reached her favorite part (where the potioneer finally admitted his love for his apprentice and apologized for being an unpleasant bastard) when a voice broke her concentration.

“There’s got to be something to do around here!”

Hermione and Luna, who had been perfectly able to find something to occupy themselves, looked up from their books.

“You could help Neville in the kitchen,” Hermione told Lavender. “There are probably some dishes that could be washed.”

Not heeding this, Lavender flounced into the room and plopped down between Hermione and Luna. “I’m going bonkers here. Nowhere to go, nothing to do, and we haven’t heard a word from anyone else. For all we know, the war’s over and You-Know-Who won.”

“If the Dark Lord had won,” Snape said calmly from his chair facing the window, staring out into the rainy darkness, “we would know it.”

Fred, who had been unusually studious lately, looked up from the notebook he’d been scrawling diagrams in. “Still, be nice to hear from someone. I wonder how George is getting on in that Muggle house.”

“Probably as well as you’re getting on in this Muggle house,” Snape said irritably.

Fred frowned. “Reckon you’re right. That’s what bothers me.”

“He’s got Harry and Remus with him,” Hermione said, trying to ease his mind.

Fred grinned. “Oh, yeah. Maybe Lupin’s been showing him some of those old Marauder tricks.”

He frowned again. “Lucky bastard.”

Hermione glanced over to see a scowl deepening on her husband’s face and said quickly to Fred, “I’m sure there’s nothing to be jealous of. Remus is an adult. I’m sure he doesn’t indulge anymore in those sorts of schoolyard pranks.”

“He indulged well enough two years ago when he and Sirius showed me and George some of the charms—”

The rest of Fred’s appraisal of Lupin’s maturity was cut off by a loud pop, and the man himself stood in their midst.
“I must say, it took you long enough. I’ve been in contact with the others for weeks.” Lupin looked around at them, smiling wryly. “It’s enough to make a fellow think you’ve forgotten about him.”

“Remus!” shouted Hermione once she recovered from her shock. She was on her feet and giving him a hug before she knew it. She’d got so used to seeing wizards in Muggle clothes that she didn’t even realize she didn’t have to avoid the folds of robes as she wrapped her arms around his wiry, t-shirt-clad torso. “How did you get here? Severus set up anti-Apparition wards and made the house Unplottable.”

Lupin held up what looked like a Muggle lighter. “Funny little device, this. It has a way of getting you right to someone when they talk about you.”

Having leapt to his feet as well, Fred shook Lupin’s hand. “What’s the word, Lupin? Everything all right?”

“Quite all right,” said Lupin. “George hasn’t given anyone a moment’s peace. I think he’s working twice as hard to make up for your absence.”

“I knew it. Hermione’s banned me from having any fun on pain of Snape.”

Lupin laughed and looked at his old classmate. “How are things here, Severus?”

“I haven’t murdered anyone yet,” Snape said, his expression unreadable. Lupin’s smile faded.

Footsteps came from the kitchen. “Is someone here? The timer was going—” Neville froze in the doorway, one hand still wrapped in an oven mitt. “Professor Lupin!”

“Hello, Neville.”

“How did you get here?”

“Why doesn’t he tell us over dinner?” said Lavender, getting to her feet and heading for the kitchen. “I’m starved.”

“Yes, please stay for dinner,” Luna said. “Neville’s a very good cook.”

“Is he? I suppose I must, then, if there’s enough.”

No one had anything to say against this, and they all made their way to the kitchen. They filled their plates with lasagna fresh from the oven, then went back to find seats in the living room. Lupin took a central spot so they could all see him easily as he filled them in, and Hermione sat between Luna and Neville on the sofa.

Lupin updated them all on what he knew of news since they’d left Hogwarts. It wasn’t much. Everyone was still healthy and secure as possible, there was no news on Death Eater activity of any clear consequence, and the hunt was not going well (he couldn’t give specifics due to Lavender’s presence).

“I’ve been keeping an eye on Hogwarts, too.” He pulled the Map from his pocket and explained it to those who weren’t familiar with it (it was, after all, a Marauder secret, not an Order secret).

“Most of the werewolves have taken up residence in the Hufflepuff rooms; Spears must have shown the rest of the pack how to get in. I haven’t witnessed too many trips to the hospital wing . . .” He trailed off, quirking an eyebrow at Fred before continuing. “And Charlie’s had fairly regular company in the hut.” The fact that he carefully avoided saying ‘Hagrid’s hut’ was not lost on Hermione—though if Charlie was living there now maybe they ought to start calling it Charlie’s
“What, you mean a girl?” Fred asked, looking shocked and impressed.

“One of the werewolves, a young woman called Peach,” explained Lupin, smiling a little. “They’ve been on the Quidditch pitch several times, too. I think he might be trying to teach her to fly.”

Fred laughed heartily. “That’s Charlie for you. Never cared for the birds, he did. Figures for one to interest him she’d have to be—” Fred stopped short, his mouth closing with a click.

Lupin chuckled. “It’s all right, Fred. I know what you mean, but the idea that someone could like a person because they’re a werewolf is a little hard to accept.”

“All due respect, Lupin,” said Fred, “but I don’t think you know Charlie very well. Now I think of it, he probably needs the challenge. Normal girls are too easily tamed.”

This remark earned him a slap from Lavender, but he shrugged it off without even glancing at her.

Hermione didn’t know whether to laugh or scold him, and Lupin seemed to be facing the same conundrum. Then Lupin’s expression grew grim. “There’s something else from Hogwarts. Dumbledore’s tomb was vandalized.”

“What?” Hermione gasped. The others looked as shocked as she felt. “Who would do such a thing?”

Lupin shrugged. “He had many enemies.”

“Could it have been You-Know-Who?” asked Fred.

“I doubt it. It would be a petty insult for someone trying to fashion himself lord of all wizards. The tomb was cracked open and Dumbledore’s body disturbed, but nothing was taken and no graffiti was left. Minerva has already repaired the damage.”

“Did no one see who it was?” asked Lavender.

“It was the middle of the night. No one was in the area. It was probably just some disgruntled Voldemort supporter trying to make himself feel important by getting one last jab at a dead man.”

Hermione’s nose wrinkled. “That’s despicable.”

“Yes,” Lupin agreed. “But the damage has been fixed and we’ve no idea who caused it, so there’s not really any use in letting it get to us. Especially as it’s also possible whoever did it did so hoping to draw some of us out of hiding to seek retribution.”

Hermione let out a sharp breath. He was right. But she just didn’t understand how some people could be so pointlessly awful. “We’ve been keeping an eye on the Muggle news,” she said. “We haven’t seen anything that looks suspicious. Do you really think Voldemort is just lying low all this time?”

A crease formed on Lupin’s brow. “It certainly doesn’t look like he’s making any obvious moves...”

Hermione could hear the ‘but’ in his tone. “You think he’s got something in motion that even the Order can’t see.”

“The Dark Lord always has something in motion,” Snape growled. “Count on it.”
Lupin nodded. “I agree. Something’s not right. There’s the matter of Olivander’s continued absence, for one. If someone took him, which it certainly looks like is the case, they’re either keeping him for some purpose, or they’ve killed him. If they’ve killed him, they’re not letting anyone know, which means they didn’t do it to make an example of him. And now Gregorovitch—another wandmaker—has been found dead. No evidence of Death Eater involvement, of course, but . . .”

This news struck Hermione as really important, but she couldn’t tell how. She looked to Snape, who was frowning in a way that made Hermione think he didn’t know what it meant either. There was something, though . . .

“But why would Voldemort kill an elderly wandmaker?” Fred asked.

“I think he wants something,” said Lupin. “Something only a real wandmaker would have. Maybe information. I don’t know.”

“Maybe he wants him to make him a wand,” Lavender suggested as if it were the most obvious answer—which it was, to someone who didn’t have the information the Order had.

“No, I don’t think so.” Hermione shook her head so that her bushy hair bounced from shoulder to shoulder. “Voldemort likes old things. He wouldn’t want a new wand.”

“That’s my thinking, as well,” said Lupin. “Voldemort wouldn’t trust a brand new wand. He seems to want to tap into a connection to magical history wherever he can.”

“Maybe he has a special core in mind or something,” Lavender persisted.

“But maybe,” said Lupin, “but I doubt it. Again, that would be looking to the future, and Voldemort is not exactly what you’d call progressive.”

There wasn’t much to say after that. Lupin stayed long enough to help them clear up the dishes, then pulled out the Deluminator.

“So is that why Dumbledore willed that to you?” asked Hermione. “Had he seen this coming too?”

Lupin smiled grimly. “I doubt it. I suspect he foresaw . . . well, something that already happened before he died. Either he was too ill to change his will before he died, he thought I might do it again, or . . . he couldn’t think of anyone else who might run away from the people who needed him.”

There was a tense silence after that remark. Hermione wanted to reassure him, but Dumbledore foreseeing Lupin’s guilt-fueled flight into the forest was the most logical explanation she could see.

“Whatever the reason, you’ve got it now,” Fred said as if that settled the matter. “Say hi to George for me, and don’t let him do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“You mean like let a girl wash her hair in peace?” Lavender quipped.

“Or passing by an unattended drink without dropping something disgusting into it?” added Neville.

“Or maintaining a respectful silence while someone is working?” said Snape.

“Exactly,” said Fred with a nod.
Lupin chuckled and opened his mouth to say something.

“Or not playing jokes on people!” Luna chimed in with bright-eyed eagerness at having figured out the game.

“Er . . . right,” said Fred.

After an awkward moment of silence, Lupin continued. “The Deluminator lets me hear when anyone’s talking about me and leads me to them if I want to go—even through wards. So if you’ve got a message for me or something you want to relay to someone else, only start talking about me and mention that you’ve got a message, and I’ll come as soon as I’m able.”

“What if you have a message for us?” Hermione asked.

Lupin shrugged. “The other groups have taken to talking about me for a minute or so every night in case I need to drop by and tell them something.”

“What are we supposed to say about you?” asked Neville, looking genuinely confused.

“I’m sure we’ll come up with something, Nev,” said Fred, but he had the glint of mischief in his eyes. Hermione was shocked to see the same glint in Snape’s.

Lupin held the Deluminator up for inspection. “I told Harry and Ted to give me an hour before calling me back, so . . .”

A small, faint voice drifted to Hermione from Lupin’s direction. “Where’s my no-account son-in-law, Remus Lupin? Wandered off again, has he?”

“I’ve no idea, Ted. I haven’t seen him,” said another voice—Harry! Hermione thought, missing him acutely—“Guess we’ll have to just keep talking about him until he shows up. Did I ever tell you about the time I walked in on him and Tonks in Grimmauld Place? Kreacher was there—”

Lupin grasped the Deluminator with both hands, muffling the sound. “He’s making that up,” he told several pairs of raised eyebrows. “Er, goodnight.” He clicked the Deluminator, and the lights went out in the room. He clicked it again and a little blue light came out of the Deluminator itself. It hovered for a moment, then drifted toward Lupin. Hermione sucked in a gasp as it actually passed into his body. Then, with a pop, he was gone.

Neville went over to the light switch, flipped it off then on again, and the light once again filled the room.

“Cool,” said Fred, with undisguised awe.

#

When Hermione slid under the covers that night (the warm body of a not-yet-asleep Snape still a slightly unfamiliar presence in the bed), she reached not for the novel she’d been reading earlier, but found her hand drawn to the book that Dumbledore had given her for her birthday, *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*. She leaned back against the headboard and flipped to ‘The Tale of the Three Brothers’. She’d always found something strange about this one, with its scribbled mark of the Deathly Hallows above the title. She recalled what Luna’s father had said about some people believing the story to be more than just a fairy tale.

It didn’t take her long to read it again, as she’d done many times before, and her mind focused on the description of the wand which could defeat all others.
“Severus?” Her voice sounded loud in the quiet of night.

He grunted in response.

“Do you know these Beedle the Bard stories?”

“I’m familiar with them.”

“I’ve heard that some people actually think they’re true, or at least this one about the three brothers.”

“Some people believe anything,” he muttered. “What’s your point?”

“Do you think . . . You don’t think Voldemort could believe it, do you?”

“He is not a fool.”

“I know that. Only there’s this legend about a wand that can defeat anyone. And now wandmakers are disappearing or turning up dead, and if there were any truth in it, they’d be the ones to know, wouldn’t they?”

He seemed to think about this. “Call Lupin back tomorrow and have him tell the others.”

“Do you think that’s it, then?” She felt a strange swell of pride at his approval, and she reminded herself that they were equals now, so she really shouldn’t be reacting like a student who’s just got awarded points from her teacher.

“I have a difficult time believing such a wand could exist,” he said, “but if it did—or if the Dark Lord thought it did—he would certainly want to possess it.”

She put the book away and turned off the light, but it was a while before she could get to sleep, wondering what this twist in Voldemort’s plan (if this was in his plan) meant for the Order—and for Harry.

#

Secretly, Hermione had wished that Lupin would wave off the idea of Voldemort being interested in the legendary Elder Wand as preposterous. Instead, he scratched the stubble on his chin thoughtfully and pointed out that both of them were well acquainted with an artifact uncannily similar to another of the so-called Hallows, so perhaps the idea wasn’t as far-fetched as it seemed at first. He promised to share her insight with the others at once, and hurried away.

Dinner that night was a simple spaghetti and meatballs, which they were just sitting down to eat in front of the telly. The Princess Bride was the movie of the night, one which Hermione was surprised to learn no one else had ever seen but assured them they’d love. Fred and Lavender were bickering like children again; Hermione marveled that she’d never seen two people so unfit to be around each other (at least, who weren’t literally trying to kill one another).

“Ooh!” Luna put a hand to her belly, nearly knocking over her plate.

“What is it?” Neville said urgently from his seat beside her, getting her food out of the way.

“It’s okay,” Luna assured him. It had been a sound of surprise, not distress. “Here.” She grabbed Neville’s hand and laid it flat on her stomach.

The look of worry and confusion on Neville’s face shifted all at once to astonishment. “Is that—Is
“She’s kicking,” Luna said, taking the whole thing with the sort of weird calm with which she took every remarkable thing.

Hermione launched herself across the room and shoved Neville out of the way. “Can I—” she gasped, and Luna nodded. She placed her hand on Luna’s belly where Neville’s had been.

After a moment, she felt it. Soft, fluttering movement from inside Luna. Then, a harder, more definite kick. It was the most amazing thing she’d ever felt, and a surge of jealousy took hold of her. If it felt like this from the outside, how much more magical must it be from Luna’s perspective?

“My baby,” Hermione whispered, tears in her eyes.

#

“Our baby, Severus! You should have felt it.” Hermione still felt dazed by the experience and barely remembered to turn her back while Snape changed for bed.

“You weren’t so eager to share the experience at the time,” she heard him say from his side of the bed. “You nearly concussed Longbottom on the end table when you flung him aside.”

“I—” She nearly turned, but recalled herself. “I told him I was sorry.” But she did feel bad about it. He’d got quite a nasty bump. She decided to occupy herself by changing into her own sleepwear while Snape’s back was turned and he was busy.

“You already knew your friend was carrying the child.” Snape’s voice sounded somewhere between amused and annoyed. “Can tactile contact have really made it that much clearer?”

She sighed in exasperation. “You really are hopeless, aren’t you? Never mind. You’ll see, Severus. One of these days, you’ll see.” And then maybe it’ll finally hit you that you’re a parent, she thought, but she couldn’t place much hope in it.

After that, they went to bed. She tried for nearly two hours to get to sleep, but she was still so charged up that it didn’t happen, and Snape was making increasingly irritated noises when she shifted position. Finally, she sat up, turned on the light, and picked up a book. She needed to sleep, so she needed something to really take her mind off of the wonder of feeling her child for the first time. She reached for a book she hadn’t read very many times, and flipped through until she spotted something that caught her attention.

Tumourous Takeover Potion

The Tumourous Takeover Potion is the most horrifyingly painful and disgusting poison ever conceived. It causes, within moments of being imbibed, malignant neoplasms (that is, tumours), to grow in the body of the victim at an amazing rate. No part of the body is safe, be it skin, brain, or even genitalia. The tumours crop up everywhere and grow like lightning, impeding the normal functions of the body and worming their way into every structure imaginable. The victim is quickly overcome both with pain and horror as his body grows a crop of tumours so extreme that within a matter of hours, he is hardly recognizable as a human on the outside, and his insides are squeezed and malformed to make room for the tumours until he literally pops from the pressure of them, leaving nothing but a bloody mess of unidentifiable flesh, blood, and puss.
It is a poison of such astonishing cruelty and horror that it must surely go down as the vilest, most evil poison known to wizard-kind, but for one trifling dilemma: it is completely impossible to brew.

This is because one of the most key ingredients of this potion is the blood of a person who is capable of bringing the dead back to life. This does not mean healing someone on the very brink of death, nor granting a living person the sort of immortality that one might gain through various means, nor the creation of Inferi. This poison requires the blood of one who can truly, honestly, and verifiably restore full and complete life to one who has utterly lost it. Despite what some might wish, such a thing is impossible; therefore it’s impossible that such a person exists; therefore (though a number of potioneers who have extensive knowledge and experience agree that it would work, if this ingredient could be found) the Tumourous Takeover Potion is, and shall forever remain, purely theoretical.

There followed a list of ingredients and directions for brewing.

Hermione choked down the bile rising at the description of the poison’s effects. Who would invent such a thing? She flipped the book over. It was one of the Dark Arts books Snape had given her, *Blood Poisons*.

Cool and coaxing, Snape’s voice came back to her as if he were saying it aloud, though when she looked, his mouth was lolled open in sleep.

*When is a poison not a poison?*
Consciousness came slowly for Hermione; it felt like slowly surfacing after being underwater for a long time. Her senses seemed to come back to her one at a time: first hearing (there was a bird outside the window, but otherwise only silence), then touch (she was unusually warm, and there seemed to be something hot and solid pressed against her), then smell (the faint odor of soap and coffee that she’d been noticing lately seemed unusually strong). Finally, she opened her eyes, and bright shafts of sunlight streamed in sideways from gaps in the curtains.

And that’s when she realized she wasn’t alone in bed.

Hermione had grown used to having Snape beside her in bed as she fell asleep, but he was always, always gone by the time she woke up. But now, though Snape was still in bed with her, he wasn’t exactly beside her anymore.

With horror, Hermione realized that she was sprawled across Snape’s body as if he was some sort of giant pillow (which, given his thin, bony frame, was a highly inapt description). Her head was lying on the grey linen over his chest, her arm thrown so far over him that it was actually curled around his shoulder and tangled in his oily hair, and her leg was draped over his in a way that had caused his nightshirt to ride up almost indecently.

Why, after all these weeks, had she abandoned her side of the bed in her sleep and crawled on top of him as if he weren’t even there? She shunted that question to the side for the time being. The priority now was finding a way to remove herself from his person without waking him up. She had no desire to be flung across the room for this infraction (she knew he would not accept unconsciousness as an excuse). Slowly, she shifted her leg down so that it would slip off of his and back onto the bed, letting out a soft breath as she did so, pretending to still be asleep, just in case.

This was a mistake. Her foot sliding across the wiry muscles of his legs gave her a sort of topographical map of a part of his body which she’d caught glimpses of under his nightshirt (but only the lowest portions, of course) and which she could now see to some extent, but which he’d never actually given her permission to view, let alone touch. It also pulled his nightshirt down some so that it stretched just tightly enough over his groin area for her to catch sight of a bulge which sent her heart racing in panic and made her entire body go stiff.

Which is when Snape’s chest, which had been steadily rising and falling under her head (without, she realized too late, the accompanying soft whistle), stopped moving entirely.

He was awake, and he had been for a while now.

But he hadn’t thrown her off him yet.

Her head on his chest was situated such that she was looking down his body, which meant both that she couldn’t see his expression and that, if he assumed her eyes were open, he’d know perfectly well that she had an excellent view of his morning erection.

And yet . . . he wasn’t reacting with anger, which completely threw her for a loop. On the other hand, he also certainly wasn’t acting in the way one might expect a husband to react upon waking to find his wife clinging to him and himself with an erection.

It was difficult, this trying to interpret his emotions when it was often nearly impossible to do so
even when she could see his face, but time was wasting. If she let many more seconds go by without doing something, when they both knew that the other was awake, things would get even more awkward.

And then it hit her. Snape had been a virgin before they’d got married. He’d had, to Hermione’s knowledge, little to no experience of any sort with women since Lily broke off her friendship with him, and even that had probably never been more than friendship anyway. And despite the several sexual encounters he and Hermione had shared, neither of them was exactly comfortable with each other’s bodies (or with their own bodies, she suspected).

With a jolt of relief, understanding, and an aching compassion, she realized that Snape was most likely feeling exactly what she was feeling in this moment: fear. While she was agonizing over what he was thinking, he was probably doing the same, and with more reason.

She almost laughed. Instead, she sighed deeply as if just waking up, pulled herself off of him and into a sitting position, and looked around a little dazedly. She looked down at him and saw the guarded, wary expression, behind which seemed to lurk a frightened teenager . . . and smiled.

“Good morning, Severus. Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to get on your side of the bed. You could have woken me up and told me to move.” As she said it, she wondered why he hadn’t, but her peripheral vision told her his erection was still prominent, and since she didn’t know what to say about that, she climbed off of her side of the bed and threw on her dressing gown, purposefully acting as absolutely casual as possible. “I’ll go see if Neville’s got breakfast going yet, shall I?” Not waiting for him to answer, she turned and left the room.

After a quick stop in the bathroom, she went downstairs to discover that Neville was, in fact, in the middle of cooking breakfast, despite the fact that no one else seemed to be up yet.

“Morning, Hermione.” He sent her a smile as he scrambled some eggs in a pan. “Do you know where Professor Snape is? He’s usually up by now.”

Hermione nervously pulled her robe around her closer. “Er, he’s still in bed.”

“Oh.” Neville tried to sound casual, but his cheeks turned pink as he looked intently at his cooking.

Hermione still felt embarrassed about what had happened (though she was sure it wasn’t nearly what Neville must have been thinking) and didn’t quite feel up to trying to analyze it, so she said, “You don’t have to call him Professor anymore, Neville.”

He looked at her. “I know. But it’s . . . well, it’s hard to make a change like that, you know?”

Hermione raised her eyebrows at him. “Yes. I do.”

“Oh, er, right,” he muttered, and went back to his cooking, looking more uncomfortable than before.

Hermione had just decided to go into the living room and wait for Snape to come down while she thought about what to make of the events of that morning, when—

She was on the floor. Her head hurt. Her body felt strange. Neville and Fred were staring down at her with frightened, worried faces. Snape was there, as well, his face less readable, and he was holding her arms.

“She’s coming round,” said Fred, sounding relieved but still scared.
“Drink this,” said Snape, and he moved his hands. One went under her head to lift it off the kitchen linoleum, and the other brought a small bottle to her lips.

She drank it immediately, then asked, “What happened?”

Neville shot a nervous glance at Snape and said, “You collapsed. Then you started shaking. I think—I mean, it looked like—”

“You had a seizure,” Snape said in a steady voice that seemed unnaturally soft.

Hermione’s heart leapt into her throat. “What?”

“You were standing there,” Neville explained, “and then you just fell. You banged your head on the floor pretty hard. Then you were shaking so badly. I didn’t know what to do, so I called for help. That was a couple minutes ago. You only stopped shaking right before you woke up.”

“It was like nothing I’ve ever seen, Hermione,” said Fred in a hollow voice. “Maybe you’ve been cursed.”

But Hermione knew what it was. She’d read up on brain tumors, and seizures were one of the symptoms.

“It’s over now,” said Snape. “I’ll take her back to bed and call if I need either of you.”

“Bed?” Hermione said. She might have had an episode, but she wasn’t a complete invalid. “I’ll be fine in a—”

She tried to get up, but fell back toward the floor before even getting her feet under her. Snape caught her before she hit her head again, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and putting another under her knees. It was a strangely chivalrous act for a man in a nightshirt, she thought, then finally noticed that Fred was wet and wearing only a pair of boxers—which he had on backwards. Neville must have screamed at them to have brought them downstairs in such states. What must she have looked like? She saw the haunted looks in all their eyes and thought she didn’t want to know.

Snape lifted her with surprising ease and carried her up the stairs. The ache in her head was going away, which cleared her senses enough to realize that, despite having just woken from a full night’s sleep, she felt exhausted. She curled her head into Snape’s chest, not even realizing that it was now resting in the exact spot she’d found it that morning, and thought that it felt nice to be held by him.

As she was carried down the hallway and looked over her knees to see the staring, worried faces of Luna and Lavender, Hermione thought that the potion Snape had given her for her banged head must be making her a bit woozy. She felt a pleasant sort of dizziness come over her, and she closed her eyes and just felt the smooth, graceful movement toward the bedroom.

She opened her eyes again when Snape laid her on her side of the bed and pulled the covers up over her.

“There is a potion for the management of seizures,” he told her. “I’ll make sure you have it, though it will not likely stop them from coming entirely. How do you feel?”

“Strange,” she said, “a bit loopy, but nothing hurts.”

Snape nodded, his mouth tight. “Is this the first time this has happened?”

“That I know of,” she answered honestly. The potion seemed to have drained her fear away along
with the pain... for the time being.

“The tumors are progressing more quickly,” he said unhappily. “There’s not much time left for you to find a cure.”

“You could try helping,” she said, slurring a little. Anger flared in his eyes, but he seemed to tamp it down. “Wait. There was... something.” Something important, she thought. Something to do with the cure. Why couldn’t she remember what it was?

Her mind was foggy, and she was drifting out of consciousness. As her head sank into the pillow, she heard Snape say, “If you don’t die in the next few hours, you can tell me when you wake.”

#

There was a little girl sitting on her bed back at Hogwarts; it was a beautiful little girl, with bushy brown hair and fathomless black eyes. Hermione sat beside her.

“What’s that book?”

The girl shrugged and didn’t look away from the enormous book in her lap. “Just a bit of light reading. Have you figured it out yet?”

“Not quite,” Hermione said, “but I’m close.” She looked at the pages of the open book in the girl’s lap. The words changed from one moment to the next, flickering back and forth. First it was a potions recipe, then a fairy story, then back again. “Can you help me?”

“It’s all together, you know,” said the girl. “One thing and the next. But you have to take them one at a time.”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t die. Then live.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

The girl looked at her and said more firmly, “Don’t die. Then live.”

Hermione shook her head in confusion. “I’m—I’m trying to.”

“Trying isn’t good enough.”

“Trying is all I can do. I’m doing the best I can.”

“It’ll take more than your best.”

“How can I give that?” Hermione cried.

The girl said simply, “You can’t.” She looked back at her book. “Someone wants you.”

A hand touched her shoulder, and Hermione was back in the master bedroom of her family’s holiday home. Neville was looking down at her, a tray in his other hand.

“I brought you lunch,” he said. He still looked terribly concerned and scared. “How do you feel?”

Hermione scooted up into a sitting position. “I feel all right.” Half her mind was still going over what the girl in her dream had said, even as Neville placed the tray of food on her lap. The words
of the girl, which had seemed maddeningly vague in the dream, made perfect sense now that she
could look at them with rational eyes. She couldn’t find the cure. They would have to: her and
Snape. But that was something she’d already known.

“Thank you, Neville. Is everything else okay?”

“We’re all fine,” he said. “Hermione, do you know what happened to you?”

Hermione sighed. Telling him about being poisoned by Snape would help nothing, especially since
they were all still stuck together. But she needed to say something to alleviate some of their worry
and make sure they wouldn’t spend all their energy trying to find out what happened and running
after wild geese. “Remember several months ago, when Narcissa Malfoy kidnapped me?”

“Of course,” he said, his face pinching in pain. “She used the . . . the Cruciatius on you.”

Hermione nodded, trying not to remember. “I think maybe she used some other curses as well. But
it’s nothing you need to worry about, Neville. Severus and I will figure out how to stop it. He has a
lot of experience with Dark curses and things, you know.”

Neville looked dubious. “There must be something we can do to help.”

“If we think of something, we’ll let you know.”

“Okay,” he said reluctantly. “Be sure you do. Harry and Ron would kill me if I let anything happen
to you.”

She gave him a smile. “You’re a good friend, Neville. I’m glad you’re here.”

“Just don’t . . . die or anything, okay?”

Neville stayed long enough to watch her eat and take the tray back downstairs. Snape came in a
few minutes later.

“Longbottom’s telling the others that a curse from Narcissa Malfoy is responsible for your
seizure,” Snape informed her. “Where would he get such an idea?”

“I had to tell him something, Severus.”

“Yes. You could have told him the truth.”

“I thought you didn’t want me to.”

“I don’t. But you could have.”

“What good would it have done?”

“None at all.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “You don’t believe me that I’ve moved on. You thought I might
take this opportunity to go crying to my friends about how horrible you are.”

He didn’t say anything.

“Honestly, Severus!” she snapped. “Just because you don’t know how to forgive doesn’t mean the
rest of us don’t. Would you take me at my word for once?”
He was silent for a long moment, then walked to the window and looked out. “Before you fell asleep, you were going to tell me something.”

It came back to her in a flash, and all her frustration with him was forgotten. She reached for Blood Poisons and flipped to the page she’d last read. “I found something, Severus. It’s called the Tumourous Takeover Potion. Do you know it?”

He looked over his shoulder at her. Then, his interest apparently having been caught, turned fully toward her. “I have read the theory. It’s impossible to brew even if it were relevant.”

“Yes, but!” She nearly leapt up in her excitement, but settled for sitting on her heels. Her heart was thumping with the rush of finding a possible solution. “Remember what you said about Wentworth’s being a cure turned into a poison, that maybe in a similar way a poison could be turned into a cure. And here’s a potion that causes tumors. So maybe if we reverse it somehow, it could cure them.”

Snape didn’t shoot her down immediately. His eyes narrowed in thought, and he looked over her shoulder. All at once, he swept toward her to sit beside her on his side of the bed and grabbed the book from her hands. He looked eagerly at the page for a full second before remembering he couldn’t read and tossing it back at her in frustration. “Read it to me,” he said, and she did so without comment.

He paced and stared at the walls while she read, and when she finished, he stopped and looked her in the eye. “This might be it,” he said seriously, and she could see the hope-that-dared-not-speak-its-name in his eyes. “Good work, Hermione.”

Praise. Honest, genuine, irony-free praise for her work. And he’d used her first name. Her cheeks flushed with pleasure, and a wide smile lit up her face.

There was hope.

#

For the rest of the day, Hermione pored through her other books for any mention of this theoretical potion (there wasn’t any) while Snape tried to remember everything he knew about all of the ingredients the potion called for. Frustrated that he couldn’t read or write, Snape carried on an endless monologue of information which Hermione was expected to either remember or write down despite the fact that she was doing research of her own at the time. But she was good at doing many things at once, so she was able to remember what Snape was saying while still skimming the books for references to the Tumourous Takeover Potion.

After sunset, a knock came at their bedroom door. They were both so wrapped up in what they were doing that they didn’t even hear it until more knocking came a minute later. Snape got up too quickly from where he’d been sitting on the bed and ended up banging his toe against the bed leg, hissing in pain, before making it to the door. He flung it open and glared at Luna in annoyance.

“What is it?”

“Neville asked me to tell you,” she said, unperturbed, “dinner’s ready.”

Hermione was surprised to realize that the entire day had gone and she was very hungry. “We’ll be right down, Luna. Thank you.”

Luna smiled at her and went back down the hall.
Reluctantly, Hermione closed the book she was looking through and got out of bed. She still felt a bit off, but most of her strength had returned. Snape watched her intently from the doorway, but didn’t move. He waited until she had thrown on her dressing gown and passed by him into the hallway before following behind her.

The smell of beef and potato stew wafted up the stairs to her as she went down, making her stomach grumble in anticipation. She was smiling when she entered the kitchen, but her smile threatened to fall when she saw the looks the others were giving her.

“How are you feeling?” Lavender asked, looking at Hermione with more genuine concern than Hermione could remember her roommate ever directing at her.

“Much better,” Hermione said, trying to get the focus off herself. “This smells delicious, Neville.”

“Luna and Lavender helped,” he admitted.

“We were about to try to contact Lupin,” said Fred, already holding a bowl full of stew. “Like he said, in case there’s news.”

“Get on with it, then.” Snape swept into the room past Hermione, ignoring the others as he ladled himself some stew.

“Er, all right,” said Neville. “Does this count as talking about him now?”

“I think you have to say his name more,” offered Luna.

“What should we say?” Neville asked, looking a little frustrated. “I’m not used to talking about people when they’re not here. Not ones I like, anyway.”

“Remus Lupin,” Fred announced as if reciting a Shakespearean monologue, “is a great man. And a great wolf. A great man-wolf, one could say. From the top of his head to the tip of his tufted tail, a fine specimen all around.”

“You’ve never even seen him as a wolf,” Lavender interjected.

Fred, looking put out at the interruption, said, “Have so. George and I snuck into his office one time during fifth year. Meant to leave a Niffler for him until we saw there was already a wolf there.”

Lavender’s eyes widened. “Weren’t you scared?”

“Well, we didn’t know it was a werewolf,” he admitted. “Just thought he was dogsitting or something.”

Snape snorted. “You mistook a werewolf for a dog?”

“In our defense,” Fred said, “Quirrell was our D.A.D.A. teacher the year we covered that, and from what I heard, he was distracted with trying to find something at the time.”

Hermione sighed. “That’s got to be enough. I don’t think Remus has anything to tell us.”

“But I haven’t even got to the good part yet!” Fred protested. “Lavender interrupted me.”

“Enough,” Hermione said wearily, and Fred contented himself with making fun of Lavender for the rest of the meal.
For the next week, Hermione and Snape worked on their research, said very little to each other that wasn’t related to their work, and made some small progress. They’d managed to identify where each of the ingredients (aside from the blood) for the poison could be found as well as identified the various properties that each ingredient had and their effects on the potion as a whole. Hermione wasn’t seeing any immediate answers to how to turn the poison into a cure, but at least it was progress, and that felt wonderful.

Having taken his previous failed speech as a challenge, Fred composed lewd, inappropriate, and downright impossible poems, songs, and speeches in honor of Lupin to regale them with every night until Lupin finally showed up just to try to get him to stop it because George and Ted had taken to teasing him with some of the choicer phrases. It was a testament to just how much Fred really did respect him that Fred actually complied with this request, and from then on they simply bantered Lupin’s name about for a few minutes or remembered aloud some things he’d said or done, but Lupin never returned, so they took no news for good news. At least no one had been killed.

Unless Lupin himself had been killed and everyone who might have found some other way to inform them had either been killed or captured, but Hermione refused to entertain such thoughts.

Two weeks after they’d last heard from Lupin, Hermione was walking down the stairs, fully expecting to have a pleasant and productive day. Her research with Snape had been going well (they’d discounted three of the potion’s ingredients so far as being the key to reversing it in order to create the opposite effect), and she’d woken to find Snape’s side of the bed still warm. Usually, he got up well before she did, but that day it seemed he hadn’t beaten her by much. She didn’t know entirely what to make of this, but she hoped it was a sign that he was becoming more comfortable with her, and that one day they might even begin rising at the same time. This was a small thing, especially considering the fact that if they didn’t get this potion sorted, neither of them would live all that much longer anyway, but sometimes it was the little things, the small hopes, that kept her going.

As usual, the welcome smell of Neville’s cooking brought a smile to her face as she anticipated a companionable morning with her friends . . . and then she had just enough sense about herself to realize that her body was no longer obeying her commands and the stairs were coming very quickly toward her—

And then everything was black.

#

Hermione opened her eyes and felt like she had hardly done so. It was as dark as it had been a moment ago. Have I gone blind? But no . . . As her eyes adjusted, she could make out faint streaks of light on the ceiling. She raised her head enough to see the outlines of the dresser and the end of the bed. It was night.

Wasn’t it just morning? What—

Falling. The bottom of the staircase, so far away, rushing up at her.

Disoriented, she sat up fully, her heart thudding in her chest.

“Severus!” she whispered in a panic, grasping at the sheets on his side of the bed. She felt his body under them, and he sat up, instantly awake.

“What’s wrong?” he hissed.
She grasped at his nightshirt with fumbling hands. “What happened? What happened to me, Severus?” She started to cry and couldn’t stop herself.

“Shh,” he said, taking her arms gently. “Lie down.”

“I don’t want to—” But then she was overcome with exhaustion as the first rush of adrenaline wore off, and she slumped back onto her pillow. “What’s happened to me?”

He turned on the lamp on his side of the bed. She squinted from the light, but then she could see him more clearly. He looked . . . relieved.

“You had another seizure,” he said. “You fell down the stairs. Does anything hurt?”

Nothing did, so she shook her head and winced. “My head hurts.”

He nodded. “Then the potions have done their work.”

“Severus, have I been unconscious this whole time? It was morning last I knew.”

“You have been unconscious for a week, Hermione.”

His words were like a punch to the gut. A week? It couldn’t have been a week! It didn’t feel like it could have been more than a few hours.

She felt a stabbing pain in her head and realized she was shaking it vigorously. “I can’t—I can’t go on like this, Severus. I’m dying, aren’t I? This is what it’s like to die.”

“You’re not dying yet,” he said firmly.

Yet. A technicality. She’d be dead soon, and she couldn’t work fast enough to find a way to stop it. She’d never been more terrified in her life.

“Hold me,” she squeaked through her tears.

He stiffened. “What?”

“Hold me, Severus. Please.”

She should have been surprised by what happened next. If she’d been in her right mind, she would have been. But all she felt when Snape lay down next to her and put his arms around her was warmth and comfort. She tucked her head into his chest, wrapped her arm around his waist, and fell back to sleep.

#

When she woke next, it was daytime, and the curtains were opened wide enough to let in some light but not enough to be blinding.

She was alone in her bed and in her room. Her head hurt, but it wasn’t an unbearable pain, and she still felt utterly exhausted.

She was just contemplating whether she had the strength to get up when she heard footsteps coming down the hallway. Then Neville was there, smiling and bringing her a bowl of soup.

“Hey, Hermione. It’s good to see you awake.”
“Have I really been unconscious for a week?”

Neville’s smile fell and he nodded. “You had us all pretty scared.”

“Not as scared as I am.”

“Do you think you can eat this yourself?” Neville asked, holding out the soup for her.

She pulled herself into a sitting position against the headboard. “I’ll try. I just feel so, so tired.”

“Professor Snape said you would. He’s been looking after you while you were asleep.”

Hermione raised her eyebrows (even that was an effort). “What do you mean he looked after me?”

“He hardly left your side except for when he’d leave and come back with more potions. He even ate in here. It’s funny. I never would have thought he’d do that sort of thing.”

Hermione managed to bring a spoonful of soup to her mouth as she thought, *Me neither.*

It took a long time for Hermione to recover, and it didn’t help when she had two more seizures over the next three weeks. Her friends had no idea what was wrong with her or how to help her. It seemed like just when she might have been getting back to normal, another seizure would hit. They came to visit her often. Fred tried to come up with funny stories to tell her (though this usually ended in her chastising him rather than laughing, which he seemed to take as equally encouraging). Someone would bring her food and help her eat it if she was feeling especially weak. Luna came and sat with her for hours on end, sometimes reading to her in that airy way she had, which was especially amusing when she read a John Grisham novel she’d found. Neville ventured outside now and then to bring her some of the lovely wildflowers that were in full blossom. Lavender tried in her own way to cheer her up, mainly by offering frequently to do Hermione’s hair; on days when Hermione felt almost back to normal, she took her up on it.

And then there was Snape, who, more than anything, was constantly and relentlessly *there.* He sat in a chair, stood by the window, or lay in bed next to her, usually silent, always watching. He offered no soothing words or romantic gestures, but he never directed a scornful word or look at her, though he became more irritable with the others than ever.

The month of May passed in a blur of pain, unconsciousness, fear, and research. As she grew more and more certain that she’d die any day, Snape pushed her harder and harder in their work to find a cure. She told herself it was only because he too was ill, but that became more difficult to believe every time he brought her lunch or consented to hold her stiffly in his arms while she cried from hopelessness.

By the time anyone remembered to check in with Lupin, June had arrived.

Hermione reacted with understandable shock when she discovered this, having come downstairs feeling better than she had in over a month. “You haven’t talked to him at all? I knew I should have added that to your daily schedules.” Not that anyone had ever stuck to the daily schedules she’d given them, though Neville had made a token effort for a couple days.

“Relax, Hermione,” said Lavender. “I’m sure nothing important’s happened. They could have come to us by broom or something if they really needed to tell us something.”

Hermione growled in frustration. “Don’t give me that, Lavender! You couldn’t have pulled your tongue out of Fred’s mouth for two minutes to check in with the only person who can tell us what’s going on in the rest of the world?”
Lavender, who had apparently decided that one Weasley was as good as the next, crossed her arms. Fred, who Hermione could only assume had got bored with sitting around not pranking anyone, said, “Oi!” indignantly. Hermione had gone into the living room on one of her better days a couple weeks ago to find them snogging on the loveseat. It had been something of a shock, considering the way they’d been fighting like children, but it wasn’t as if she couldn’t believe it of either of them.

“I’m sorry, Hermione,” said Neville, frowning at himself. “I should have remembered.”

He should have, but the fact that he recognized this, as well as the fact that he’d been dreadfully busy running the house and helping Luna with her increasingly obvious pregnancy, made her say, “It’s all right, Neville. At least you were doing something useful….” She trailed off as her stomach filled with butterflies. Pregnancy. She did the math quickly in her head.

“Remus!” she screeched at the ceiling, causing everyone in the room but Snape to jump in surprise. “Remus Lupin, I need to speak to you! Can you hear me? Please, Remus, as soon as you can! I need to talk to Remus Lup—”

With a pop, Lupin appeared in their midst, looking disheveled, like he’d just thrown on whatever clothes were nearest at hand. He stuffed the Deluminator into his pocket. “Finally! We were starting to think we should send someone to check—”

Hermione grabbed his hand before he could finish. “Remus, please! The babies! How are—has—has one of them been born?” She looked at him desperately, watching his expression, hoping he wouldn’t have bad news.

Lupin smiled down at her, his eyes suddenly full of warmth and laughter. “Yes. Yes, one has been born.” He raised his eyes to where Snape stood behind Hermione. “You have a son.”

Hermione’s heart thudded furiously, and she felt weak with joy and relief. A son. She had a little boy. “Can I see him?” she asked immediately.

Lupin shook his head. “It’s too dangerous.”

“Oh, please, Remus! You can’t tell me I have a son and then not let me see him!”

Snape’s hand pressed down on her shoulder. “You know it’s too dangerous, Hermione. To everyone.”

Lupin blinked, noticing Snape’s use of her first name, but he wisely didn’t call attention to it.

She looked up into Snape’s eyes, and he said, “We’ll see him soon enough.”

What he meant by that, she wasn’t sure. Was he offering hope? It was true they had been making good progress in decoding the poison, but what if—

It didn’t matter. Not now.

She pulled Lupin toward the sofa and sat beside him. “Tell me everything.”

He did, though there wasn’t as much news concerning the war or the Horcruxes as she might have hoped. But it wasn’t the war she really wanted news on.

“He was born on the fifth of May,” Lupin said, and Hermione’s heart wrenched. She’d missed nearly a month of her son’s life already. “Everything went perfectly fine. The baby’s healthy and
strong, and Antoinette’s doing well. He’s beautiful, Hermione. He’s got your eyes. From what I understand, he’s a perfect gentleman—as much as an infant can be. He seems to be especially taken with Molly and Ron.”

Ron. Hermione felt a pang of jealousy, but pushed it down. She was glad one of her dearest friends could be there with her son, even if she couldn’t be. She tried not to think of how it should have been Ron’s own son, and she hoped Ron wouldn’t think too much on that either.

“Oh, I didn’t even think of a name! What have they been calling him?”

Lupin looked quizzically from her to Snape, but Snape didn’t seem to have an answer to whatever Lupin’s question was. “Don’t you know how wizard naming works, Hermione?”

It had never occurred to Hermione that wizards went about naming children differently, and she’d never read anything about it being different. But maybe if it was different, it would have been so second nature to them as normal naming was to Muggles that they wouldn’t have thought to mention it. “Don’t you just . . . give them a name and then write it on their birth certificate?”

“No, quite,” said Lupin. “That’s good enough for Muggle-borns or Squibs, but when a witch gives birth to a magical child . . . things have been sort of streamlined. Short-sighted idea, really, but there it is. When the witch says the child’s name aloud, it’s magically recorded in all the relevant places, including the birth certificate and the Hogwarts registry.”

“Oh,” said Hermione. She could see why parchment-pushers would think that an improvement to the system. “So . . .”

“So you’re son’s already been legally named,” Lupin confirmed.

“Oh,” she said again, not sure what else she could say. It wasn’t as if they’d actually had time to think up names for the babies themselves. “What did Antoinette name him?”

“Cedric,” said Lupin. “Apparently it was out of her mouth before she realized it, but then it was too late. She feels badly that she hadn’t even asked you.”

“No,” said Hermione. “No, I think that’s . . . a very appropriate name.” She couldn’t say that she knew Cedric Diggory well, but she knew he’d been a good person, and he was something of a war hero now, if only by being a martyr.

Lupin smiled. “I thought so, too. His full name is Cedric Severus Snape. She assumed you’d want to go with the wizarding tradition of giving the firstborn son his father’s name as his middle name.”

Hermione hadn’t thought of that either, but she had no particular objection. Snape had a sort of satisfied smirk on his face.

“Well,” said her husband, “at least Miss Diggory isn’t completely hopeless.”

“You might want to think up names for the others,” offered Luna, giving Hermione a start. She’d almost forgotten other people were in the room.

Hermione thought about this for a moment. “You know . . . I don’t think I will. Luna, you and the other surrogates aren’t really getting anything at all for putting yourselves in danger to help us. I think the least we can let you do is let you name the children you’re going through all this for. Right, Severus?”
Snape looked dubiously at Luna, probably wondering what sorts of silly names she’d come up with, but he didn’t object, which Hermione thought remarkably magnanimous of him.

“You might also be interested to know,” said Lupin with a coy grin, “that you’re not the only new parents among us.”

Hermione gasped. “Has Tonks had her baby?”

Lupin laughed. “No, not Tonks. We’ve still got a month or so to wait for ours. But there’s a new Potter in the world.”

A squeal erupted from Hermione’s throat, and Fred, Neville, and Luna joined in the cheer. “They’ve named him James Sirius, haven’t they?” Hermione asked.

“Of course,” said Lupin. He added with a strange nervousness, “They’ve . . . asked me to be his godfather.”

Hermione squealed again and grabbed his arm. “Oh, Remus, that’s wonderful! You’ve agreed, haven’t you?”

“I . . . Not yet. Dora wants me to, but . . . Say something does happen. It’s bad enough putting my own child in the danger of my care, but I couldn’t do that to Harry.”

The hand that had been holding his arm smacked it. “Don’t be silly, Remus. The danger of your care. Honestly. You’ve got to be James’s godfather. It just makes sense. And nothing’s going to happen to Harry and Ginny, so there’s no use worrying about that. You’ll be an absolutely wonderful godfather.”

“Yeah,” added Fred. “Stop thinking so much, Lupin. You know the trouble that got you into last time.”

Lupin chuckled ruefully. “I suppose you’re right.”

Snape raised an eyebrow at all this, but said nothing. For a moment Hermione thought he’d grown nicer in the past weeks, but then she thought that it was probably only that he didn’t particularly care one way or another about whether or not Lupin was Harry’s son’s godfather.

After all this, Lupin told them what little was going on with the war. Hermione made an excuse to send Lavender out of the room long enough for him to tell the rest of them about the Horcrux hunt. (There’d been no progress, and McGonagall was growing frustrated.) He also shared the news from Percy that all of them had been declared wanted fugitives. Well, not quite all of them. Someone in the Ministry apparently considered it bad form to declare the nearly-orphaned son of two incapacitated heroes a fugitive when there was no hard evidence they could point to (though there were also theories that the Ministry ‘someone’ was just afraid of Neville’s grandmother), so Neville was simply wanted for questioning. And given that the surrogates (other than Luna) had no history of troublemaking or even being involved with the rest of them, they were labeled missing and presumed kidnapped.

“And there’s been suspiciously little news about Voldemort,” said Lupin after Lavender had once again been sent out of the room on an errand so purposeless that even she seemed to realize they were just trying to get rid of her. “Horace thinks Voldemort might suspect him at last. He thinks Voldemort’s being more careful what he tells him or says in front of him.”

“If the Dark Lord suspected Horace of treachery, he’d simply kill him,” said Snape.
“I know it sounds horrible, but I hope you’re right,” said Hermione. “Because it’s better than Voldemort having plans that he’s deliberately hiding from us.”

Snape turned his gaze to her with a slow deliberateness. “I am right. Count on it.”

She nodded. “I do.”

Lupin didn’t stay for lunch, but the rest of them enjoyed some sandwiches and talked about babies and a happier future than really seemed realistic in the present circumstances.

When Hermione went back to her bedroom, she found Snape there, ready to work. But she didn’t want to work just yet. She went to him, wrapped her arms around him, and hugged him as tightly as she could. “A son,” she whispered into his shirt. “We have a son, Severus. I can hardly believe it. I want to see him so badly.”

He put his hands on her shoulders and gently (but a bit awkwardly) pushed her back until she was looking into his face. “It doesn’t do any good to think about that now,” he told her. “We both need to focus on finding a cure. I do think there’s a good chance we’ll find it in time now, but we have to hurry. We’ll be no good to . . . Cedric . . . if we’re dead.”

Hearing him speak their son’s name—a name she was still getting used to using in that context—sent a wave of some unnamable emotion through Hermione. It made this bond between them more real than ever. Knowing that there was a little person out there with Hermione’s eyes and Snape’s name, knowing that her friends had seen and held this person . . . It was all out there now. There could be no hiding it. Not that she wanted to anymore.

But Snape was right. They needed to focus on their work. Not just for themselves, but for their children. And she knew they were getting close to an answer.

#

Two weeks later, Lupin returned.

They were talking about him casually, as they’d returned to the habit of doing every night. Hermione, now feeling entirely like herself again (but knowing that could change at any time), made sure they remembered it. They were lounging in the living room after dinner. Lavender had draped herself over Fred in the most ridiculous fashion, and Fred, in turns, either looked irritated at her or practically groped her in front of them all, depending on his mood (and sometimes both at once). Neville was rubbing Luna’s feet, and Snape was pretending to ignore them all as he so often did when the whole group was together.

They were all quite stunned when Lupin appeared in the middle of the room, his jeans and t-shirt smeared with blood.

Hermione leapt to her feet. “Remus! What happened?”

His eyes went wide. “How do you know something—” He saw where she was looking and relaxed. “Oh. Bugger, I should have thought to change. No, everything’s all right, Hermione. Everyone’s all right.”

“Then why do you have blood all over you?” she demanded.

“There was a small complication, but it’s been seen to.”

“Whose blood is it, though?” Fred demanded. “What happened?”
“It’s Cecilia’s,” Lupin answered, looking at Hermione and Snape.

Hermione could have sworn her heart stopped.

“I was just helping with the delivery,” Lupin continued.

Hermione’s heart skipped and beat double-time. “Delivery? Then—”

Lupin smiled. “Congratulations. It’s another boy.”

Emotion overwhelmed her, and she slumped back into her chair. She turned to Snape for his reaction; as usual, he only looked thoughtful. As Hermione cried with happiness and relief, Fred led a cheer of congratulations.

“The baby and Cecilia are both well,” Lupin told them. “It was about six hours ago. It was touch and go for a moment, but in the end it got sorted. The baby’s perfectly fine, and Cecilia’s resting after seeing a Muggle doctor.”

“Another boy,” Snape mused. “And what did the girl name him?”

Lupin looked down and fiddled at some of the blood on his shirt, looking quite . . . well, sheepish.

“Er, yes. What you’ve got to realize, Severus, is that Cecilia doesn’t really understand much about . . . your various . . .”

Snape frowned at him. “The name, Lupin.”

Lupin looked at him, but Hermione could tell he was trying to keep from laughing. What could be so funny about my son’s name? Oh, don’t tell me Cecilia let George talk her into something ridiculous.

“It’s just that, being in Gryffindor, she knows Hermione’s friends far better than she knows how you feel about anyone, Severus, and she had some thoughts of her own after all these months of hiding out and having us take care of her . . .”


Lupin fought harder to refrain from smiling. “All right, Severus. Your new son’s name is . . . Remus Harry Snape.”

The look of shocked fury on Snape’s face would have caused a roomful of first years to cower in terror, but Fred let out the first guffaw. Then Lupin, then Lavender, and even Neville and Luna couldn’t help giggling at the sight of Snape with his jaw dropped. Hermione laughed, too, but not entirely because of Snape’s reaction. It was also because the idea of naming one of her babies after one of her good friends and one of her best friends hadn’t really occurred to her, but now it seemed utterly perfect, and she was grateful to Cecilia for choosing something she thought Hermione would like (even if she’d had no idea how furious it would make Snape).

“HOW—DARE SHE—” Snape sputtered in outraged bursts. But everyone kept laughing, and soon he wore himself out. There was nothing to be done about it, of course. It was legal and binding now. “I’m not calling him that,” Snape finally muttered, and no one said he had to (though Hermione wondered what he did plan on calling him).

Lupin had one other piece of news to share with them, though it was next to nothing in comparison with his first piece. “Horace thinks that Voldemort knows one of his followers is a traitor, but doesn’t know which one. Horace is nearly as accomplished at Occlumency as Severus, so he’s
managed to stay hidden so far, but he’s getting twitchy. Every time he checks in, he asks to be relieved of his assignment.”

“He’ll do what needs to be done,” said Severus, still snippy. “He’s a blowhard, but he knows where his loyalty lies. He always has.” The last part came out a tad bitter.

“That’s what we’re relying on,” said Lupin. “You and I both know spying is no easy task, Severus. I hope Horace has the constitution to see it through.”

Snape had calmed down significantly by the time they went to bed that night. Perhaps he was less upset than he’d appeared. After all, he’d gone through a lot to protect Harry, and Hermione didn’t think Lupin’s newfound friendship with him could be entirely one-sided. Hermione preferred to think that rather than to think that he’d consoled himself with the knowledge that he might not have to face the conundrum of what to call little Remus Harry at all.

“Do you think they’re all boys?” Hermione asked, pulling the covers up around her. She was thinking of the dreams she’d had, all so terribly disturbing. These dream versions of her children were almost always boys. “I think I’ve had the feeling that they would be. Or maybe I was just letting that ‘four princes are coming’ rot from the prophecy get into my head.”

He was silent for a long moment, and she wondered if he’d respond, then he said, “I rather suspected they’d all be girls.”

“Did you?” This surprised her. Snape didn’t seem the type to hope for girls. “Why?”

He shrugged his eyebrows. “No particular reason.”

She turned the lamp on her side of the bed off, and the room went dark. “I don’t think I care either way,” she whispered. “It’ll be enough if we all live through this.” The moonlight made random shadows on the walls, and she stared at them, listening to Snape breathe beside her. She thought of the family they could be if everything went well, she thought of her children living as orphans if she and Snape died, and she thought of the worst: what it would be like if she and Snape lived and none of their children made it out of the war alive. “Severus,” she whispered, and she knew he was still awake by his breathing. “I hope we all make it.” Then she curled up facing him but not quite touching him, put her hand on his under the covers, and fell asleep.

#

The faint light of a not-quite-half moon shone through the gaps in the curtains as Hermione got ready for bed. It had been nearly two weeks since the birth of her second son, and it had been growing very difficult to stay focused on their work on the potion when she couldn’t stop thinking about the two children she wanted to see and the next one that was due to be born in a few more weeks.

Snape was lying on his back in bed, not yet asleep but unmoving. For some reason, Lavender had just turned on the shower, which meant the bathroom wouldn’t be free for at least forty-five minutes, and Hermione was tired after a long day of research and a headache that had refused to go away for nearly seven hours.

Sod it, she thought as she reached for her pajamas. Snape was in bed, it was dark, and she was too tired to wait for Lavender to be done in the bathroom. With less haste than she might have ordinarily employed when she had more energy, she pulled off her clothes—only to realize that the knickers she’d been about to put on were Lavender’s (she could tell by the lace). With a huff of annoyance, she rummaged through her trunk until she found her own knickers, pulled them on and
then her pajama bottoms. She put her arms through her tank top, about to slip it over her head as she turned to get into bed—and froze.

She’d known Snape wasn’t asleep yet, but she’d assumed he was lying there with his eyes closed. At the very least, she thought he’d keep their bargain about not watching each other dress. But now his head was turned toward her, and even in the dim moonlight Hermione could tell he’d been watching.

Some instinct she didn’t analyze stopped her from pulling on her shirt as quickly as possible. She let her arms fall back to her sides and looked at him. Their eyes met, and then his began to trail down her body. Her skin tingled as if she could literally feel his gaze, and she had no idea why she was offering herself to be looked at in this way. No man had seen her breasts before—not even Ron. But now, she sort of . . . wanted Snape to see them. Why was that? She’d never wanted to be seen as a sex object or anything of the sort, so why would she—

A heavy sigh came from the bed, and Snape turned his back to her.

Urged by that same unknown instinct, Hermione padded softly to the bed and got in on her side of it but didn’t lie down. She tossed her shirt on the floor and kneeled on the bed, facing him.

“Severus,” she whispered.

He didn’t respond. She laid a hand on his arm, which tensed.

“Severus, look at me.”

Slowly, he turned and looked up at her. He was guarded, wary. What did he think she was doing? What was she doing?

She trailed her hand down his arm and took his hand in hers. He didn’t pull it back or fight her, but let her move it where she wanted. She placed it on her breast.

His eyes widened, and his hand twitched under hers as if about to pull it away, but it didn’t move. He looked where his hand was, then back to her face, his eyes questioning. He sat up and faced her. Long moments stretched on, neither of them moving, until slowly, tentatively, he moved his other hand to cup her other breast.

She held her breath and closed her eyes, and before she knew it, she was using her own hands to press his against her harder. The heat on her breasts was scorching in the cool of the room, and every nerve ending was alert. His long fingers splayed across her chest, and like she was something volatile and dangerous, he gently, hesitantly moved his hands to massage her breasts.

It was like he had never touched a woman before, and Hermione knew he probably hadn’t. She’d never been touched by a man either, excepting their earlier encounters—but he hadn’t even touched her then, had he? It felt strange and new and wonderful. It was soothing and tantalizing and so many other interesting things. Part of her mind was screaming at her, asking her what the hell she was doing, and didn’t she know that this man was (or at least had been) her teacher, that he was far too old for her, that he’d heaped countless cruelties on her and even given her a poison that could kill her? But another part of her mind screamed something very different: that this was right, that this man was her husband, that he was honorable and brilliant and even kind in his own way, and that it was about damn time something like this happened.

“Beautiful,” he murmured, and his voice sounded pained.

She opened her eyes and saw him staring at her breasts as he kneaded them, as his coarse thumbs
swept over to feel her hardened nipples, and words spilled out of her mouth. “Kiss me.”

Her heart leapt into her throat as his eyes met hers. Would he do it? Did she really want him to? How far was she going to let this go? She’d been feeling for some time like she would like to be closer to him, yes, but was she ready to have sex with him? What would it be like if she did, if they both wanted it and it was spurred by feelings and desires rather than contractual obligations?

Snape’s hands on her breasts stilled, and his face began to come closer. Her breathing was stilted as she waited. Should I close my eyes? Should I meet him halfway?

She closed her eyes. There were no ulterior motives here, no deceptions. Just instinct and emotion. She could feel the heat of him now. She could smell mint on his breath. Then the first, uncertain brush of his lips on hers . . .

A thunderous crash shook the house. Hermione’s eyes flew open, stunned, but Snape leapt off the bed. “Stay here,” he commanded, all uncertainty wiped from his face. As a lover he might have been a novice, but as a warrior he was a veteran. He swiped his wand from the bedside table and charged out their bedroom door, shouting, “Longbottom! Weasley!”

Hermione pulled on her shirt in a flash, grabbed her own wand, and ran to the doorway.

“Longbottom, stay with the women!” Snape ordered as he and Fred charged down the stairs.

“What’s going on?” screamed Lavender.

“We’re being attacked,” Hermione shouted back. “Luna, Lavender, back in your room!” They obeyed, but only barely.

“Hermione, be careful!” Neville called as Hermione rushed after her husband. Snape may have been the more experienced fighter, but she was no slouch, and if they were under attack, she was not going to cower in the back while her friends fought.

Hermione tried to brace herself, but she was still surprised at what she found when she reached the bottom of the stairs. An entire wall of her house had been blown apart, and Snape and Fred were rushing out toward dark figures.

There aren’t that many, Hermione realized as she caught up to Snape and Fred. Snape gave her one irritated look, but he must have known she wouldn’t listen to him when he told her to stay.

There were five men, all very big and frightening-looking—but they didn’t look like Death Eaters. She didn’t recognize . . . No. The one at the front.

Her stomach lurched as the men swarmed in suddenly and surrounded them.

“You!” Fred shouted furiously. His arm was outstretched—not pointing his wand, but his finger. “I’ll kill you, you bastard! I’ll kill you for what you did to my brother!”

Greyback smiled, showing yellow, pointed teeth. He was so close now. How had he got so close? No, it was Fred who had got too far from Snape and Hermione. He’d charged at Greyback. Fool!

Before Fred could react, Greyback lunged, teeth met flesh, and Fred screamed.

A chorus of cruel, barking laughter surrounded them, and Hermione spun in all directions, her wand raised against attack and her mind reeling. But the men—werewolves, most likely—weren’t attacking. They were just laughing. Laughing at Fred’s death? No . . .
“He bit my finger off!” Fred cried in disbelief, staggering backward to Snape and Hermione, his blood-slick left hand cradled to him with his right. “The bloody maniac bit my sodding finger off!”

He looked in shock at Greyback, who was standing calmly, smiling at him, the stump of Fred’s left index finger visible through his jagged teeth. Then, leisurely, his eyes never leaving Fred’s, he closed his lips and chewed, as casually as a person might eat a carrot. After a few moments of utterly nauseating crunching, Fred’s blood dripping from his mouth, Greyback swallowed.

“Mmm,” said Greyback, licking his lips. “You taste just like your brother. I wonder, does your pretty little sister taste the same?”

Hermione wanted to vomit. Snape had to reach out to hold Fred back from charging at Greyback again, shooting a curse at the werewolf at the same time. Greyback, far more nimble than he looked, dodged the curse and snarled at Snape.

The fight might have been on then, but it was interrupted.

“Fred! Fred!” shouted Lavender as she raced out of the house toward them, ignoring Neville, who was running after her, trying to order her back to the house. “What happened? I heard you scream —”

She came up short when she saw the five werewolves. She let loose a shriek.

“Lavender!” shouted Fred. “Go back!”

It was too late. One of the werewolves grabbed her around the waist and clapped a hand over her mouth.

“This your girlfriend?” asked Greyback, grinning. He sauntered toward Lavender. “She’s a pretty little thing, too.”

Still trailing behind, Neville shot a curse at the werewolf holding Lavender. He went completely stiff and fell to the ground. Freed, Lavender rushed toward Fred, but Greyback growled and leapt at her.

As Fred ran at Greyback with his wand out, Snape shot a curse at one werewolf, then another. Hermione pointed her wand to shoot a stunner at a young, one-eyed werewolf when she was hit from the side. Someone landed on top of her on the grass, and she heard her wand snap under the weight of their combined bodies.

She scrambled up and pushed the person off of her. It was Lavender. She was not moving, and her shoulder was chewed up and bleeding. Hermione couldn’t tell if she was dead or alive.

Her wand was broken clean in half, useless. She looked up just in time to see a werewolf running at her, but he was hit by a curse, and streams of blood poured from gashes in his neck as he collapsed.

Strong hands lifted her to her feet. “Are you hurt?” Snape asked.

“No,” she answered but held up her broken wand.

She looked around. All the werewolves were either dead or gone. Greyback was nowhere to be seen. Neville was panting, and Fred ran to Lavender’s side, still clutching his bloody hand but looking otherwise unhurt.

“Is she alive?” he asked.
Snape did a quick check. “Barely. Can you take her Side-Along back to Hogwarts?”

Fred nodded.


Fred looked dazed with pain, worry, and rage. But he picked Lavender up and Disapparated.

“Expecto Patronum!” Snape shouted, and a shining Patronus leapt from his wand. Hermione saw that it was a doe, but she had no energy to react to that fact at the moment. She listened as Snape gave it instructions and sent it to Hogwarts.

“We have to go,” he told her and Neville. “The others—”

He was interrupted by a scream, faint and muffled, but not far away.

Hermione went pale. “Luna.”

They sprinted toward the sound of the scream, around the other side of the house. As they ran around the house, Hermione grabbed Neville’s arm, stopping him. “My wand’s broken, but I have a spare in my room. Could you—”

“Accio Hermione’s wand!” Neville shouted, pointing his wand toward the broken upstairs window of Luna and Lavender’s room.

A moment later, a thin, pale shaft of wood flew toward them, bypassing Neville entirely. Hermione snatched it out of the air. The moment it was in her hand, she felt much more powerful, much less helpless. “Let’s go.”

They were only a dozen or so steps behind Snape as they ran down the hill behind the house. Soon, they heard voices.

“Just drink it, girl! Drink it and you’ll live! It’s only the spawn I want!”

The second voice made no words, but only loud, vigorous hums of refusal.

Hermione recognized the voices instantly and put on a fear-fueled burst of speed.

Rounding a corner, she saw them. Luna was lying on the ground, her legs bent at odd angles, one hand clasped over her mouth and the other over her swollen belly. Above her crouched Narcissa Malfoy, a hateful grimace on her face. She was holding a bottle to Luna’s face, trying to force her to drink.

Narcissa looked up and saw them coming. Without missing a beat, she shot a stunner at Neville, and he fell to the grass with a cry. Snape, his eyes boiling with fury, cried out, “Release her, Narcissa! And I may let you live!”

“What have I got to live for, Snape?” she cried. “Nothing! You and your tramp made sure of that!”

But then, she stood up, and Hermione felt a fleeting hope that she’d just run away and leave them alone now that her plan had failed. Narcissa’s hands hung at her side, her wand held limply.

Then, not so limply.

It was little more than a twitch of her wrist, and her wand was pointed squarely at Luna, still lying in pain at her feet.
“Avada Kedavra,” Narcissa hissed. A green bolt made the short leap from her wand to Luna’s body.

“NO!” Hermione charged forward, Snape at her side. “Stupefy!”

A surge of power rushed through Hermione’s wand toward Narcissa Malfoy, slamming into the evil witch and knocking her ten meters back into the air—where she slammed against a tree and crumpled to the ground with a thud.

“Luna!” Hermione was at her friend’s side in an instant while Snape ran past her to Narcissa. Neville joined her a moment later, having recovered from his stunner too late to do anything.

“Is she . . .” Neville asked.

Hermione was already crying as she searched for a pulse. Luna’s eyes were still open, but they were empty. “She’s dead.”

She held Luna’s hand while Neville held the other, both of them weeping unrepentantly. Luna was dead because she’d tried to help her. And now the baby, too . . .

“She didn’t deserve this,” Hermione murmured. “I shouldn’t have let her get involved in this.” But Neville was still too stunned and hurt to respond.

Then Snape was there, kneeling over Luna’s body, his movements deliberate but hurried. He pulled Luna’s shirt up and yanked her pajama bottoms down enough that he could see the whole swell of her belly.

“It’s too late, Severus,” Hermione told him. Maybe he hadn’t seen . . . “She’s dead.”

“I know,” he said, then pointed his wand carefully at Luna’s belly. “Sectumsempra,” he whispered.

“What are you doing?” Hermione cried as a scalpel-thin stream of light from Snape’s wand split Luna’s belly open, spilling blood and other fluids out onto the grass.

Snape didn’t answer. As Hermione and Neville watched in horror, Snape plunged his hands inside the gash in Luna’s body . . . and pulled out the baby.

Tears blinded Hermione. My baby. My poor baby. Isn’t it enough I lost Lu—

The baby cried.

Hermione blinked away the tears and saw Snape gazing at the tiny, bloody, squirming infant in his hands with awe. It was so small, so unbelievably small. But it was alive.

“It’s a girl,” said Neville in an equally awed whisper.

She’s alive, thought Hermione. How could she have—

Curses such as the Cruciatus affect only those upon whom they are placed, not anyone who might be in the vicinity of or even touching the victim. Dumbledore’s words came back to her, and for an instant, all irritation and anger she felt toward the late Headmaster vanished, as if the words themselves had kept her child alive.

She looked at Snape and for one more second was staggered by the wonder in his expression. Then his face set, and he carefully cut the umbilical cord. “Here,” he said, and Hermione expected him to give her their daughter. He thrust the baby into Neville’s hands.
Neville looked at him in shock, trying to grasp the squirming newborn. “Professor Snape?”

“Take her to St. Mungo’s.”

“St. Mungo’s?” Hermione asked, astonished. “What for?”

“She’s two months premature. She needs more help than Poppy is equipped to give her.” He turned to Neville. “Longbottom, take her to Healer Partridge—yes, I know what you’ve thought of him in the past, Hermione, but he’s not the Dark Lord’s—and tell him who she is.”

“But why can’t we—” Hermione protested. It was so unfair that her friends were getting to spend time with her babies and she wasn’t.

“We’d be arrested as soon as we stepped foot in the place,” Snape snapped. “Longbottom has a chance at getting to Partridge without being taken into custody—if he’s careful.”

It was chilly out, so Neville unbuttoned the top of his pajama shirt to cuddle the baby against his chest. “You can count on me,” he told them, sounding a little less nervous than he had a right to be.

“We’ll be at Hogwarts. Meet us there when you can.”

“Right,” said Neville, standing. He whispered to himself, “Healer Partridge. Healer Partridge,” so he’d remember it.

“Take care of her,” Snape told him. “Or I’ll kill you.”

Neville gulped, nodded, and Disapparated.
A deep, biting cold sank into Hermione’s chest as she looked at Luna’s body. Her friend was gone, her life given to protect Hermione’s daughter. Narcissa had wanted to kill the child as revenge for Draco’s death; it made sense now. Narcissa may have gone mad, but not mad enough to refuse an innocent girl the chance to save herself. But she hadn’t known Luna.

Hermione paused in the act of closing Luna’s eyes, her fingertips stilled on Luna’s pale cheeks. Her other hand tightened around the wand she was still holding. Her spare wand. Dumbledore’s wand. Her eyes searched for Narcissa—and found the witch too quickly. Mrs. Malfoy was a crumpled lump at the base of a tree.

“Severus,” Hermione whispered.

He followed her gaze. “She’s dead.”

The knot in Hermione’s stomach tightened. “I—I killed her?”

He frowned at Luna’s eviscerated corpse. “She doesn’t deserve your regret. Now come. We don’t want to wait around for those wolves to return.”

Snape stood, and she looked up at him with tears in her eyes. “But, we have to—to bury her or something.” They both knew she didn’t mean Narcissa.

“We need to leave,” he snapped, then pursed his lips. “Although we might have more trouble if the Muggles find the bodies.” He made a low, annoyed sound. “Very well. I’ll see to them. Go and collect whatever we can take quickly.” He looked down, appearing to realize that he was still wearing nothing but his nightshirt. “And bring me some clothes.”

Hermione ran up the hill and through the gaping hole their attackers had blasted in the side of her house. One trunk between them would be about all they could handle quickly. With a pang of regret, she remembered the idea she’d once had to put an enlargement charm on a handbag and wished she’d gone through with it at some point. She Summoned all the books she’d brought into the trunk, then found Snape’s stash of potions and put them in. After hastily changing out of her pajamas and making sure she had several items of clothing (which she didn’t spare time to identify and sort), she took one last look at the room, trying to remember if there was anything else they couldn’t do without. Her eyes landed on the bed, where the sheets were still rumpled and askew. She felt the ghost of Snape’s hands on her breasts—had it really been only minutes since that moment? It felt like eons.

Shaking herself, Hermione Levitated the trunk down the hallway, stopping at the other two bedrooms to grab things she knew Fred, Neville, and Lavender would want—and the pair of radish earrings she saw lying on a nightstand.

When she got back to Snape, she found a freshly-disturbed bit of ground on one side of the large tree, and Luna’s corpse laid out beside a three-foot-deep hole on the other. Her body was arranged in a typical coffin pose, with hands crossed over her chest. Her clothes were still bloody where Snape had cut her open, but he’d done his best to give her some dignity apart from that.

Tears filled Hermione’s eyes, and she looked away, needing another moment. She saw a wand lying beside the tree. Narcissa’s wand. The wand that had killed Luna. She snatched it up, feeling a
strong urge to snap it, but stopped herself. Instead, she knelt by the mad witch’s grave and stuck it tip-first in the dirt. If her husband came looking for her, he at least ought to be able to find her body.

“I’m sorry things went like this,” Hermione murmured, then looked up at Snape. “I know she was your friend once.”

Snape shook his head, his face grim. “I had no friends among the Death Eaters.” But there was a twinge of regret in his voice.

Hermione moved to kneel by Luna’s side, took her hand, and kissed her forehead. Her skin was cool and stiff. Snape had put some sort of stasis charm on her body. “Thank you,” she said to Luna, forcing the words out through a throat that didn’t want to stay open. “For everything. I couldn’t have wanted a better friend. We won’t forget you.”

She heard a soft snort behind her. “Doing so would be impossible.” There was no snideness in Snape’s words.

Hermione stood back and Levitated Luna’s body into the shallow grave, then Levitated the dirt to cover her. She didn’t need to ask why the grave was so shallow. The Order wouldn’t let Luna stay here long. But for now, they needed to move fast. They should have already left.

Hermione looked up to see Snape walking back from the house, changed into some of his Muggle clothes, and the hole in the house repaired. How long had she been lingering at Luna’s side?

“We must go,” he told her.

She heard a pop far on the other side of the house, quickly followed by another. Snape snatched one handle of the trunk and reached for her, hissing, “Now.”

Through the sudden fear that was spreading through her, Hermione imagined the Death Eaters getting their hands on Luna’s corpse. As she reached for Snape’s hand, with her other she waved her wand and caused grass to spring up and blanket Luna’s grave, hiding it.

#

Apparating outside the gates of Hogwarts, Snape and Hermione found someone already waiting for them.

Charlie’s rugged face was grim as he opened the gate for them. “Glad you guys made it,” he said, speaking mostly to Hermione. “Mum and Dad are in the hospital wing with Fred and most of the others.”

“Are we the last to get here?” asked Hermione.

Charlie shook his head. “We’re still missing Harry’s group, as well as Ginny and Tonks.”

“Were the others attacked too?”

Charlie nodded. “Death Eaters all ’round. A coordinated attack. No one has any idea how they found you all.”

As Charlie closed the gate behind them, Hermione was afraid to ask the next question. But Snape wasn’t.
“Casualties?”

“Only Fred and Lavender so far. Where are the other two from your group?”

“Miss Lovegood was killed by Narcissa Malfoy,” Snape said, and Charlie’s eyes went wide in the moonlight. “I managed to save the baby. Longbottom took her to St. Mungo’s.”

Charlie took the information in and nodded. “Speaking of which, you’d better get to the hospital wing. There’s someone there I imagine you want to meet.”

Hermione’s heart leapt as her mind raced through all the people who’d arrived before them. Antoinette. Antoinette’s group was here. With her son! The one they’d named . . . “Cedric.”

“You two go on,” said Charlie. “We’ll see to your trunk.”

Charlie took the trunk, and Hermione glanced around, wondering who ‘we’ was. Her eyes finally landed on a young woman with arms covered in burn scars who was standing back from them, her fingers fiddling with the hem of her shirt as if she weren’t used to wearing one.

“Thanks, Charlie,” Hermione said, then grabbed Snape’s hand and pulled him at a run toward the castle.

They found the main door guarded by Spears, who even through all the emotions whirling around inside her Hermione was relieved to see was wearing a set of grubby but modest wizard’s robes. He opened the door as soon as he laid eyes on them, and they ran upstairs.

They burst through the hospital doors and saw a group of haggard-looking people huddled loosely around a bed. Suddenly overwhelmed by the need to go make sure everyone really was okay, Hermione hurried over to the group, hugging the first person she reached.

“Hermione!” Ron yelled, startled and relieved, and he pulled her closer for a crushing hug. “You’re all right!”

“So are you!” She pulled away enough to grab his face and look into his blue eyes, sharp relief flooding her at seeing her friend safe and sound.

“Weasley!” barked the gruff voice of Mad-Eye Moody.

“Oh, er, right.” Ron backed to arms-length from her and gave her an apologetic shrug. “We need to make sure you’ve really you. So, er . . . who did you once turn me into?”

“Crabbe.”

“You turned him into a crab?” asked Bill.

Ron laughed. “I wish.”

Snape and Mad-Eye exchanged questions and answers, and Mad-Eye put his wand back in his pocket and said, “We’re all who we say we are.”

Security satisfied, Hermione soon found herself enveloped in hug after hug from Molly, Arthur, McGonagall, Bill, and even Fleur. Even Snape got a hug from Molly, though he only stood stiffly and didn’t return it. When Molly backed off, Snape started giving a report to McGonagall, Mad-Eye, Kingsley, and most of the others.

Taking Ron’s hand in hers, Hermione sat down in an empty chair beside Lavender’s bed. Her
roommate looked bad, barely awake with a blood-soaked bandage covering her neck and shoulder. Fred sat at her other side, both his good hand and one wrapped in its own blood-soaked bandage covering her hand.

Hermione looked around the room. “Ron, where’s Antoinette? Where’s my baby?”

“Oh!” Ron jumped up, pulling her with him. “You’ll like him, Hermione. He’s disgustingly well-behaved, just like his mum.”

That almost made her laugh. It had been a while since anyone could have truly described her as well-behaved. “I’m sure his Uncle Ron will fix that.”

Ron stopped and looked at her, a surprised, pleased grin sprouting on his face, then he hurried her along. He led her behind a privacy curtain at the far end of the room.

“Toni, look who’s here,” he announced.

Antoinette looked up from where she was sitting breastfeeding a baby (Ron appeared neither shocked nor bothered by this sight). “Hermione!” Antoinette smiled and disengaged the baby from herself.

Hermione was transfixed. The infant had a pinched, pink face and wisps of black hair. His eyes shut tight, he opened and closed his mouth, wondering where his dinner had gone.

“Can I . . .” she breathed, and Ron scooped the baby out of Antoinette’s arms and placed him into Hermione’s.

It was magic. The child opened his eyes, and Hermione saw her own brown eyes looking up at her in innocent confusion.

“Hello, Cedric,” she whispered, tears welling up. “I’m your mummy.”

Little Cedric waved a tiny hand at her as if acknowledging this news.

Hermione kissed his forehead, delighting in the feel of his soft, velvety skin against her lips.

Her baby. Her child. Her son. After all the doubt and confusion, the anger at being forced to breed, the fear that she’d not live long enough to hold any of her children, she finally had one of them in her arms.

Her firstborn. She remembered the night he’d been conceived, with all the discomfort, resentment, hurt feelings, and stark terror. It was worth it. Every moment of that unbearable wedding night was worth it for this moment, holding her beautiful son and looking into his perfect chocolate eyes.

A tear dripped onto his cheek, and she wiped it off with a laugh. “Thank you.” Her voice was hoarse. “So much.” She tore her eyes away from Cedric to look meaningfully at Antoinette and Ron. “Both of you. I can’t . . .” She shook her head. “I don’t know how to thank you for all you’ve done for us.”

“You just did, Hermione,” said Ron. He pulled her into a side-hug and smiled at the baby.

“It was worth it,” said Antoinette, doing up her last button. “Seeing you now . . .” She laughed. “Actually, it makes me want one of my own. Eventually.”

“I have to show Severus,” Hermione said suddenly and turned on her heel, making a bee-line for
Snape before she had time to worry about what his reaction would be.

The other Order members he was talking to saw her coming and, one by one, fell silent to watch her approach, sensing the importance of what was about to happen.

Snape met her eyes as she broke through the silent circle around him, but his expression was unreadable.

“Your son, Severus.” She fought past the urge to hold Cedric tight and never let him go and held the baby out for her husband. Snape looked down at the child in her hands, and his stoic mask melted into the same look of wonder and awe she’d seen when he’d plucked their daughter from Luna’s body. But there was no rush now, no imminent danger, and the expression lingered on his face. He reached out with his long, thin fingers and cradled the child’s body in them. For a moment, Cedric hung there between them, supported by the hands of his parents. Then Snape pulled him close and tucked him awkwardly into the crook of his wiry arm.

Hermione smiled. He looked so uncertain, like he’d never held a baby before. Before tonight, he probably hadn’t.

Snape said nothing, only stared like he couldn’t quite believe what was happening. Cedric squirmed a little, and Snape smoothed a trembling hand over the baby’s head. Cedric reached out and grabbed Snape’s thumb in his tiny fist. Snape’s Adam’s apple bobbed deeply.

“He’s a precious child,” said Molly, beaming like a new grandma—which, actually, she was. “He’ll make you proud.”

“He already has,” Snape whispered, so softly that Hermione barely heard it. Then he blinked and his cheeks went pink, like he was embarrassed to have said something so overtly sentimental.

Snape looked up to see Order members staring at him with awed expressions of their own, which seemed to snap him out of the moment. He gave the baby back to Hermione—his face stern again, but his hands still gentle—and said, “Take him back to his wet nurse. We have things to attend to.”

“I’ll do eet, ’ermione,” offered Fleur. Hermione followed her gaze to the door, where people were shuffling in.

As if in need of something to reestablish his manly dominance of the situation, Snape strode toward the nearest newcomer, his wand in hand. He stopped with his wand inches from Lupin’s face, narrowed his eyes, and said very carefully, “Have you been able to forgive yourself yet?”

Lupin winced, his eyes flicking momentarily to rest of the group, before saying in a low voice, “No, but that’s not the point.”

It was far from the usual type of security question, but it seemed to satisfy Snape. He put his wand away. Lupin nodded to the others behind him like the exchange had satisfied him as well.

“Your group was split up?” demanded Mad-Eye, since only Lupin, Tonks, and Hestia had come in.

Lupin shook his head. “Only once we got into the castle.” At that moment, more of their group arrived.

Handing off Cedric for the moment, Hermione sprinted forward and flung her arms around Harry’s neck.

“Watch it, Hermione!” Harry yelped, not meanly, and pulled himself away from her. Only then did
she see that he had a little bundle in his arms.

Her hands flew to her mouth. “Sorry!” The baby wiggled and made a little hiccupping sound. “Is that . . . ?”

“This is James,” Harry said with so much pride in his voice and face that, even though he looked exhausted, Hermione thought he might burst with it.

James was even more pink and pinched-looking than Cedric. “He’s beautiful,” said Hermione.

Beside Harry—and looking even more tired—Ginny smiled. “Sure, now, but wait ’til he gets hungry. Kid starts screaming and won’t quiet down until I stick a breast in his face. Must get that from his dad.”

“Ginny!” Harry blushed.

“Thanks for that,” Ron said in a disgusted voice as he approached. He caught Ginny in a bear hug, lifting her off her feet. When he set her down, he said, “All right, Gin?”

“We’re all fine, Ron.”

He smiled at Harry. “Good to see you, Harry. The past few months were dead boring until the Death Eaters showed up. Well, except for the baby thing.” He looked at what Harry was holding, and a sort of scared look crossed his face. “Is that . . . ?”

Harry grinned at Ron’s reaction and held out the baby. “Want to hold your nephew, Ron?”

“Blimey,” Ron muttered, taking the baby and staring like he wasn’t quite sure what to make of it. “He has black hair,” he said disapprovingly.

“Just try not to think about where the squirt came from or how he got there,” said George, who had come up behind Harry and Ginny. Ron apparently didn’t follow his advice, as he immediately turned red and refused to look at either his sister or his best friend. “Speaking of which,” said George, stepping forward, “I think this belongs to you.”

Like he was passing her a basket of rolls at dinner, George handed Hermione her younger son.

A thrill of excitement hit her like a freight train. Her heart jumped about erratically, her hands shaking suddenly. She nearly dropped the baby; it didn’t help that he was squirming and twisting like there was somewhere he absolutely had to be very soon. For a moment, she was afraid she was having another seizure.

When she finally got a good enough hold of him that she could get a good look at him, she saw that he had a pretty good dusting of hair—black as pitch, just like the eyes peering at her from his tiny, chubby face. Joy and amusement bubbled up in her, and she laughed. “He looks just like—”

“Severus, yes,” said a voice, and Hermione looked up to see that Lupin and Tonks had replaced Ginny, Ron, and George, who’d gone over to meet up with the other Weasleys to reunite and coo over the new grandbaby. “We’d noticed.” Lupin had a twinkle in his eyes and an arm around his heavily pregnant wife.

“He’s a handful, though,” Harry warned her. “I mean, I’m sure Snape’s a handful, too, but—” He cut off suddenly and looked a bit sick. “Never mind. I just mean the baby’s pretty restless. He’s only thirteen days old, and he’s already run Cecilia ragged. I don’t think she’s slept in a week.”
Lupin kept glancing to a spot over Hermione’s shoulder, and she looked to see Snape standing alone, watching them with an uncertain twitchiness that didn’t suit him at all.

“Get over here, Snape,” Tonks said in exasperation, sounding like she was tired of his shenanigans.

He strode over as if he’d been about to do just that. He looked at Lupin, and before he could give voice to the sneer Hermione saw growing on his face, she thrust the black-eyed infant into his arms. All at once, his wall crashed down and he stared, startled, at the twisting, flailing child he now held.

“This is one of ours?” he asked, but it was clear he knew it was.

“Remus Harry,” Lupin said with suppressed laughter. “Again, that wasn’t my fault.”

Snape raised an eyebrow. “Indeed.” He managed to get a decent hold on the boy. “I’m not calling him that,” he reiterated.

Tonks laughed. “But that’s his name. What, are you gonna call him Hey You for the rest of his life?”

“If necessary, I will call him Boy Number Two.”

“It could have been worse,” Harry offered, fighting back a smile. “They could have named him James Sirius.”

Snape scowled at him, and Harry’s smile broke out. “Tell you what. If we have a second son, we’ll make his middle name Severus,” he joked. “Then we’ll be even.”

Snape’s scowl lessened, and he snorted. “I’m not sure which is worse.” But Hermione could tell he didn’t completely hate the idea. She hoped he wasn’t thinking of Lily at a time like this.

One of the infant’s wild arms smacked him in the face, then Snape’s expression went completely blank. He held the baby out, away from him. There was a new dark, wet spot on his grey jumper. “Wonderful,” he said, his voice as flat as his expression. “I’ve sired a Gryffindor. You may have your cub back, Hermione. I’m going to Scourgify my shirt.”

Hermione, Harry, and the Lupins burst into laughter as Snape handed the baby to Hermione and stalked away. Hermione held her son close, not minding the wetness. She tickled his cheek, and he batted at her finger. “Well, at least we know what to call you now . . . Cubby.” At the others’ questioning looks, she shrugged. “It would have been confusing to have two Remuses or two Harrys, and Remus Harry is a bit of a mouthful.”

#

The levity and cheer that having so many new babies had brought to the group died down quickly, and some had never felt it at all. When George didn’t see Fred huddled around with the other Weasleys, he found his twin sitting by Lavender’s bedside. Hermione didn’t hear most of what they said to each other, but she did hear George’s worried, angry outcry when he saw Fred’s hand. Fred gave him a wan smile and said, “We’re not identical anymore.”

At this, Hermione had to explain to Lupin that Greyback and his pack had been their attackers, and that brought both his and Tonks’s mood down instantly. Harry went to join the huddle of his in-laws, and Hermione walked with Lupin and Tonks to Lavender’s bedside, to help fill in any of the story that Fred didn’t feel up to talking about.
“It’s all right, Remus,” Fred said as Lupin started his uncomfortable speech on ‘what to expect now that you’re part-werewolf’. “Bill told me all about the undercooked meat and full moon restlessness already. I can handle it.”

“To be honest,” replied Lupin, “I’m more concerned about Lavender.” Fred nodded in bleak agreement.

George was seething and kept staring at Fred’s bandaged hand. “I’ll kill him. Next time I see him, I’ll kill that son-of-a-bitch.”

“Get in line,” growled Tonks, who liked the topic of Fenrir Greyback even less than Lupin did.

Harry and Ron came over to join them. “Hermione,” asked Harry with deliberate casualness, “where are Neville and Luna?”

For a few minutes there, she’d managed to forget that one of her best friends had been killed, but the tears started coming again. She hugged Cubby (who was still wet but had finally settled down some) and said, “Luna’s dead.”

“Bloody hell!” Ron blurted, aghast.

Fred looked at her, shocked.

Lupin let out a whimper like a kicked dog, and an angry hiss burst from Tonks.

Harry didn’t say anything, just looked like someone had punched a hole through him. He collapsed into a chair and stared at the floor. After several moments of silence, he said carefully, “And Neville?”

“Neville’s fine,” she told him quickly, “At least, he was when we last saw him. Severus saved our baby from Luna’s...” She couldn’t say body, not out loud, not just yet. “Severus saved the baby, but she’s so premature. He sent Neville with her to St. Mungo’s.” She hugged Cubby a little closer. “I hope he made it to the Healer all right.”

When Ted and Andromeda, the last to return, came in from talking with Spears, it was decided that the Order members would leave the others in the care of Madam Pomfrey and hold a meeting to get everyone fully informed on what had happened tonight. Ted and Andromeda were invited along as well, with the understanding that it was a secret meeting and they would have to be part of a certain group to attend—which, after everything, they were more than willing to agree to.

Once they had gathered in the security of the Room of Requirement, Snape gave a factual, emotionless report of the attack, beginning with, “We were all getting ready to go to sleep when a blast shook the house,” and ending with, “Then we heard more Death Eaters arrive and Apparated directly to Hogwarts.”

Next, Mad-Eye, Kingsley, and Lupin gave their reports. It was the same for them all: sudden attacks with little or no warning by a dozen or so Death Eaters and narrow escapes. “I’m only glad my mother and her family had decided to go to a late-night film,” Lupin said when he’d finished. “It’s bad enough they’ll return home to find us gone and their garden demolished.”

“But how did they know where to find us?” asked Hermione.

“That’s what bothers me.” McGonagall steepled her fingers in front of her face. “The only people who knew the details of this mission were those involved in it and other members of the Order.”
“We’ve got a spy!” Mad-Eye announced, his magic eye rolling around to look at Snape.

“Maybe, Alastor,” McGonagall said, “but I won’t believe that it’s one of us. All we need for Voldemort to win is for us to start turning on ourselves.”

“But how do you know it isn’t one of us?” Lupin said darkly. “It was last time.”

“No,” said Harry. “The last time, it was my fault. It was Voldemort’s connection to me that led us into an ambush.”

Several worried pairs of eyes looked at him. “Do you think that’s it?” asked Arthur.

Harry thought for a moment, then shook his head. “I haven’t felt him lately, my scar’s not burned, I haven’t been having the dreams I did before. Unless he’s found a way to see into my head without my even knowing about it, I don’t think it’s that.”

McGonagall frowned. “Which means we can’t rule it out entirely. But if he were doing that, Harry, I think he’d have acted before now. No, my best guess would be that he’s got some other spy watching us, or has found some other way to observe us from the outside. We need to practice—as Alastor is fond of saying—constant vigilance. Somehow, Voldemort has eyes on us, and we need to find them.”

#

After the Order meeting, guard rotations were assigned, and those not immediately set to patrol were left to get settled in. House assignments were ignored, and everyone who didn’t already have quarters in Hogwarts were allowed to find some in whatever places they chose. It was decided that the Slytherin dorm would be off-limits, as that was the dorm most likely to be easily infiltrated by the enemy (who, it didn’t have to be said, was most likely a Slytherin and could probably guess the password).

Charlie continued to stay in Hagrid’s old hut, but most of the other Weasleys (including the women) chose to spread themselves among the Gryffindor boys’ dorms, partly for comfort’s sake and partly to utilize the tower as a lookout point to keep an eye on the grounds. The Gryffindor girls’ dorms were left mostly empty due to the staircase that didn’t allow men or boys entry, but for this reason the few non-mated female werewolves had taken up residence in them. Most of the rest of the Order found places to sleep in Ravenclaw Tower (the Hufflepuff rooms being largely taken over by the werewolves already). Fred remained with Lavender in the hospital wing, and George stayed with him.

All of which left Hermione a bit uncertain. On the one hand, she had grown used to sharing a bedroom with Snape, and that’s what people would probably expect of them. On the other hand, she didn’t want to be far from her babies, but she and Snape couldn’t exactly spare the energy to look after two newborns on their own if they were to continue their work on a cure for Wentworth’s, and they wouldn’t have the milk to feed the babies anyway.

In the end, Hermione decided that they should stay in the hospital wing, where there were more than enough empty beds to accommodate her, Snape, Evelyn, Antoinette, and Cecilia, as well as plenty of room for the Transfigured cribs for the two babies. And, should something go wrong with one of the babies, Madam Pomfrey was always on hand. Mad-Eye took a bed near the door, saying the hospital could do with an extra guard with all the civilians and wounded it held, but Hermione suspected it was something else as well; ever since their return, she’d noticed that he seemed especially protective of Evelyn, and she thought they must have bonded during their hiding. It was almost paternal.
Hermione half-expected Snape to choose to stay in his own rooms anyway, but he took the bed next to the one she chose without a word of contradiction.

It was nearly four in the morning when there came a soft knock on the hospital wing’s door. Mad-Eye was up in a flash to answer it. Hermione, who had been half-woken by the knock, sprang up and out of bed when she heard Mad-Eye’s harsh whisper. “Longbottom? Who’s that with you?”

“Out of the way, Moody.” Snape was quicker than Hermione and had already reached the door. Hermione was right behind him. Fred and George, leaving Lavender to her disturbed sleep, padded up behind Hermione.

They were so crowded around the door that they had to back up and make way before Neville could come in. He was tired and dirty, but he visibly relaxed as he came inside and withdrew a tiny bundle from inside his robes.

Hermione held out her arms at once, and with a look of reluctance, Neville handed the child to her. “How is she?” Hermione asked urgently. The baby was warm and breathing, though, and that was a good sign.

“She’s stable,” Neville said, keeping his voice low in the darkened room. “Healer Partridge got her stabilized and gave her some potions. He wanted to keep her there for a while, but I didn’t think that was safe. Finally, he agreed to let me bring her here but—”

“But of course I demanded to be allowed to come along,” said Partridge, finally stepping into the room enough that they noticed him. He looked tired, too, his blond hair disheveled and his Healer’s robes rumpled. “It would be bad enough given how premature she is, but she wasn’t given the benefit of the strengthening potions her mother was supposed to have taken after her conception.”

The potions Hermione had thrown against the wall, thinking Partridge was poisoning her. It would be partially her fault if her baby wasn’t strong enough to survive this.

Snape was not so easily distracted. He grabbed Partridge by the collar. “Were you followed?”

“No!” Partridge yelped in surprise at being manhandled.

“How did you get away? Won’t you be missed by your other patients? If you bring even more trouble to us, Partridge, I swear—”

“No one knows I’ve come here, Mr. Snape,” Partridge assured him. “We were very discreet, and I informed the schedulers that I would be taking a holiday and assigned my patients to other Healers. No one will miss me.”

Snape stepped back from him, and it seemed as if he was finished with Partridge—until he drew his wand and pointed it at the Healer’s face. Partridge stiffened, his eyes locked on the tip of Snape’s wand.

“You have a way to check him?” Mad-Eye growled.

Snape didn’t answer him, but said to Partridge in a clear, steady voice, “I’m going to ask you a question I’ve asked before, and I want you to give me exactly the same answer you did last time. If you don’t, I’ll kill you where you stand.”

Partridge gulped, shooting a terrified glance to Neville, then to Hermione, neither of whom could offer him reassurance. Hermione didn’t know what question Snape would ask, but she hoped that Partridge—if this was Partridge—had a good memory.
In that same steady tone, Snape said, “Can we trust you, Partridge?”

Partridge blinked, thinking, then said carefully, “I don’t see why not.” Snape lowered his wand and nodded at Mad-Eye, and Partridge let out a relieved breath. “Would someone mind explaining to me what this is all about?”

Now that she was sure a spy hadn’t infiltrated their group, Hermione left Snape and Mad-Eye to sort him out and tell him what they would. She had more important things on her mind.

She carried her tiny, tiny girl to the far end of the room to get away from the noise and sat down. Tears came, then, and she didn’t try to stop them. She was so afraid that she’d lost this one, and she still couldn’t be entirely sure she wouldn’t. The baby would need constant care for at least a few weeks. But she was here now, with her family.

The baby had only the faintest hints of russet hair, and her half-closed eyes were brown, just a shade lighter than Cedric’s. Hermione kissed her tiny face and sighed.

“She’ll be fine; you’ll see.”

Hermione looked up. Neville was standing over her. He must have been there the whole time. He smiled.

“Because of you,” she said. “Thank you, Neville.”

Neville shook his head. “Don’t. There’s no need.”

She looked back at the baby. “She’ll need a name . . .” she thought aloud.

“Er . . . she has one.” Neville shuffled his feet. “I hope you don’t mind, Hermione, but . . . well, the Healer needed some equipment or something, and the witch in charge said she needed to record the baby’s name, and I said she didn’t have one, and . . . well, one thing to another, I had to register her birth, but Partridge assured me that the system’s so convoluted that no one who means her harm could find it for days.”

“You mean, you named her?”

Neville nodded apologetically.

“What name did you give her?”

“Luna.” Neville’s voice cracked. “I hope that’s all right.”

Hermione’s heart spilled over, and more tears came. “It’s perfect.”

“Her middle name’s Hermione,” he went on, sounding relieved that she approved.

“Well, little Luna,” she told her baby, “you be strong and survive this, okay?” The baby’s head bobbed. “I know you will.”

The situation with Partridge had apparently got sorted, as Hermione soon found herself surrounded by people. Fred and George came over to stand by Neville and attempt to lighten the mood, and the three surrogates had woken and come over to see what the fuss was about. Snape waited until he and Mad-Eye had given Partridge a few last words and let him fall into a bed before coming over to see his daughter.

Hermione looked up into his eyes, her face wet with tears of joy. “She’s okay, Severus.”
Snape’s body released some tension, and he placed a hand on Neville’s shoulder. He didn’t say anything or even look at Neville; the gesture conveyed gratitude all the same.

“May I hold her?” Snape asked, a desperation in his eyes that didn’t reach the rest of his face.

“Of course.” Hermione rose and eased Luna into Snape’s arms. As tiny as she was, she looked even smaller folded into his long, lean limbs. “Her name’s Luna.”

Snape looked up in surprise, then nodded, accepting it. After staring at Luna for a while, he said, “She’s so . . . small.” Such uncertainty in his voice. Hermione thought she understood. To know so much about so many things, but not understand how he could feel so strongly for something so tiny. It was a new experience for him.

All the commotion finally woke Cedric and Cubby, and once Antoinette and Cecilia got them calmed down, they brought them over to meet their sister. None of them were old enough to actually react to each other much, of course, but Cedric did give her a good, long look.

“We’re all here,” Hermione realized, looking at the group. Her husband, her three children, and the last one still in its borrowed womb. How long could this last, and would she and Snape live long enough to see their last child in the flesh?

Exhaustion flowed through her, as well as determination. They needed to go to bed, to get their rest, and tomorrow, no matter what else might be going on, she and Snape would get back to work on the cure. They were already so close.

#

“I think we’ve got it.” Hermione looked at the piece of paper in her hands. The thrill of victory she was expecting didn’t come. She couldn’t bring herself to believe that after all this work and time, they actually had the recipe for the cure. She dared not hope. “Are you certain about the last ingredient, Severus?”

“Yes,” he said, pacing the floor of the Potions classroom, in which they’d secluded themselves for the past five hours. “We’ve examined every other element. The blood is the turnkey.”

It made sense, and it was so simple—part of the reason Hermione tried to hold back her hope. What if they were wrong? They’d gone over every possible alternative, so if this wasn’t right, they’d be back to square one.

“We’re fortunate,” he said. “A person who’s brought the dead back to life may be impossible to find, but murderers are plentiful.”

So simple. Reverse the conditions of the key ingredient to turn the potion into its opposite. It didn’t work for every potion, of course, so there was still the chance that even if all their calculations were correct this could end horribly (especially considering this was a purely theoretical potion to begin with), but it was a lot better than nothing.

“Yes,” she said softly. “After all, either one of us would fit that description.”

Snape snorted a laugh. “Not hardly.”

Her head shot up. “But . . . Draco and his mum . . .”

“Draco’s death was an accident, as was Narcissa’s. There was no intent on your part to kill them. It is possible that the mere fact of your doing it anyway might be enough, but I don’t want to take any
chances with this potion. We need to be sure that the blood matches the opposite of not just the letter of what the original instructions say, but the spirit of it. The instructions for the Tumourous Takeover Potion called for the blood of one who had brought the dead back to life. Such an action would, presumably, require intense compassion and love. Therefore, the reverse of it would require the blood of one who killed in cold blood. And you, Hermione, are not a cold-blooded killer.”

“Well . . . that’s good to hear,” she said, feeling a bit strange, like he’d just paid her a compliment. “But . . . what about you? That first night, in Grimmauld Place, you told me you’d murdered people.”

Snape let out a long breath and looked at the floor. “I as good as did. But not for the purposes of this potion.”

Hermione’s eyes went wide. “You didn’t? You never killed anyone?”

He looked at her sharply. “I didn’t say I never killed anyone. I said I never literally murdered anyone. There is a difference.”

“Then why did you tell me you did?”

“Hasn’t Potter told you yet?” His voice was pained. “It was I who overheard the prophecy about him and told the Dark Lord.”

Hermione’s hand flew to her mouth. “You? Then, Harry’s parents—”

“Are dead because of me.” He deflated. “Lily’s dead because of me. I may as well have cast the Killing Curse myself.”

There was such intense self-loathing and regret in his voice that Hermione leapt up and went to him. “Don’t say that! It’s as much Peter Pettigrew’s fault as yours. And at least you saw your mistake and tried to change. As much can’t be said for him.”

He looked into her face, sadness and bitterness and anger swimming in his black eyes—then he shut them off, and his face was unreadable again. “The point is, neither of us have blood for this potion.”

Disappointment clouded Hermione’s thoughts for a few seconds. Snape had started opening up about something really important, and she wanted to try to work through it with him, even as she wondered what he’d meant by ‘hasn’t Potter told you’; did Harry know this? But he was right: they had a problem to solve.

As much as it disturbed her to say, she offered, “What about Remus? I mean . . . Hagrid . . .”

Snape shook his head. “When he and the others killed Hagrid, they were beasts looking for food. Dangerous, brutal beasts, but there is no malice there. Not like would be required for a human in his right mind to kill another in cold blood.”

That was also a bit comforting, but left them with a more serious problem. If they required the blood of a true cold-blooded killer, then none of their friends would—or could—suffice. But like he’d said, there was no shortage of murderers in the world.

“We could set a trap,” she suggested, the plan already forming in her mind. “Find some way to get a Death Eater alone and—”

“There is no need.” Snape picked up a small wooden box and withdrew a vial of red liquid.
“What is that?” Hermione asked.

“Narcissa Malfoy’s blood.”

“What?”

“I procured it while you were packing before we left the house.”

“You took her blood? What made you do that?”

“Call it instinct.” He shrugged. “I’m not in the habit of leaving potentially useful potions ingredients around to waste.”

“But only dark magic usually uses blood!”

Snape raised an eyebrow at this. “Old habits, I suppose. One never knows when one will need something unexpected.”

“Severus,” she said carefully, “tell me you didn’t take Luna’s blood as well.”

He gave her a look like what she was asking was obvious. “She was, by some definitions, a virgin mother, not to mention one who sacrificed her own life for the sake of an innocent. Of course I took her blood. Do you have any idea how powerful it would be in certain potions?”

“But—but that’s—not—” Hermione sputtered. She didn’t know what to say. As much as she thought she’d grown to understand her husband, she was starting to forget that he had a darker side. She pushed that thought away and moved on. “We’ve got all the ingredients.” She laid them out on the table. “Let’s try the cure.”

Once they had everything, the revised Tumourous Takeover Potion took less than an hour to brew—it could have easily been made in a standard class period.

“It’s ready,” she said, ladling out two gobletfuls of the slick purple liquid with shaking hands. Her heart was pounding furiously. “What . . . what if it doesn’t work? What if we didn’t get it right? What if it just does what it was meant to do and we die horrible, revolting deaths?”

“It will work,” said Snape with a nod of certainty. “In all your years in my class, Hermione, never once have I witnessed you fail to brew a potion to perfection. I’m confident this will be no different.”

At any other time, she would have been ecstatic to hear him say such a thing, but right now she needed more to calm her. “But those weren’t experimental potions! Those were potions with clear instructions written by professionals, ones that have been made thousands of times over by other witches and wizards!”

“I don’t like repeating myself, Hermione,” he said firmly. “It will work.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because if it doesn’t, it hardly matters.”

“You mean . . . because we’ll be dead.”

He nodded and took a goblet. “I will try it first. If I die, you might still have a short time to attempt another revision.”
“Don’t talk like that, Severus.”

“Merely trying to offer hope.”

“Your dying wouldn’t give me hope.”

He looked at her strangely. “Don’t tell me you’d miss me.”

“I would,” she said, surprising herself. “You’re . . . you’re my husband, Severus. The father of my children. I don’t want you to die.”

He looked nonplussed for a moment, then smirked. “That’s the most romantic thing a woman’s ever said to me.” He raised the goblet to his lips.

“No!” Hermione snatched the goblet out of his hand and set it back on the table. Before she could think about what she was doing, she grabbed the back of his neck and pulled him toward her, kissing him forcefully on the mouth. His thin lips were stiff and unresponsive. When she let him go and opened her eyes, she saw his wide with shock. “Just in case,” she mumbled, blushing.

He didn’t have anything to say. Instead, he picked up the goblet and downed the potion in one draught.

In tense silence, they waited for something to happen. For nearly ten seconds, nothing did.

Then, with a scream of agony, Snape fell to his knees on the dungeon floor. His fingers clawed at his throat, his scalp, anywhere they could reach.

Hermione stood unmoving, her heart jolted to a stop, terror like she’d never known raging through her. She’d failed. Her potion was killing him.

Like the flick of a switch, Snape collapsed, his body lying limp on the cold stone.
Dead.

After everything they’d been through, Snape, her unwanted husband, the man for whom she still couldn’t quite bring herself to admit how deeply she felt, was dead. And it was her fault.

No. She wouldn’t accept it.

The terror that had trapped her like a Body-Bind Curse weakened, pushed aside by her resolve. In her panic, she forgot entirely to try magic, and her mind spun with the Muggle first aid techniques her parents had taught her.

Hermione dropped to the floor beside Snape’s body and rolled him over on his back. Not even bothering to check his pulse, she started giving him CPR. Pinching his nose and tilting his head back, she blew into his mouth. Then she reared back and pounded on his chest with her clasped fists.

“No! NO!”

Her fists slammed down on his sternum.

“Oof! Easy, woman!” Groaning, he sat up.

“Severus? You’re not dead!” She flung herself at him.

“Evidently not,” he said, bemused.

“I didn’t kill you!” she screamed in ecstasy.

“No.” He rubbed his chest. “But you were making an admirable attempt.”

She smacked him playfully. “Then,” she realized, “if it didn’t kill you . . .”

Spotting a book left lying on one of the tables, she ran over and grabbed it. Sliding back onto her knees beside Snape, she opened the book and shoved it in his face. “Can you read?”

Snape looked at the pages, working to focus his eyes. “Evangeline moaned as Gunnar employed his member most nobly, causing the pleasure to build in her essential center until her cauldron boiled over with—What drivel is this?” He grabbed the book and flipped it over so he could see the cover. “Fifi Lafolle. Of course. Why do students insist on leaving their belongings lying about—”

“No!” Hermione grabbed his shoulders and shook him. “You can read! You’re cured! The potion worked!”

He tossed the book aside, and then was still for several seconds, taking stock. “Indeed it did.” He got to his feet, pulling Hermione up with him.

“We should get Madam Pomfrey or Healer Partridge to examine you to be sure.”

“No. No one must know of this, Hermione.”
“But if we found the cure, what harm is there? No one will rush off to find a cure if it’s we’ve already got one.”

“Think of the children. What trouble could come for them if people know they have our memories and knowledge? It could be seen as an advantage later in life, perhaps disqualify them for opportunities that bureaucrats would rather be won solely on merit.”

She hadn’t thought of that. “Will they really have all our memories, Severus?” It was a mind-boggling thing to contemplate.

“It’s likely, though exactly how that will develop or manifest I don’t know.”

“Surely people wouldn’t care, though. They didn’t seem to care about those other Wentworth babies I read about.”

“That would be even worse. Because, knowing there was a cure, what would stop every parent from trying to give their children the same advantage? And what do you suppose the effect would be of a sudden demand for the blood of murderers?”

He was right. Letting it get out that they’d taken Wentworth’s Brew could have far-reaching and potentially hazardous consequences on the wizarding world. “Then how can we know for sure that the cure worked if you don’t get tested?”

“I’ll get tested,” he said, “by a Muggle doctor, later. They have equipment for that sort of thing, don’t they?”

“You do feel better, though?” she asked. “Are all your symptoms gone?”

“I believe so. I do feel better than I have in many months.”

“Then I’ll take it too.” She picked up the other goblet, trying to keep her hand steady. If it cured Snape, it would cure her. She was sure of it. She had to be.

She lifted the potion to her lips. It was sweet, not bad, and she tried not to think of the fact that it contained the blood of a woman she’d killed. It went down smoothly. She set the empty goblet back on the table.

The pain hit like a bolt of lighting. Like she’d been doused with petrol and set aflame. A piercing shriek was torn from her throat, and her skin felt like it was crawling, like something was underneath trying to tear its way out. She pawed at her face and arms, wishing the pain would end. This was worse than the endless Crucios Narcissa had cast upon her, worse than any pain she’d ever endured . . .

And then it was gone. The grip of agony released her, and with it went all the strength in her body. She couldn’t move, couldn’t speak, couldn’t even open her eyes. She floated in a vast, empty space inside her own mind, insensate.

Gradually, she became aware of her body lying on a hard surface and something warm and strong wrapped around her. Snape’s arms. He must have grabbed her as she collapsed and lowered her to the ground. He was whispering soothing noises into her ear.

“Come back, Hermione. It’s over now. It’s all right. Come back.”

She gathered her strength and opened her eyes. It was like waking from a deep sleep, difficult to pull herself out of, but once she had, she was wide awake within seconds. She sat up. Snape was
kneeling beside her.

“How do you feel?”

She blinked. How did she feel? The headache that had been a constant presence for the past several weeks had vanished, and she felt more awake and alert than she was used to feeling. She allowed herself to hope that meant the other symptoms were gone for good as well. “Better. Much better. Did we actually do it, Severus? Are we... are the tumors all gone?”

“I think so.” He smiled and reached out to stroke an errant lock of hair from her face. “I knew you could do it.”

The look in his eyes made her blush, and she grinned shyly. “We did it, you mean.”

“Just so.” He stood again and helped her up, leaving the moment of unexpected tenderness behind them. “That’s one threat of imminent death down, many more to go.”

The war. Of course. “Does it ever end, Severus?”

“Not in my experience.” He didn’t mention the kiss, for which Hermione was glad. Now that they were both still alive, she felt a bit silly for it.

#

Though she understood why it wasn’t a good idea to alert other people to the whole Wentworth’s situation, even the Healers, Hermione was so abuzz with relief that she just had to tell someone, and it felt wrong keeping a secret this important from her two best friends. So, after leaving Snape to putter around in the Potions room, she found Harry and Ron and dragged them into the nearest empty classroom.

“Hermione, what—”

“Hush, Ron, I have to tell you something.”

“We were just looking for you. We’ve got something to tell you too.”

“Let me go first. But before I do, I’m fine. I’m perfectly fine now, okay?”

Harry and Ron looked at her warily. “Okay...” they said together.

Blurting it all out as quickly as she could, she told them everything about Wentworth’s Brew, from the time Snape first assigned it, that he’d been giving it to both of them, why Voldemort had commanded it, and how they’d worked out the cure and were now both totally cured.

“Blimey,” said Ron after she’d finished. “Why didn’t you tell us, Hermione?”

“What would you have done, Ron? You couldn’t just hex someone and make it go away. We had to find the solution without worrying about you or Harry going off and getting himself killed trying to help.”

Ron frowned. “We wouldn’t have done. You could have told us. Do you not trust us anymore, now you’re married to that—to Snape?”

His words stung. She’d thought Ron had got past this. “Of course I trust you, Ron. But don’t tell me you wouldn’t have gone off and done something rash. We both know better than that.”
He was still frowning, but he stopped arguing.

“What I don’t understand,” Harry said, “is how he got you to take it. I can’t imagine you just taking some potion someone gives you without knowing what it is, even if it’s someone you trust.”

Well, maybe she hadn’t told them quite everything about the Wentworth’s.

“He . . . slipped it into something else I was taking,” she said hastily. “Trust me, Harry, you don’t want me to get more detailed than that.”

Wisely, he took her at her word. “As long as you’re okay now, Hermione. That’s all we care about. Right, Ron?”

Harry nudged him, and Ron relaxed. “Yeah, Hermione. We just want to make sure you’re okay. But you know you can tell us if you ever need anything or if there’s anything we can do or . . . anything.”

“I know, Ron. And Harry. Thank you.” She hugged them both at once. “I can’t believe how lucky I am sometimes to have friends like you two.”

Ron let out a small, bitter laugh and a tiny, “Yeah. Friends,” which she chose to ignore for her own peace of mind. What Ron and she might have once had was in the past, and she didn’t think it would ever be possible again. If she was totally honest with herself, she didn’t really think she wanted it to be anymore.

Releasing them from the hug, she smiled and said, “What did you want to tell me?”

“Oh, yeah!” Harry looked around like he’d misplaced something. “We were out patrolling, and we ran into . . . where did he go?” He opened the classroom door, and an orange ball of matted fur slipped inside and ran up to Hermione.

“Crookshanks!” She plucked the cat off the floor and hugged him, ignoring his ill-kempt state. “With everything that’s happened since we’d been back, I hadn’t even thought to look for him.”

“We found him out hiding in a tree,” Harry explained. “Maybe he didn’t like staying in here with all the werewolves.”

“Oh, Crookshanks, look at you! You’re a fright! Let’s get you a bath and a brush, shall we?” With that, she strode out of the room with a grumpy-looking half-Kneazle which was probably reconsidering its decision to return to the castle.

#

Something woke her. Without stirring, Hermione opened her eyes, wondering what had disturbed her sleep and telling herself that if it was an attack, there’d already be a great deal of noise.

It was dark in the hospital wing, but the small torches at each end of the long room gave enough light for her to make out forms and movement. She looked around at everything she could see without moving her head from where it rested on her pillow. Still, quiet forms filled the beds around her, but the one directly to her right was empty. She scanned the room.

There. Snape was sitting in a chair by Luna’s crib, apparently unbothered by the soft snores of Healer Partridge, who slept in the closest bed so as to be immediately available in case of emergency. Partridge had said Luna was still weak but that she was getting stronger all the time, and he had high hopes for her.
Snape was silent as he stared at his daughter, his back to Hermione so she couldn’t see his face.

From the doorway, there was soft whisper of sound, followed by quiet footsteps. Snape looked toward it momentarily, but waited until the figure was closer before speaking.

“Trouble sleeping, Lupin?” he asked, but it sounded like he meant *Go away.*

“Not me,” replied Lupin, keeping his voice as soft as Snape’s as he picked through the potion bottles near Partridge’s bed. “Tonks. The baby’s restless.”

Snape said nothing to this.

When he’d chosen a bottle, Lupin turned to leave, but stopped, looking at Snape. He followed Snape’s gaze to the crib. “She’ll pull through, Severus. You needn’t worry so much. Children are remarkably resilient.”

Snape gave a slow, absent nod, but said nothing.

Lupin took a seat in the chair beside Snape. “But that’s not what you’re worried about, is it?” He waited for Snape to say something. When he didn’t, Lupin took a breath and started again. “It’s difficult bringing a child into such uncertain times, not knowing if you’ll be there to watch them grow up.”

Snape finally spoke. “You misread me, Lupin. I’m not worried that I’ll die. I’m worried that I’ll live.”

What? Hermione wanted to go to him: comfort him, knock some sense into him . . . something. Instead, she remained still, watched, and listened. Lupin looked disconcertedly at her husband. Then, as the words sunk in, he nodded as if they made a sad sort of sense.

“My father was a horrible man,” Snape said quietly, and even though he sounded bitter and angry, Hermione was shocked to find him opening up to Lupin. “He was abusive, angry, bitter . . .” His voice fell even softer as he said, “He murdered my mother.”

Lupin’s eyes went wide, but then a look of comprehension came over him. “You’re not your father, Severus. For better or worse, none of us are our fathers.” This fact seemed to disappoint him. “A year ago or more, I never would have believed it, but . . . The way you are with them already . . . You’ll be a good father, because you’re a good man.” He leaned toward Snape a little and added in a voice so soft Hermione wouldn’t have been able to hear it had the room not been so silent, “If she could see you now, Lily would be proud of you.”

Snape’s shoulders tensed, and Lupin stood.

“Good night, Severus.” He left as quietly as he’d come in, Snape never moved, and Hermione drifted back to sleep.

When she woke hours later, dawn was breaking, and the chair Snape had been sitting in was occupied by Neville, who’d transfigured it into a rocking chair and was currently holding Luna and mumbling something to her as he rocked. Everyone else was still asleep.

In the bed beside her, Snape slept soundly, making soft whistling noises. She slipped out of bed and stood over him, remembering what she’d overheard last night.

*Remus was right, Severus,* she thought, not wanting to wake him. *You are a good man. Even if you don’t believe it.* She pressed a feather-soft kiss to his forehead, but he didn’t wake.
Considering everything, Lavender recovered quickly. When she woke after a few days, bandages still covered her wounds, so she didn’t really have an idea of the extent of her injuries. She was pleased to find Fred sitting at her bedside and was, for a moment, almost her old self—until she remembered the attack and was told what happened to Luna. She flung herself into Fred’s arms, all at once cooing over his own injury, weeping heartily, and promising vengeance on their attacker. An hour or so of this, and Pomfrey pronounced her well enough to locate a more comfortable room of her own, though she would need to return twice daily to have her bandages changed. Hermione was present at one of these changings and thought it fortunate that there were no mirrors available in which Lavender might see the extent of the damage to her neck and shoulder (the fact that Fred kept her attention on himself while Pomfrey worked was also beneficial). In fact, Lavender didn’t seem to even register the importance of her wound being inflicted by a werewolf for some time.

It was lunch time in the Great Hall, and the house-elves (most of them thrilled to have so many people to serve after a long stretch of mostly catering to werewolves) had set out a feast nearly as elaborate as the ones they were accustomed to serving a schoolful of students. Smaller, of course, as the Order members, werewolves, and various others only took up about one table’s worth of space, but they didn’t skimp on variety. On top of the usual puddings, pies, and veggies was a great deal of meat, some of it prepared as usual and some of it barely threatened with a cooking fire.

“Ew!” squealed Lavender as the plates arrived on the table and a dish of lightly seared steaks appeared in front of her, sitting in a pool of warm blood. “That meat’s nearly raw!”

Fred exchanged a glance with Lupin, then tried to distract Lavender with a joke. It worked as well as expected—and Lavender didn’t even realize it when she reached for one of the bloody steaks and put it on her own plate. Nor did it seem to occur to her that she had begun to cut and eat the steak until she was on her fourth bite. Only when she saw Fred eating it as well did she cry, “Fred! You’re eating that?”

“So are you, luv.”

She looked around. Many people were eating the cooked meat, but Lupin and Bill, as well as the pack of strange werewolves, were also eating the nearly-raw meat. In that moment, everyone nearby fell silent as she stared from one person to the next, then at her own plate.

“Oh,” she said at last. “I’m not . . .” Tears started coming, but she tried to hold herself together. “I’m not a . . .”

“No,” Fred told her, taking her hand under the table. “Greyback was in human form. You’ve just got a nasty scar and a taste for fresher meat, that’s all. Nothing to worry about.”

Horror filled her eyes. “Scar?” She looked at Fred’s bandaged left hand, which was now awkwardly holding a fork half-way to his mouth. “That’s why they couldn’t fix your hand.”

“It’s nothing,” Fred said with a shrug.

“Well, he might not play the piano very well,” said George, trying to help, “but as he couldn’t before, it’s no real loss.”

It didn’t work. Lavender was fingering her bandages. “How bad is it?” she whispered. Fred wasn’t quick enough to answer, so she said, her voice a desperate whisper and tears again coming to her eyes, “I’m hideous, aren’t I?”
“If by hideous you mean beautiful,” said Fred, “then yeah, you’re a right dog.”

Lavender burst into sobs and fled the room.

“That didn’t work,” George noted.

“Bloody hell,” Fred muttered as he got up and ran after her.

There was a long, awkward moment at the table then, the werewolves and non-werewolves not quite looking at each other.

Halfway down the table, Scratch (who had consented to wear jeans, though he went about bare-chested whenever possible) hoisted his goblet into the air. “To Greyback!”

No one seemed to appreciate Scratch’s sarcasm or returned the toast, but it did dispel the tension, and conversations resumed.

#

At the beginning of July, as Hermione and Snape were taking Luna and Cedric for a stroll around the castle to get some fresh air (Cubby being occupied with Harry, Ron, and James in some secret boys-only activity which Hermione hoped didn’t involved infants on flying brooms), Hermione broke the silence by commenting, “I’ve been thinking about brewing some Polyjuice Potion.”

Snape gave her a questioning look. “Should I even bother asking why?"

“It’s such a useful potion, and with everything that’s going on, we might find we suddenly want some. I think it would be good to have some on hand. Do you have the ingredients for it?”

“I believe so,” Snape answered. “Are you going to ask me if you can have them or simply steal them from my stores as usual?”

Hermione refused to rise to the bait. “Oh, whichever’s easiest.”

“For you or for me?”

She smiled to herself.

#

“Time to go, Lupin.” Snape pointed insistently toward the door of the hospital wing. It was July the ninth, Tonks had been in labor for less than an hour, and the sun was setting.

“Yes, but—” Lupin took staggering steps in the direction of the door, his wife, and just about every other direction as if he couldn’t figure out what to do with himself. “You’re sure the baby’s not—”

“She’s still only dilated three centimeters,” Partridge informed him. “With the stress all of this is putting on her, it’s unlikely her morphing abilities will help much. It could still be some time before the baby arrives.”

Lupin cast a nervous, annoyed glance out the window. “Do you think it’ll be long enough—”

“I’m not holding it in, Remus!” Tonks yelled through a contraction. “It’ll get here when it gets here!”

“Now, Lupin,” Snape growled, drawing his wand.
“Yes, but—” Lupin looked fretfully from Snape’s wand to Tonks to the window. “But what if—”

Molly went to Lupin and grabbed both of his hands in hers. It stilled him long enough for her to look him in the eyes. “Remus, I know you want to be here for the birth, but time’s run out. I’m sorry. Tonks will be fine, and the baby will be well taken care of if it comes before you get back. But you’re no good to anyone if you stay here.”

Her last words sobered him like nothing else so far had. “Yes. Yes, of course. Thank you, Molly.” He strode to where Tonks lay in the hospital bed and kissed her forehead. “I’ll be back as soon as I can. I love you, Dora.”

“Likewise, Remus,” she panted, “but I’ve got enough to deal with right now without having to fight back a rampaging wolf, so please do me a favor and get the hell out of here!”

Obediently, Lupin backed away and ran out of the room—with Mad-Eye beside him, just in case he didn’t make it to the Shrieking Shack in time.

Along with everyone else in the room, Hermione let out a relieved breath. She could understand Lupin’s desire to be here for the birth of his child, but sometimes in his excitement of the moment he lost sight of more mundane things—like the fact that he’d be turning into a mindless beast as soon as the full moon came out. Snape had offered to make him Wolfsbane, but the other werewolves were so close to joining their side, and Lupin didn’t think it wise to alienate them by partaking in a luxury they couldn’t (there had not been enough supplies or qualified potioneers to brew Wolfsbane Potion for so many werewolves on short notice). It was bad timing that Tonks went into labor on the night of the full moon. The other werewolves had made the trek out to the forest, but Lupin stayed as long as he could with her, hoping that the baby would arrive before he had to leave. But luck had never been on Remus Lupin’s side.

Now that the soon-to-be-ravenous werewolf was out of the room, Madam Pomfrey pulled a privacy curtain around the area of Tonks’s bed and shooed all non-essential personnel to the other side of it to wait.

“Hermione!” Tonks called as Hermione was following Molly past the curtain’s edge. “Come here. Please.”

Hermione hurried to Tonks’s side. “What is it? What can I do?”

Tonks grabbed her hand in a firm grip. “Stay with me.”

Hermione looked uncertainly at Andromeda, who was holding Tonks’s other hand. The older woman nodded reassuringly. “We’re here, Nymphadora.”

“Is he gone?” Tonks asked, her voice weak, vulnerable.

“He is,” said Andromeda.

“It’s bloody bad timing, Mum,” Tonks complained with tears in her eyes.

“I know, dear,” Andromeda said and smoothed back Tonks’s mousey brown hair.

And so Hermione stood there, just being with her friend, as so many of Tonks’s other friends and family waited outside the open hospital doors. Not long after sunset, she heard Mad-Eye come back and tell everyone that Lupin reached the Shack with almost ten minutes to spare. Most of the visitors went off to do other things after an hour or so, but around eleven o’clock Hermione could still hear Ted and Charlie talking.
Partridge was diligent in his monitoring of Tonks’s condition, giving her potions now and then and offering reassuring words. Pomfrey stayed close, ready to leap into action at a moment’s notice. Antoinette had been allowed to stay, as well, having expressed an interest in perhaps becoming a mediwitch and wanting to see magical medicine in action, with her assigned task being to run errands if the need should arise. (Though given the shy smiles she kept offering the handsome Healer as she asked him any number of Healing-related questions, Hermione suspected her interest was more than strictly professional.)

Half an hour to midnight, things became interesting.

“I see the head!” Partridge announced as Tonks huffed and puffed harder than any storybook wolf, her hands squeezing Hermione’s and Andromeda’s so tightly it felt like she might break something. After such a long period of waiting, everything happened quickly. It seemed like a matter of moments between Tonks swearing to rip Lupin’s balls off for doing this to her and Partridge announcing, “It’s a boy!”

Hearing the commotion, Ted and Charlie raced in just as Madam Pomfrey was handing a fair-haired baby into Tonks’s outstretched arms. Stillness swept over them all as they witnessed Tonks’s first meeting with her son. Then, Partridge asked, “What is his name, Mrs. Lupin?”

Tonks smiled at her boy. “Ted Remus Lupin.”

Ted Tonks blinked in surprise, and Charlie patted him on the shoulder.

“We’ll call him Teddy, though,” Tonks told her father with a wink, “to avoid confusion.”

Ted swelled with pride and hugged his wife. “We’re grandparents, Dromeda!”

Andromeda laughed and kissed him. “So we are.”

“Hello, Teddy,” Tonks told her son. “I love you. And so does your daddy, even if he can’t be here right now.”

That’s when they heard, carried on the wind through the open windows, the haunting howl of a wolf. And Teddy Lupin opened his eyes.

#

The entire Lupin family had had a rough night, so no one was surprised that they didn’t come down for breakfast the next morning. In fact, after spending the morning hours recuperating privately in the hospital wing, they retired to the third floor of the Gryffindor boys’ dorm, where Tonks and Lupin had set up temporary residence. They weren’t actually seen out and about in the castle for four days, but when they were, they looked as happy and healthy as they ever did (if still rather tired).

Greeted with cheers and applause, the Lupins entered the Great Hall to join everyone for lunch. Lupin and Tonks were surrounded by well-wishing friends and curious werewolves. When the crowd thinned, Lupin took the empty seat next to Hermione, with Tonks on his other side next her parents and Harry’s family across from him. Teddy was curled up in his arms.

Hermione was about to ask how they were both feeling, but gasped instead. Teddy’s thick shock of hair had just changed from blond to brown.

Noticing her reaction, Tonks grinned and nodded. “He’s a Metamorphmagus.”
“And not at all a werewolf,” said Lupin with a satisfied smile. “But I suppose you noticed that when Dora didn’t give birth to a puppy.”

“It wouldn’t have mattered if he was,” Harry insisted loyally.

“No,” Lupin agreed. “But you can’t imagine my relief.”

Teddy swiveled his head, his golden-brown eyes aimlessly searching the room. They landed on Cubby, who Hermione was holding and had been trying to feed from a bottle. Cubby looked back into Teddy’s eyes—and she must have been imagining it, but it almost seemed like mischief glinted in Cubby’s eyes, and Teddy’s hair suddenly shifted from brown to turquoise.

“All right, I’m calling it now,” said Tonks. “Those two are going to be a handful.” Hermione had a feeling she was right.

“Clearly James is going to have to keep them out of trouble,” Harry said with a straight face. At Lupin’s raised eyebrows, he added, “Well, one of them has to be the responsible one, otherwise we’re all in for it.”

“Since when has the responsible one ever been able to keep the others out of trouble?” Lupin asked, giving Hermione a wink.

“If children were given proper discipline from their parents,” Snape grouched from his seat at Hermione’s other side, “there would be no need for peers—or teachers—to keep them in line.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “I’ll remind you you said that,” she said as she passed Cubby off to him so she could eat her lunch, “when you start getting owls from annoyed teachers.”

Snape held Cubby out in front of him, trying to find a way to keep eating while holding him. “I assure you, there won’t be any owls”—Cubby flailed in the air and kicked over a pitcher of pumpkin juice—“though they may corner me in the staff room.”

“You still plan to teach after the war is over?” Harry asked, surprised. “I thought you were only doing it because Dumbledore wanted to keep you close.”

“Hmph.” Snape frowned and finally pulled Cubby close to him. “Given the state of things, I suppose I have more motivation that I did previously to make sure the quality of education at Hogwarts remains up to certain standards.”

“Oh, man,” said Ginny, “I do not envy that kid when he’s old enough to be in your class.”

Snape raised an eyebrow at her but didn’t deign to reply.

After Harry, Ginny, and Ron had finished eating and left the table, the Lupins turned to the Snapes.

“Severus, Hermione,” Lupin said, keeping his voice down so as not to be overheard, “Dora and I have something to ask you.”

Hermione waited, wondering what this could be about.

“We want to know if you’ll be Teddy’s godparents,” said Tonks.

Hermione gasped. “Oh! Oh, I—I’d love to. It would be an honor. I mean—” she amended, looking at Snape, “if Severus wants to.”

Lupin and Snape were looking at each other steadily, and Hermione thought of the conversation.
she’d overheard. If Snape hadn’t believed Lupin’s assertion that Snape would be a good father, he had to believe this. Lupin wouldn’t offer Snape this honor unless he truly believed he could be trusted to handle it.

“You’re certain?” asked Snape, sounding like he thought Lupin and Tonks might have gone insane. “Wouldn’t you rather have Potter do it?”

“Harry’s young, and he’s got enough responsibilities of his own,” Lupin told him. “We’re certain, Severus. Will you agree to be Teddy’s godparents?”

He still looked uncertain. “If . . . if that’s what Hermione wants, then I’ll agree.”

Lupin reached around Hermione to squeeze Snape’s shoulder. “Thank you.”


#

Weeks passed, and things remained quiet. As far as they could tell, Voldemort hadn’t made a single move since the coordinated attack on them all at the end of June. They didn’t fool themselves that he was just sitting around; they knew he was gathering his forces and preparing for his next attack, which could come at any time. So they stayed wary and continued to assign constant patrols around the school and grounds with nearly everyone taking their turn. Even the werewolves got in on it, so that by mid-July, even though they hadn’t actually said anything, everyone was fairly confident that the werewolves would fight with them if—when—an attack came. It seemed the werewolves thought it a mark of utmost trust that they were allowed such casually close proximity to human babies, some of them even taking their turns at babysitting.

Those who weren’t actively hunted for by Death Eaters or the Ministry or presumed dead continued their daily comings and goings from their jobs, as they had throughout their months-long protection detail. They were careful about how they traveled and who they spoke to, ensuring that they were not discovered. And so Arthur was able to keep an ear to the ground and occasionally check in with Percy, and Mad-Eye was able to keep making sure the Werewolf Capture Unit was mysteriously unsuccessful, to the point that some of the Wizengamot were even considering scrapping that project altogether (though Umbridge would never allow such a thing). Bill and Fleur kept an eye on Gringotts, but never saw any sign of Bellatrix or anyone else coming for the cup in her vault. Both of the elder Tonkses had on multiple occasions been forced to disavow any knowledge of their daughter’s whereabouts to persistent Aurors, but didn’t draw otherwise undue attention.

In the third week of the month, Evelyn’s due date came and went. With each day that passed afterward, Hermione grew more and more concerned, despite Partridge’s assurances that a due date is only an approximation and babies frequently decide to come a couple weeks early or late.

Speaking of Partridge, he had begun spending a considerable amount of time with Miss Diggory. It was all very proper and polite, of course, no sneaking off into darkened corridors like a couple of hormonal fifth-years or anything; in fact, watching them dance around each other reminded Hermione of a number of Regency romances she’d read. Still, she couldn’t say that she liked Partridge, even if he hadn’t turned out to be some kind of mad scientist, and he did seem a bit old for Antoinette. She was only seventeen, after all, and he was thirty-four, fully twice her age. By modern standards, it was grossly inappropriate. Of course, Hermione realized, she was hardly one to judge, given that her own husband was nineteen years her senior. Not to mention the fact that Antoinette was a pure-blood, Partridge might very well have also been a pure-blood, and for all Hermione knew, an age difference of seventeen years between witch and wizard was nothing at all shocking to the old wizarding families. And since there was nothing really indecent about the way they were behaving, she tried to just mind her own business.
Maybe it was all the babies around, reminding everyone of propagating the species, or maybe it was the strange calm and sense of safety that people tried not to let lull them into comfort (and, more often than not, failed), but there did seem to be an air of matchmaking about the school these days.

Aside from Partridge and Antoinette, she also had to deal with the flowering romance between Fred and Lavender (who did sneak off into darkened corridors, much to Ron’s disgust). Lavender had grown more somber and less bubbly since her run-in with Greyback, but Fred brought it all out in her again. And at least Fred found it so amusing to pull pranks on Lavender that he rarely bothered to accost anyone else (“Seeing her reaction’s only half the fun of it,” he’d admitted to Ron and Harry one day while Hermione was with them. “The other half is making up with her afterward.”)

George usually helped with these pranks, of course, though presumably he didn’t also enjoy the “other half” of the joke. Though Hermione did walk in on Lavender and George snogging once and decided that if Lavender didn’t pay enough attention to notice the non-missing finger, then she deserved to be made a fool of (Or maybe, she added to herself, she knows and is trying to get around to as many Weasleys as possible. This, Hermione thought, was no longer her concern).

Another Weasley seemed to have chosen a mate, as well. Charlie was hardly ever seen without the quiet werewolf called Peach nearby. It was odd watching them together. He was kind and gentle with her, but yelled insults and threats whenever one of the male werewolves got inappropriate with her (as the male werewolves often did, though most of the witches had learned to ignore such posturing). Hermione was happy for them. For all its oddity, the relationship seemed to work.

She was surrounded by marital bliss, as well: Harry and Ginny, Lupin and Tonks, Ted and Andromeda, and Molly and Arthur seemed to be constantly holding hands, kissing, or doting over babies. It was almost a relief to see Kingsley’s put-upon expression whenever Trelawney trailed after him, hung from his arm, or called him pet names (Hermione hadn’t once heard her call him ‘Kingsley’).

As for Hermione’s relationship with her own husband, she couldn’t exactly complain, but she kept hoping that they might still become closer, some small part of her daring to hope that one day they might be seen holding hands and exchanging casual kisses like the others. Ever since they’d cured themselves of the effects of Wentworth’s Brew, they had focused more on their roles as co-parents than their roles as husband and wife. The babies took up much of their attention, even with the surrogates (and the ever-helpful Neville) assisting with their care. It was encouraging and heartwarming to see the way Snape dealt with the babies, but more and more Hermione found herself wishing that she’d see his eyes soften like that when looking at her as well.

As the end of the month approached and Hermione realized exactly what that meant, she saw her chance to find out if Snape was at all amenable to getting closer as a couple.

On the thirtieth, she asked Snape to go for a walk with her, just themselves, alone. He frowned, confused, but went along.

While they walked down a deserted corridor, Hermione fidgeted with her shirt sleeves. “Severus, I was wondering . . . It’s been lovely having the babies so close, but don’t you think it would be nice to have one night to ourselves, where we didn’t have to listen to Partridge’s snoring or the babies waking in the middle of the night?”

Snape looked at her with a raised eyebrow. “Tired of your family already?” He sounded faintly hurt.

“No! No, it’s just . . . for one night, it might be . . . well, we haven’t got to spend much time together, just you and I, since we got back to Hogwarts. And I thought . . . it might be nice to be
alone together.”

He stared at her, his expression giving nothing away. Finally, he said carefully, evenly, “If that is what you wish.”

She beamed. “Good! So, maybe . . . maybe tomorrow night, we could stay in your rooms. They’re still unoccupied, I trust.”

“I’d hardly let one of the wolves use them.”

“Great! Because I was thinking—”

“Snape! Just the bloke we were looking for!” Fred and George bounded down the hallway at them and slapped Snape on the shoulder.

“We were?” he sneered. “To what do I owe the displeasure?”

George laughed. “Exactly, Severus, exactly.”

“You try my patience, Weasley.”

“Of course we do,” said Fred. “That’s the whole point.”

Snape turned and started walking away.

“Hold up now, Snape, we’ve got a proposition for you,” said George.

“See, today’s Neville’s birthday,” explained Fred, “and tomorrow’s Harry’s. And we all thought that the anniversary of the births of two such fine gentlemen deserved a celebration.”

“A proper celebration, of course,” continued George, “and what better celebration could there be than a game of Quidditch in their honor?”

Snape peered at the twins. “I still don’t see how this concerns me.”

“Well, we’ve already picked teams,” said Fred.

“Harry and Ginny have, that is,” said George, “as they’re the captains.”

“And it’s mostly us Weasleys, with Harry and Tonks and some of the others.”

“But the thing is, Snape, we need someone to call the game, someone who’s done it before, someone unbiased, someone whose offspring or significant other isn’t on one of the teams.”

“So, of course we thought of you right away!” George finished with a grin.

“Unbiased?” Snape asked after a few seconds.

“You sure are,” said Fred.

“Because you hate us all equally,” said George.

There was something in this logic that Snape liked, Hermione thought, as the corner of his mouth twitched upward. He was quiet for a long time, then said, “Very well. I shall call your stupid game.”

“Knew you would, Snapey,” said George.
“Game starts at midnight,” said Fred as the twins were already rushing off. “Don’t be late!”

Say what they would about this being a celebration for Harry and Neville, it was obvious that most of the Weasleys had simply been itching to play Quidditch after so many months cooped up indoors. Harry was surely as eager to play as they were, but Neville had never in his life played Quidditch and was perfectly content to watch from the stands.

There was risk involved in flying about the Quidditch pitch where anyone who came snooping around might see them, which is why they hadn’t had any games before. But for this special occasion, they made an exception, provided proper security measures were taken. Several of the wolves had volunteered to patrol the grounds while the game was on, as did Firenze, while Mad-Eye, Sturgis, and Hestia kept an eye on things from their brooms. Privacy spells were cast to camouflage the pitch and prevent the light from torches on the field from penetrating too far into the darkness. The three-quarter moon provided enough light to see fairly well, but the players all added stripes of glowing fabric to their makeshift uniforms. Even Snape had glowing dots scattered on his Slytherin green robes.

The night was warm and clear, a good night for a match. Hermione had wrapped a loose cloak around her shoulders but otherwise wore only some simple Muggle attire. In her arms, Cubby was watching the goings-on on the field with rapt attention.

“Happy Birthday, Neville,” she said to the young man sitting beside her with Luna wrapped securely in his robes.

He smiled. “Thanks, Hermione.”

“Sorry we couldn’t get you anything. It must be a lousy birthday without presents.”

Neville laughed. “I’ve had worse.”

Nearby, Antoinette held a sleeping Cedric and chatted with Partridge, who’d wrapped his cloak gallantly around her shoulders.

A handful of werewolves were huddled at the front of the stands, eager for the game to start: Scratch, the irritating young man who liked to rile people; Precious, Greyback’s unfortunate daughter who was showing a great deal of improvement in coming out of her shell by even being around crowds like this; Peach, the werewolf with burned arms who’d been nearly inseparable from Charlie for weeks now; and Tessa, Spears’s mate and the pack’s ranking female.

“Is this the way things are in your family, Lupin?” Scratch taunted. “Your woman gets all the action while you sit on the sidelines with the cub?”

“Well spotted, Scratch,” Lupin replied, unperturbed.

“I don’t see you out there,” Tessa observed, and since everyone knew Scratch was a Muggle and couldn’t have played Quidditch if he’d wanted to, there was really no need for him to respond.

Hermione wasn’t sure who to root for. On Harry’s team were Fred, George, Ron, Cecilia, and Bill. On Ginny’s team were Tonks, Charlie, Ted and Spears (who’d apparently both played for the Hufflepuff team back in their day), and, to general astonishment, Molly. (“Who did you think taught the children?” she’d pointed out when Hermione’d asked. Truth be told, Hermione had never before considered either Molly or Arthur playing the game, but it made sense that one of them would have if nearly all their children did.) She hated to root against some of her friends, but...
she did have to admit to favoring Harry’s team, since her two best mates were on it.

“Who’s going to announce?” asked McGonagall.

“I’ll do it!” offered Scratch.

“You can’t even remember everyone’s names!” Lavender accused him. “I’ll do it.”

McGonagall looked dubiously at the both of them, but conjured a magical microphone and placed it between them.

“I hope Nymphadora doesn’t fall off her broom,” Andromeda mused coolly. Despite her Slytherin roots, she was wearing a yellow-and-black scarf in support of her daughter and husband.

“Are we late?” said a voice, and Hermione turned to see Kingsley helping a struggling (and heavily pregnant) Trelawney up the stairs.

“Not at all,” McGonagall assured them. “It hasn’t started yet.”

“We thought you weren’t coming,” said Arthur as Evelyn scooted over to make room for them.

“We weren’t going to,” said Kingsley, sounding weary, “but Sybill decided she wanted to come.”

“Thank you, Tiresias, dear,” she said as he helped her onto the bench. She had, it seemed, flatly refused to believe that Kingsley was not the Seer he’d posed as, even after he’d explained the situation to her. Many people had tried to get it through to her at first, but they’d all given up by now. “I saw a vision of doom,” Trelawney explained, her voice not quite so airy as she was trying for, since she was in the middle of situating herself and her greatly enlarged belly. “Someone will die tonight. If I’m here, I might see who the poor wretch is in time to warn him. Not that it would do any good, of course . . .”

Hermione had heard enough predictions of death from Trelawney that this shouldn’t have fazed her, though with the war the way it was and her recent experiences with certain other prophecies, Hermione couldn’t ignore this one quite so easily as before, and her mood sagged.

“On that cheerful note,” muttered McGonagall, who was clearly as ambivalent toward fortune-telling as ever, “the game should begin at any moment.”

On the pitch below them, the two teams has lined up opposite each other. Snape counted down, blew a whistle, and tossed the Quaffle into the air. Like a shot, the players zoomed skyward.

Lavender grabbed the microphone. “All right, er, the Quaffle’s in the air—someone grabs it! A Weasley. Oh, it’s, er, it’s the oldest one! Bill! Right, Bill’s got the Quaffle, headed for the goal—Wow, look at him go, lean muscles, gorgeous hair, he’s quite fit—”

Fleur cleared her throat loudly and glared at Lavender.

“Er, right, I mean, it looks like—”

Scratch snatched the mic away from her. “The ginger tosses at to the goal, but the other ginger blocks it—Nice save!—Now mama ginger has it and—Ooh, she’s almost hit by a ball hit by one of those other two gingers!”

“Really, I don’t know how I’d follow the game at all without this helpful commentary,” Lupin observed.
Lavender grabbed the mic. “Harry and Charlie are still circling. No sign of the Snitch yet. Ginny’s got the Quaffle now—I don’t think she can get it past Won-Won—oops, I mean Ronald—Nope, he saves it, tosses it to Cecilia—but oh! Intercepted by Tonks—Ooh, look, she’s got her hair in yellow and black stripes! I wish I could just change my hair on a whim like that. It takes me absolutely forever just to get it properly curled in the morning—”

Scratch shoved her aside. “Wow, Spears and the other old bloke are hitting the whomper balls back and forth—One nearly takes out the scar-headed guy, but he swerves in time to—What’s that? Looks like’s seen something. He’s taking off after it with the dragon-tamer on his heels—”

“Harry’s seen the snitch!” Lavender screamed, grabbing the mic again. “He’s going for it—Charlie’s catching up—They’re neck and neck now! Harry’s reaching for it, but—”

“Graaaahh!”

Everyone jumped and turned to look at Trelawney, who was clutching her stomach and wincing. Beside her, Evelyn looked down with a sneer of disgust. “I think her water’s broken.”

Trelawney held her belly, her face twisted up in pain.

“She’s in labor!” McGonagall was the first to voice what most of them were already putting together. “We’ve got to get her to the hospital wing at once!”

In a flurry of excitement, Arthur, Partridge, and Kingsley helped Trelawney from the stands and hurried her back to the castle. Lavender ran to join them, concern for her favorite teacher overriding her petty rivalry with Scratch. McGonagall stopped the game long enough to tell Snape and the players what was going on.

“Should we call off the game?” asked Molly, her eyes full of concern beneath a sweat-dappled brow.

“No,” said McGonagall. “This sort of thing takes time. It could be hours before the baby arrives, and there’s nothing anyone else can do to help anyway. You keep enjoying yourselves. We’ll let you know if we need you.”

So the game continued, minus a few spectators, and Hermione tried to enjoy watching it. She cheered and clapped, and when, in the early hours of the morning, Harry landed on the pitch with the Snitch in his hand, she gave him a hearty hug. But she hadn’t been able to shake the feeling that Trelawney had seemed too much in pain, even for a woman going into labor.

When Hermione went to the hospital wing to see how things were going, the news wasn’t good.

“The Healer says there are complications,” Kingsley told her uncertainly. “She’s been in too much pain, they say, and there’s too much bleeding.”

“Do they think it’s almost over yet?” she asked.

Kingsley shrugged. “They don’t know.”

There wasn’t much to say after that, and Hermione took a seat in the hospital wing to wait with Kingsley, McGonagall, Lavender, Molly, and Arthur. She felt like, in some way, she was a part of the reason this was happening. After all, Trelawney’s forced marriage to the Seer Tiresias was an addendum to Voldemort’s plan which revolved around her and Snape, and if not for that, Kingsley wouldn’t have had to take Tiresias’s place as Trelawney’s husband.
They sat for hours, into the afternoon, no one speaking. The silence was only broken by the screams and whimpers of pain from Trelawney and Partridge’s reassuring words to her.

Finally, Partridge came out, his robes bloody and his expression grim. “I’m sorry, Mr. Shacklebolt. I did everything I could but . . . I’m afraid the complications were too much.”

Kingsley looked stricken. “Sybill . . .”

“Didn’t make it. I’m sorry.”

Lavender broke into sobs.

Kingsley closed his eyes as if fearing what he’d hear next. “And . . . the child?”

Partridge looked up sharply. “Oh! Oh, the child’s fine. As healthy a baby boy as I’ve ever seen. Madam Pomfrey’s getting him cleaned up now.”

Kingsley let out a ragged breath. “I have . . . a son?”

“You do indeed. He’ll be brought out in a moment.” Partridge swept off back to the birthing area.

“Kingsley,” Arthur asked softly, “are you all right?”

Kingsley looked dazed. “Sybill . . .” He shook his head. “I didn’t love her, but she didn’t deserve this. She was my responsibility. I failed.”

Arthur put a hand on his shoulder. “You couldn’t have protected her from this, Kingsley. No one could have.”

“That makes it worse. If anything, I’m the one to blame. This is my fault. I should have found some way around the damned Ministry rules. Surely I could have protected her without having to—”

But he knew there had been no other way. They’d explored all the options at the time. And everyone knew that having sex with Sybill Trelawney, never mind having a child with her, was not something most men would have done without exploring all other avenues. No one said any of this, of course. They didn’t have to, and it would hardly have been appropriate given the circumstances, but there also wasn’t time, as Madam Pomfrey came out the next moment with a swaddled baby and handed it to Kingsley.

He held his child, still looking overcome. Mocha-skinned and bald as his father, the baby wiggled and made soft cooing noises as Kingsley held him.

“Did she give him a name?” Kingsley asked in a hushed voice.

Madam Pomfrey shook her head, and Hermione saw that there were tears running down her cheeks. “Didn’t have time, the poor woman. She only held out long enough to lay eyes on him, smiled, and then . . .” She raised a tissue to her face and blew her nose.

“What will you call him?” Molly asked gently.

Kingsley was silent for several seconds before saying, “I’d always thought that if I ever had a son, I’d name him Royal.” He looked at her, uncertain and almost shy. It was a strange look for him. “Sort of a joke, I guess. A way of naming him after myself without actually doing it. Is that ridiculous?”

“Not at all,” Molly assured him.
He accepted her judgment. “Sybill’s middle name was Patricia,” he mused, “so . . . his middle name will be Patrick.”

Madam Pomfrey nodded in approval. “Royal Patrick Shacklebolt. I’ll see to the forms.”

After Pomfrey had left them, Hermione remembered Trelawney’s words, so easily dismissed by nearly everyone else: Someone will die tonight.

Perhaps she hadn’t been such a terrible Seer after all.
Having seen Snape’s home at Spinner’s End, Hermione was not surprised at what she found when she stepped into his rooms in the chilly depths of the Hogwarts dungeons. The furniture in the outer room appeared to be antique, likely having been brought into the school some centuries ago: a stiff-backed sofa, a small table with a single chair, a writing desk, and a chaise longue that had seen better days. To Hermione’s pleasure, the walls were lined with bookshelves, all of them nearly overflowing with an assortment of volumes both ancient and modern. The only breaks in the shelving were a fireplace and a large viewing window over which were drawn heavy curtains. The room was mostly tidy, though the desk was scattered with scrolls and parchment, and there were a number of books lying about haphazardly.

“It’s . . . lovely, Severus,” she said because she felt she had to say something. In truth, the rooms reminded her of the man himself: cool, unwelcoming, and appreciated only after first glance.

“Lies are unbecoming, Hermione,” he replied, flicking his wand toward the humble hearth. A ball of flame flew from it into the fireplace and continued to crackle happily.

Inspecting the nearest bookcase, she insisted, “No, really. It’s very . . . you.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “Do you mean to say you find me lovely?” The sarcasm was thick in his voice.

The question caught her off-guard, but she recovered quickly. “In your way, Severus, yes.”

“And what way is that?” His tone was soft, challenging, daring her to think of something.

She thought about it. “In the way of a father who loves children he never wanted. In the way of a protector who takes his duties seriously.” Not able to meet his eyes, she closed the distance between them and said softly, “In the way of a man who has more love to give than he lets himself believe.” She raised her hand and laid it gently on his chest, glad that he was wearing Muggle clothes.

He stepped back from her and crossed the room to fiddle with some papers on his desk. “You’ve had a long day. I suppose you’ll want to go to sleep soon. The bedroom’s through there.”

It had been a long day, and between the Quidditch match and Trelawney’s ill-fated childbirth, she hadn’t got any sleep at all. But she wasn’t going to let this opportunity pass her by.

“Would you . . . sit with me? I’d like to talk, if that’s okay.”

He let out a breath and reluctantly followed her to the sofa. The fabric was cold and stiff and didn’t give much under her, but it didn’t matter. Snape was beside her, not quite pressed against the opposite end, but almost. She turned to face him.

“Do you know what today is?”

He grimaced. “Of course. Saint Potter’s birthday. That’s what the whole to-do was about last night, if I recall.”

“That’s not all, Severus. One year ago today, we . . . we were married.”
That stopped him cold. Clearly, he’d forgotten completely.

He didn’t have anything to say to this announcement, so she continued. “Looking back, it’s hard to believe how much we’ve been through since then. How much we’ve lost already . . . and how much we’ve gained. It was a nightmare for both of us, I know. I’d never have believed it, had someone told me that night . . . that in a year I’d actually be . . . be almost glad for what was forced on us.”

As he met her eyes, she saw his mask cracking. “It’s good that you’re happy to have the children,” he said slowly.

“Yes, the children. But not only the children, Severus. I’ve come to . . . to admire and respect you more than I ever did before, through all of this. You’re brilliant and brave and . . .” She’d had such great plans for what she was going to tell him, but now the words seemed to stick in her throat. “I’ve grown . . . quite fond of you.”

“There is no need to stroke my ego,” he told her. He tried to sound firm, withdrawn, but his eyes showed something else. A much younger man was beginning to peer through them. A man who hadn’t lived such a rough and unloved life. A man who still had hope.

“It’s true,” she said, and as she spoke she was ever moving herself closer to him, so that now she was right beside him, her knees pressed against his leg. “But I need to know. Please. The honest truth, whatever it is. Have you . . . grown at all more fond of me?”

He looked down at where her leg touched his. After a long silence, he said, “You are more than I had thought, Hermione. You are stronger and kinder than I had known. But if you tell me that you would still want to be my wife if you had the option to be free of me, I shall call you a sentimental fool and remind you that I need neither your pity nor whatever other favors you may naïvely think to offer me.”

His words sliced into her. Did he doubt she knew her own feelings? Perhaps she didn’t. She had feelings for him, that was certain, but she had trouble putting into words exactly what those feelings were, even in her own mind. But she knew what those feelings weren’t.

“I don’t pity you, Severus,” she told him, and before he could argue with her, she silenced him with a kiss.

He resisted, but she was unrelenting. If he wouldn’t believe her words, then she’d show him with her actions. She moved her body closer to him to get a better angle and pressed her lips over his again and again until they softened and offered back tentative pressure of their own. When Snape’s teeth momentarily closed on her lower lip before letting it go, she teased her tongue across his upper lip, not even sure what she meant by it. His mouth opened wider, and his tongue slipped into her mouth as his hands cupped her head gently, his fingers tangling in her mass of hair.

She caressed Snape’s tongue with her own, wet and slick and still tasting of pumpkin juice from dinner. She could easily count the number of kisses in her past—one kiss from Krum which had lacked any passion whatsoever, that disaster with Lupin in the Shack, and the previous few one-sided kisses with her husband — and for all she knew, Snape hadn’t even had that much experience. They were neither of them masters at this, but once again, that put them on even ground. Once again, here was something that neither of them had had much practice in. But they were learning. Oh, yes, they were learning, and so quickly.

She shifted her body closer to him, her hands spreading over the hard, wiry planes of his chest through his jumper. They drifted down, down, and brushed against something hard.
Yes. This felt right. She would show him just how much she didn’t pity him. How much (she was surprised to learn herself) she wanted him. As her mouth kept him busy, her hands worked to undo the buttons of his trousers. She was nearly finished with them when he realized what she was doing and started wriggling beneath her.

“Hermione,” he mumbled into her mouth. “Wait.”

She wanted him with a sudden and desperate passion. His hands fumbled with hers—trying to help her, she thought in her lust-addled mind—as she undid the last button and reached into his boxers.

*There!* He was ready for her.

“I can’t!” He shoved her off, tossing her roughly onto the floor.

She looked up in shock.

He scrambled to his feet, straightening his trousers. He wouldn’t look at her, tried to hide his face from her. “I can’t,” he bit out. “I can’t. It’s just—”

Like a hammer to her heart, she heard the word he didn’t speak: *Lily.*

Still. After everything. *Lily.*

He flew from the room, slamming the door behind him.

In the ringing silence of the dungeon, Hermione sat in a daze. After all they’d been through together, he still loved her. Rage, hurt, and jealousy boiled inside her, causing a wave of guilt. She shouldn’t be angry at a dead woman, especially one who she couldn’t actually lay blame of any kind on. But she did. Right then, she hated Lily Evans.

And she hated herself. What kind of mad animal had she become, so overcome by lust that she hadn’t recognized his protestations? He’d been unwilling, and she hadn’t noticed. (*Or hadn’t cared.*) She’d practically molested him.

And, just a little, she hated him. Wasn’t the man the one who was supposed to be more interested in sex? Shouldn’t it have been her trying to shove off him? He was her husband. He’d agreed to it, even if he hadn’t exactly chosen it. Wasn’t it part of his duty to see to her needs?

Which thoughts led her back to hating herself again for her own ridiculous selfishness.

The feelings overtook her, and she collapsed on the floor where she sat, sobbing.

When she finished crying, she got up, went into Snape’s bedroom, took off her clothes, and curled up under the cold sheets of his four-poster bed, knowing that tonight—on her first wedding anniversary—she’d be sleeping alone.

#

“Argyle!”

The gargoyle statue stepped aside, and Hermione ascended the stairs to the Head’s office, hoping McGonagall wouldn’t be there.

After the events of last night, she’d felt too humiliated to face her friends at breakfast and terrified at the prospect of seeing Snape there—she wasn’t ready for that; not yet. Instead, she’d headed straight for the one person she felt she could hash this out with freely.
Though, of course, calling him a person was being generous.

“Ah, Miss Granger. To what do I owe this uncommon pleasure?” The painted blue eyes of Albus Dumbledore twinkled at her from the painting directly behind McGonagall’s desk. He looked very much as he had two years ago, before coming into contact with Slytherin’s cursed ring.

“Tell me about Severus and Lily.”

This wrong-footed him. “Severus and Lily? My dear, you don’t mean to say that he still—”

“Yes,” she interrupted. “He still.”

The twinkle in his eye was gone. “Tell me, if you know, what form his Patronus takes.”

Hermione’s heart sank. “A doe. That’s Lily, isn’t it?”

“A representation of her,” he admitted. “I had hoped that even if time itself hadn’t dulled his devotion to her, his loyalty might have transferred to you, given time. And you have had time.”

“Yes.” She hugged herself. “I thought . . . I thought he might have been growing to . . . No. It’s stupid. I knew from the beginning how he felt, and I shouldn’t have let myself hope it would change. He’s never going to give her up, is he?”

After several thoughtful moments, Dumbledore asked, “Were the items detailed in my will dispensed as instructed?”

This seemed an odd change of subject. “As far as I know. Remus got the Deluminator (which came in very useful, thank you), Harry got the sword of Gryffindor (and we’re still working on tracking down those Horcruxes), I got your wand (and I needed it, too, since mine got broken in battle, so thanks very much for that), and Severus got that old broken ring that killed you. Why on earth did you give him that thing? No one can figure out what you meant by it.”

“Is it still in his possession?” he asked, ignoring her question.

“Yes. I think he carries it around in his pocket. I’ve seen him pull it out and look at it now and then. It doesn’t make him happy.”

“I think one day it might,” he said softly. Then he brightened. “And how does my wand suit you?”

Hermione pulled it from her pocket. “Quite well. It’s . . . very powerful. It seems almost too powerful sometimes. But why did you give it to me?”

“Because it’s yours.”

She rolled her eyes. “Because you gave it to me, yes. Is there an explanation that doesn’t involve circular reasoning?”

He smiled, amused. “You misunderstand me, Miss Granger. There’s something you have to understand about this wand. You are familiar with the concept of the wand choosing the wizard?”

She nodded. “Of course. That’s why first-years have to try different wands. They can’t just choose one off the shelf; they have to find the one that fits them.”

“Indeed. And this wand, you see, is more choosy than most. It is, in fact, rather ruthless. It can only pass from one wizard to another when the first wizard is defeated by the second.”
“Defeated? Like in a duel?”

“Precisely. I myself acquired this wand by defeating a great wizard.”

“Grindelwald?” she guessed. It was the most famous of Dumbledore’s duels.

A haunted look passed over his face for a moment. “Yes. And he acquired it in the same way, and so on and so forth back from the time it was taken from its first owner. That night on the astronomy tower, when Draco Malfoy disarmed me—”

“He defeated you!” she broke in with a sudden rush of understanding. “So this wand chose him. But when I . . .”

“When you defended me from him,” Dumbledore said gently, “you defeated him, and the wand chose you. So you see, from that moment on, the wand was yours. I was simply . . . borrowing it until I had no more use for it. I apologize for taking such liberties, but I’m sure you can understand that I wouldn’t have been much use to the Order without a wand, and dying as I was, there was no sense in trying to find a new one.”

Hermione barely heard what he was saying. Her mind had rushed back to the letter she’d read months ago from Luna’s father, the one describing the Deathly Hallows—in particular, the Elder Wand, which passed hands by the defeat of its owner and was rumored to have once been possessed by Grindelwald.

Did that mean . . . It couldn’t.

It had to.

“Sir . . .” she began, part of her hoping that somehow she was wrong, “is that why you gave me a copy of *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*?”

Dumbledore beamed at her. “Very good, Miss Granger.”

“Then . . . the Peverell grave in Godric’s Hollow . . . Harry’s Invisibility Cloak . . .”

“Harry is one of only three surviving descendants of the three brothers mentioned in that tale.”

“I suppose you mean James is one of them, since he’s Harry’s son, but who is the last?”

“Voldemort.”

Hermione gasped. “Harry and Voldemort are related?”

“Only very distantly,” Dumbledore said with some amusement. “He’s more closely related to any number of pure-bloods and half-bloods of your acquaintance.”

Hermione stared at the Wand in her hand as she worked it through. It was hard to believe that she was the mistress of the most powerful wand in existence. It was a lot of pressure, far more than she wanted. And Harry had another Hallow, and he’d had it nearly as long as she’d known him. Which left the Stone . . .

“If Voldemort’s a half-blood,” she thought aloud, “that must mean that he is related to the Peverells through his Slytherin side. The Stone probably would have been passed down through the family as an heirloom, like the Cloak. But from what Harry told us about those memories you showed him, Voldemort’s mum and her father and brother were the last of Slytherin’s line before
She looked at him sharply. He was beaming again.

"The ring was more than a Horcrux, wasn’t it? The stone set into it . . . Severus has the Resurrection Stone!"

Dumbledore clapped. “Very good indeed, Miss Granger!”

“Well, why didn’t you just say so in the first place?”

“Would you have been ready to hear it if I had?”

She rolled her eyes at him again. What a stupid question.

But what now? The Deathly Hallows were real, and she, her husband, and her best friend had them. But she’d read the story. Aside from the brother with the Invisibility Cloak, things didn’t work out so well for the Hallows’ original owners. She thought of all the evil witches and wizards who wouldn’t stop until she was dead if they knew that by killing her they could gain the Elder Wand. She thought of what would happen if Snape realized what he had, imagined him calling forth Lily again and again, tormented longing making him a withered husk of himself.

“Now I know. So what do I do?”

“That is up to you,” Dumbledore said. “I am merely a painting. But I suspect it will come to you, when the time is right.”

She hoped it would. Until then, she’d tell no one. It wasn’t worth the risk.

#

Rain drizzled down on their heads, dreary weather for a dreary day. Hermione stood with twenty or so people, none of them bothering to use umbrella charms to shield themselves from the wet. McGonagall was valiantly giving a speech in praise of a woman she’d only barely liked and hardly respected. Lavender was crying softly on Fred’s shoulder. Kingsley stood in stoic silence, as still as a statue, his furrowed brow the only outward evidence that his wife’s death troubled him.

Snape hadn’t joined them. Hermione didn’t know if it was because he didn’t care about Trelawney or because he didn’t want to be around her, but Hermione was relieved. After what had happened between them last night, she didn’t feel up to facing the humiliation of seeing him yet.

Trelawney had been buried behind Dumbledore’s tomb, next to Luna’s grave. After they’d all reconvened, Bill and Mad-Eye had ventured to recover Luna’s corpse. Her friends had got some closure and she’d got a final resting place that wasn’t an unmarked grave.

When they’d lined Trelawney up beside her, it was like a silent acknowledgment that more would be joining them, and most likely soon. They were building a graveyard on the school grounds.

“I’ve been thinking,” Harry said quietly as he stared ahead, his face fixed in a grim expression which Hermione recognized. “We need to find and destroy the rest of the Horcruxes. Soon. We need to make him mortal so we can kill him and be done with this.”

Done with people dying, he meant. Hermione agreed.

After the funeral was over, Harry, Ron, and Hermione gathered in the fourth-year boys’ dormitory
in Gryffindor tower, which the Potters had made their temporary residence. He’d made sure Ginny would be off with James, so they had the room to themselves.

It felt so strange, the three of them alone again, plotting. It must have been ages.

Hedwig flapped angrily in her cage.

“I can’t let her out to fly around like I used to,” Harry explained when he caught Hermione looking. “She’s too easily recognized. I feel terrible about it. She’s been stuck in that cage for so long. I take her to the Room of Requirement sometimes to stretch her wings, but it’s not the same as being outside.”

Hermione understood. She sat on the floor, petting Crookshanks. He’d been following her around a lot lately, and she was convinced he’d missed her while she was in hiding.

“So, which do we go after first?” asked Ron. Of the three of them, he was the only one who seemed genuinely excited about this.

“I’ve made a list.” Hermione drew a scrap of parchment from her pocket. “These are what our best information says are the remaining Horcruxes and where they’re likely to be found.” They gathered around her to look at it. “Helga Hufflepuff’s cup,” she read. “Gringotts, Lestrange vault. Salazar Slytherin’s locket—location unknown. Nagini—with Voldemort.”

“That’s helpful,” snorted Ron.

Hermione ignored him and finished the list. “Harry Potter. Sorry, Harry; we’ll have to figure out how to deal with that at some point. But we will find a way that doesn’t involve your death.”

“Well,” Harry said with careful composure, as if she hadn’t spoken, “it’s obvious which one we go after next.” He turned to Ron. “Do you think Bill could help us get into Gringotts?”

“I bet he could! And Fleur might help, too!” Ron grinned.

“We’ll talk to them when we’re done here,” Hermione said. “And we should get Tonks to help.”

“Why?” asked Harry.

“Someone’s got to impersonate Bellatrix if we want to get into her vault, and unless you’ve got some of her hair lying around, our options are limited.”

“What about us?” asked Ron.

Hermione smiled to herself. “I knew it would come in handy. I’ve brewed some Polyjuice Potion in case we needed it. We can take hair from some random Muggles and pretend to be Bellatrix’s anonymous assistants.”

“You mean her lackeys,” said Ron. “I doubt Bellatrix would need assistance from anyone.”

Harry nodded, thinking. “All right, so we talk to Bill, Fleur, and Tonks. If they agree to help, lets get everyone together and make a plan.”

“When are we doing this?” asked Ron.

“Tomorrow,” Harry said immediately.

It was soon, but Hermione saw his point. They needed to get the Horcruxes destroyed if they
hoped to have any chance at defeating Voldemort.

“Ow!”

Crookshanks had leapt from Hermione’s lap without warning, his claws digging into her leg in his haste. He ran around the small room, and at first he looked like he’d gone barmy, but then they saw that he was chasing something. The chase ended abruptly under one of the unoccupied beds, and they soon heard the crunching and squelching noises of Crookshanks enjoying his catch.

“Gross, Crookshanks,” she reprimanded him, not wanting to see him at his meal. “Don’t you get enough of that outside?”

“For once,” Harry said, “I’m glad Crookshanks was here. I don’t want a rat in the same room where my baby sleeps.”

“He’s an excellent mouser,” Hermione said with pride, “but he could have a few more manners.” The cat began making sick, retching sounds. She frowned. “Do you think something’s wrong with —”

The door burst open with a bang. “Where is he?” shouted a wild-eyed Lupin.

“Bloody hell!” Ron yelped.

“Where is he?” Lupin repeated, searching the room with his eyes, then he began overturning anything he could get his hands on, ransacking the place like a madman.

“Remus, calm down!” urged Harry. “Where is who?”

Lupin waved something in front of their faces: the Marauder’s Map. “Peter,” he growled. Hermione’s blood went cold. “Crookshanks!” She dove under the bed where the cat had gone strangely quiet, but she couldn’t reach him.

Catching on, Lupin dropped to the floor, his longer arms reaching where she couldn’t. Unexpected emotions passed over his face: victory, disgust, dismay. He sat back, pulling something out with him.

“Crooks!” Tears leapt to Hermione’s eyes as she grabbed a limp orange bundle of fur from Lupin’s grasp. “Oh, Crookshanks, what’s happened to you?”

Crookshanks’s eyes were wide open, unblinking, unfocused. Her cat was dead. How had that happened? He’d been fine a moment ago, and they’d been sitting right here the entire time. He’d only gone after some horrible rodent . . .

Lupin was staring at the other thing he’d pulled out from under the bed. It was a bloody lump which only after staring at it for a second or two could Hermione identify as a partially-eaten rat. There was horror and disbelief in Lupin’s eyes.

“Hermione,” he said calmly. Too calmly. “May I see your cat?”

Hermione clung to Crookshanks, wishing he’d breathe, meow, something. But Crookshanks didn’t move, didn’t make a sound. Her tears fell heavily, but she passed the body to Lupin.

Carefully, with the precision of one used to dealing with delicate things, he opened Crookshanks’s lifeless mouth and looked inside. Disbelief flickered in his eyes, then he reached a finger into the
cat’s mouth and, a moment later, drew out something tiny and covered with blood. He gave Crookshanks back to Hermione and held the object up for inspection.

It was a little silver paw, fingers splayed, bone and skin still attached to the end of it.

“Peter,” he whispered.

The four of them sat there in stunned silence, trying to digest what had just happened. Wormtail—Peter Pettigrew—had been in here, listening to their plans. Crookshanks had seen him, killed him, and then choked on Wormtail’s silver paw. And it had all happened so fast.

“Remus,” said Harry, “do you mean you saw him on the Map?”

Lupin’s voice was empty, still staring at the little paw he held. “Yes. I’ve been checking it periodically, especially since we found out someone informed on us. When I saw his name in this room with you, I could hardly believe his nerve.”

“So he’s the spy?” blurted Ron. “That’s a relief. I mean, at least it means it wasn’t one of the Order.”

Hermione clutched Crookshanks’s body tighter, tears streaming down her face. “When I heard Lavender’s prophecy,” she remembered, “Crookshanks went after something. I bet it was Wormtail. That’s how Voldemort knew about it. And when we told Lavender about going into hiding, Crooks started scratching at something in the wall. He must have been there then, as well.”

“How could he, though?” asked Ron. “Boys can’t get in the girls’ dorms.”

“There are crevices in the walls,” Lupin explained, sounding far away. “Little passages. Peter learned to navigate them in school. He used to sneak over and spy on girls. He would never listen when I told him to stop, and James and Sirius thought it was funny.”

“But there were Fidelius Charms on all the safe-houses,” said Harry.

Hermione groaned. “Which were only placed after we told Lavender about the plan. Wormtail could have reported back to Voldemort before we even set up the charms.”

“Blimey,” Ron muttered. “He knew where we were the whole time. Then why did he wait so long to attack?”

“Maybe he was gathering his forces,” suggested Harry. “Or waiting to try to grab the babies after they were born. Or working out some other plan.”

Lupin didn’t weigh in on this. He looked torn between hatred for Wormtail and pain at the loss of someone who had once been his friend. Even through her own pain at losing her pet, Hermione could see it. “Are you sure that’s really him?”

Giving a good look at what remained of the rat’s body, then going back to staring at the paw, Lupin nodded. “Yes.”

There was silence again. Ron looked as if he had a good riddance on his tongue, but they could see this was affecting Lupin powerfully. But his emotions were unclear and seemed to war with each other.

“It’s okay to mourn him,” Hermione offered, sniffing back her tears. “He was your friend once.”
Lupin shook his head. “No. I mourned my friend seventeen years ago, and even then I was too late. Whatever that rat was, he wasn’t my friend.”

“Then why do you look sad?” Harry asked.

“I think . . . I didn’t honestly believe I’d be the last Marauder left alive.”

Then Hermione understood. It wasn’t Wormtail he was mourning, it was the loss of his youth, that brotherhood, now well and truly gone for good.

She tried not to look at the mangled body of a rat that had once been a chubby, overeager boy. “We should . . . bury him.”

Lupin tucked the silver paw into his pocket and stood up, curling his lip at Wormtail’s body. “No. He chose to live as a rat. Now he’s died as a rat. It’s fitting.” He pointed his wand and Banished the remains.

“Remus, I’m sor—” Harry began, but Lupin cut him off.

“Don’t be. Crookshanks did what you should have let Sirius and me do four years ago. If anyone should be felt sorry for here, it’s the cat.”

It didn’t feel proper to say she agreed, but Hermione buried her face in Crookshanks’s fur. “Good boy, Crookshanks,” she murmured, choking on tears. “You got that nasty spy. Such a brave cat. Good boy.”

They buried him between Luna and Trelawney. It was a small, cat-sized grave with a small, cat-sized headstone, but it was there. And if anyone got close enough to look, they’d see carefully-etched block letters which read:

Crookshanks

pet

friend

hero

#

“It’s not enough.” Tonks shook her head and leaned it against a bedpost. They’d gathered in Gryffindor tower once again—on the seventh floor this time, where Bill and Fleur had been staying. “They’ll check for identification. If I’m going to impersonate my aunt, we’ll need her wand.”

Ron groaned. “Right. Just pop on over and ask if we can borrow it then, shall we?”

“You won’t need the actual wand,” Bill mused. “A good approximation will do. The goblins are no different from anyone else in being terrified of Bellatrix. They won’t risk angering her by making her jump through a lot of hoops. I’d wager a good copy would convince them for as long as we’d need it to.”
“But how do we get even that?” asked Harry. “Can anyone remember that clearly what it looks like?”

“Slughorn,” Hermione said suddenly. “He’s in with them, isn’t he? And aren’t Slytherins all supposed to be clever? Maybe he can find a way to make a copy without her knowing, then get it to us without anyone finding out.”

Harry and Ron looked dubious. “Can we trust him with something this big?” Harry frowned. “No offense, Hermione, but he’s not exactly James Bond.”

Ignoring the looks of confusion from Ron and Bill, Hermione said, “He’s survived a year or more as a spy amongst Death Eaters without getting caught. I think maybe he’s got more tricks up his sleeves than we know about.”

“But what if he’s caught?” said Harry. “He didn’t warn us about the attack on the safe-houses. Voldemort didn’t trust him enough to tell him about that.”

“Or didn’t want to send him on the attack and wanted to keep it on a need-to-know basis,” Hermione countered.

“Doesn’t really matter if he’s the ideal choice,” said Tonks. “He’s our only choice. I’ll contact him tonight. But if it works, we’ll need a way to get the fake wand from him.”

“We could use ’arry’s owl,” suggested Fleur. “Only transfigure ’er so she looks like some ozer owl.”

Harry thought about it. “That could work. And she’ll be glad to get out and do something.”

Bill leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. “There’s more. Fleur and I have been doing a bit of careful poking around the past few months. We’ve managed to find out a fair bit about the Lestrange vault. It’s one of the deepest and most heavily guarded. There are some other things you’ll need to be prepared for.”

Harry took a deep breath. “Like what?”

#

“Out of my way!” Tonks stormed through Diagon Alley, gesticulating wildly with Bellatrix’s wand. No spells were coming from the wand, of course—it was a Geminio replica, and like the photo Snape had copied for Harry, it didn’t function as the original did. Tonks herself, on the other hand, was working just fine. She played the part of her aunt to a T, and the sparse crowd parted around her like water. Hermione, Harry, and Ron followed in her wake, a little disturbed by the convincing performance.

Underneath an awning in front of one of the closed shops, Hermione spotted a wizard watching them carefully, but he made no move either toward or away from them. “Dawlish,” Tonks whispered to her when they had passed by him. “An Auror.”

Hermione pursed her lips in disapproval. What was the world coming to when Tonks could wander the streets as Bellatrix Lestrange freely, but if she did so as herself, she’d be immediately taken into custody by her fellow Aurors? It’s a good thing she is on our side, Hermione thought suddenly. A Death Eater with the power to look like anyone they wanted would be . . . bad.

Beside her, Ron and Harry didn’t look too happy about Dawlish either, their borrowed faces frowning. Ron was now a portly, middle-aged man with a goatee, and Harry was a tall, thin man
with a comb-over. She much preferred their own looks, but they’d decided that if they were
generically unattractive, they’d be less memorable and less likely to draw questions. Which was
why Hermione was hurrying along in the body of a plump young woman with skin troubles and an
unfortunate nose.

As they approached Gringotts, Hermione went over Bill’s instructions in her head:

_They’ve heightened security, so there’ll be two goblins at the front with Probity Probes. You can’t
let them scan you, or they’ll see right through your disguises._

They ascended the steps toward the main doors. As expected, the goblin guards only had terror-
filled eyes for the witch they thought was Bellatrix, giving Hermione and Harry time to draw their
wands unnoticed and whisper “Confundo” under their breaths. They had the wands back in their
pockets by the time they reached the top.

“You already scanned us, imbeciles!” snapped Tonks, stopping the goblins with the Probes half-
raised.

“What are you on about, Bograg?” one of the goblins accused the other. “We already scanned
them.” He swept a bow to Tonks, which looked very odd with his short stature and oversized
fingers and feet. “Apologies, Madam Lestrange.”

Tonks hissed and passed by them; Harry, Ron, and Hermione trailed submissively behind her.

The bank’s marble hall was cool and immense. Several witches and wizards cast startled, nervous
glances at them as they entered, but most of the goblins carried on as if nothing were unusual:
consummate professionals.

_Goblins are very shrewd creatures,_ Bill had gone on, _and they only get shrewder with age. To have
the best chance of intimidating one so that he doesn’t ask too many questions, try to find the
youngest goblin you can. There’s one called Niptuk who only started a month ago. He’s usually
stationed at a counter on the far left._

“You there!” Tonks called and strode toward the counter of a goblin who was slightly less wrinkly
and old-man-looking than the others. “I wish to access my vault.”

“Of cOURSE, Madam Lestrange,” the goblin stammered. “At once—Er, no, I mean—I mean, I’ll
need to see some identification, if you please.”

Tonks scowled at him. “What is your name?” she asked in a dangerous voice.

“Niptuk, ma’am,” said the goblin, visibly quivering.

“Well, Niptuk,” said Tonks, “I do not please. But if you must, here.” She thrust the fake wand
toward him.

He jumped with a squeak, then came to himself and took it from her with shaking hands. “Er, yes,
very . . .” He flipped through something on his counter which Hermione couldn’t see. It must have
been some sort of wand reference guide, as he quickly handed the wand back to Tonks. “Thank
you, ma’am. Th-that seems to be in order. Right this way.”

He hopped down from his stool and disappeared into the back. He was gone for several long
moments, and Ron started shuffling his feet nervously. Hermione shushed him and poked him with
her elbow. “It’s okay.” She hoped.
The deepest vaults are guarded by a dragon, but as long as you have the Clankers, you should be fine. Make sure Niptuk doesn’t forget them.

A moment later, Niptuk arrived, carrying a bag that sounded like it was full of metal. “Follow me, please.”

They followed Niptuk through one of the doors and into a stone passageway. It was a tight fit to get them all into the rail cart, and Niptuk didn’t seem at all pleased with being so close to an infamous murderer, but soon the car was off and they were all focused on not getting thrown out.

Down and down the cart went, air whipping past their ears so fast they could barely hear anything else. The cart kept going and going, deep into the cavernous bowels of the bank. It reminded Hermione of a Muggle roller coaster she’d been on once, only far, far more terrifying. She doubted goblins had ever heard of such things as seat belts and safety standards.

You’ll want to bring an umbrella—a big one—or the Thief’s Downfall will spoil everything.

Hermione could see it, a great waterfall pouring down from some unseen source to the rails a hundred yards below them. She pulled a shrunken Muggle umbrella from her pocket and gave her wand a wave. Quietly, so that Niptuk wouldn’t turn around from his spot in the very front of the cart, she raised the now beach-size umbrella over herself and her friends. As the enchanted waterfall got closer and closer, the sound became a rush in her ears, echoing through the cavern, and she tensed, her grip on the umbrella tightening. Then, with a crash, they barreled through it, tiny droplets spraying into her face—but the umbrella held. The cart lurched alarmingly, but Niptuk made a hasty adjustment to the control lever, and it got itself righted again. Hermione shook off the umbrella, shrunk it, and put it back in her pocket. Then Ron made a show of doing a Drying Charm, and Niptuk looked over his shoulder and offered a timid thanks for the courtesy.

It wasn’t long before the cart came to a stop in what must have been the very deepest part of the cavern.

“Blimey,” Ron muttered, staring at the sickly old dragon that was chained before a handful of vaults.

It was terrible. The poor creature had been kept prisoner down here for who knows how long. It looked like it hadn’t seen sunlight in decades. Hermione grimaced, but she could say nothing. No Death Eater minion would care a jot for a monstrous old beast.

Niptuk hopped out of the cart. Harry followed Tonks out, then had to give Hermione and Ron a hand; they weren’t used to maneuvering bodies with so much extra weight around. Ron nearly landed on his bum.

The goblin pointedly refused to notice this and immediately pulled from his bag some strange metal instruments that made loud clanking noises when shaken. The dragon howled in fear and cowered back into a corner. Hermione’s stomach turned to see it. As soon as the Ministry was back in responsible hands, she would have words with them about the treatment of magical creatures in Britain. Even—no, especially—in a well-known, centuries-old institution like Gringotts, this sort of abuse should not be tolerated.

The Clankers in one hand, Niptuk went to one of the vaults and laid his hand against it. The door melted away, revealing a deep, rough-hewn vault filled with gold, silver, and treasure of all kinds. Niptuk moved away from it to hold off the dragon, leaving Hermione and the others to their purpose.
I’ve heard rumors about the Lestrange vault. They say what’s inside it is cursed with Gemino and Flagrante. So don’t touch anything except the thing you’re going for, or you’ll wind up buried in red-hot treasure. For that matter, don’t touch what you’re going for either, at least not with your hands. It’ll probably have the same curses on it.

Hermione and the others lit their wands and looked inside. There were stacks of gold coins nearly to the ceiling, furs and skins from animals she couldn’t identify, and all manner of other things scattered throughout the vault. They stepped gingerly inside, careful to walk only on the bare floor.

“Where is it?” Harry wondered aloud as they searched the vault.

“There!” Tonks hissed. Her wand—her real wand, which she’d slipped out of her sleeve—was shooting a stream of light toward a shelf high on the wall. A small, gold cup with an engraving of a badger sat unassumingly on the shelf.

There are some spells that won’t work inside the vaults. You won’t be able to Summon or Levitate the cup, so you’ll have to find some other way to get to it if it’s in a bad spot.

“Ron, have you got it?” Hermione whispered.

Ron pulled a small, straight stick no bigger than a chopstick from his pocket and pointed his wand at it. “Engorgio.” The stick grew and lengthened into a thin pole.

“Careful!” Hermione warned, as Ron had nearly knocked over a pile of coins.

He got it under control; he was holding it tightly, braced under his arm. It had grown to over twelve feet long. “I hope this works,” he muttered.

They waited, holding their breaths as Ron eased the elongated pole toward the cup. Hermione’s heart thumped loudly. One false move and Ron could send treasure down on top of them, and then it would multiply until it crushed and burned them all.

The pole reached the cup, tapped it, nearly knocked it over—and then slipped through one of the handles. It slid down the length of the pole quickly.

“Don’t let it touch you!”

But Hermione’s warning was unnecessary. Harry pointed his wand at the pole, and before the cup reached the bottom and touched Ron’s hands, a wooden crosspiece had been added to the pole so that it looked a bit like a lance.

“Finite Incantatem,” whispered Harry, and the pole shrunk, gently lowered by Ron as it shrank until it was a short stick once more. Harry caught the cup in a bag he’d pulled from his pocket, then stuffed the bag into his jacket.

They all let out a deep breath of relief. They’d done it. They had the cup.

“I’m done!” Tonks yelled at the goblin as they emerged from the vault. “Take me back, Niptuk.”

The young goblin looked all too eager to be rid of her. He scurried toward them, stuffing the Clankers back into their bag and pausing only to close the vault’s door before launching himself into the cart. It was only a matter of moments before Hermione and the others had joined him and they were off, zooming back up the cavern’s long track.

Once they reentered the main hall of Gringotts, Niptuk hurried back to his station as quickly as
possible, and Tonks led them past the curious gazes of the goblin bankers behind the counter.

They had nearly reached the exit when suddenly Tonks shifted form. One moment she was Bellatrix, the next she was the Hogwarts Astronomy teacher, Aurora Sinistra. Hermione gasped, but if she hadn’t been walking nearly beside her, she might not have noticed, as Sinistra actually looked a lot like Bellatrix from the back. Tonks didn’t even have to adjust her stride. Hermione heard murmuring from the goblins behind her, but she knew better than to ask Tonks why she’d shifted. When she once again looked forward as they reached the steps to the bank, Hermione was glad for that.

The real Bellatrix Lestrange brushed past them in a storming fury—which was probably her usual temperament. She didn’t so much as glance at her niece or the others, but as they hurried down the steps, they heard Bella’s shriek of rage.

“What do you mean I was just here?” she demanded.

“That’s our cue,” said Tonks, and they broke into a run.

They weaved through the crowd, pushing people aside as they raced back to the Leaky Cauldron.

“Halt!” cried a voice.

“Keep going,” urged Tonks. “It’s Dawlish. Don’t let him get a clear shot.” They didn’t have to be told twice. They pushed past people, heads ducked, keeping as many bodies between themselves and the misguided Auror as possible.

“I know it’s you, Tonks!” Dawlish shouted.

At the name of the witch wanted for assassinating the Minister, people on the street began to pay more attention. They flung themselves away from the escaping Order members, thinning out the group of people Hermione and the others were trying to lose themselves in. Gasps and cries came from those they shoved past, and also cries of “Get her!” “She’s worse than her aunt!” and “Freak!”

Dawlish was gaining on them, and Hermione was afraid this would come down to a fight. A red bolt of light flew past her, striking an old man Tonks had just ducked behind.

They made it to the Leaky Cauldron only seconds before Dawlish and shoved their way through the patrons and out onto the busy London street. Before Dawlish could catch up to them, they Disapparated.

#

The Polyjuice Potion wore off just as they got back to the castle.

“I’ll go tell the others the mission was successful,” Tonks said, shifting back into her own shape.

“You lot go take care of that piece of rubbish, yeah?”

Harry grinned. They’d all been feeling a bit giddy with victory since their narrow escape. “We’re on it.”

While Tonks went off to find the others, Harry, Ron, and Hermione ran to Gryffindor Tower. They didn’t stop until they were in Harry’s room. He pulled the bag out of his pocket and emptied the cup out onto the floor. It seemed to be glowing and emitting a squeal, like it knew what was going on and was furious.
Harry withdrew the sword of Gryffindor from under his mattress. He looked at the cup, considering, then handed the sword to Ron.

Ron looked up with surprised. “What’s this?”

“Your turn,” Harry said with a smile. “Hermione and I have both destroyed one.”

Fingers wrapping tightly around the hilt of the sword, Ron grinned. “Thanks, mate.” He turned his attention to the cup. With his face set resolutely, he raised the sword above his head.

The cup screamed, and a whoosh of gas shot out of it, filling the air in front of them. Caught off guard, Ron froze, staring at the images that played out on the gas like a projection.

Hermione recoiled. It was herself . . . and Snape. They were naked. They were having sex.

She looked on in horror at the images of herself and Snape, eyes flashing red . . . She was on her hands and knees, and Snape was kneeling behind her, moving furiously, hands clasped tightly to her hips. They both panted and moaned like animals. There was something about them both, more beautiful and more terrible than either was in life.

It was an illusion. Pure illusion. She and Snape had never done it like that. She looked at Ron, still holding the sword aloft. Anger, betrayal, and disgust twisted his face painfully.

As one, the images of Hermione and Snape raised their heads to look at Ron, never pausing what they were doing. The fake Snape grinned maliciously at him, and the fake Hermione laughed in his face.

The sword slipped from Ron’s grip and clattered to the floor.

“It’s a trick, Ron!” Hermione shouted. “The Horcrux is trying to save itself!”

“But it’s true,” Ron said, breath coming in gasps as he tried to stay in control of himself.

“No!”

“It doesn’t matter if it is or not, Ron!” Harry shouted, ignoring the images. “Kill it! Kill the Horcrux! Don’t let it win!”

A shadow passed over Ron’s face. “I’ll kill it,” he growled, and picked up the sword. With a feral cry, he swung the sword so that it passed right through the images of Hermione and Snape—and crashed down onto the cup.

A painful, burning squeal filled their ears, and the gas dissipated into nothing. The cup was cleft in two by the blade of the sword. Ron stood over it, chest heaving as he sucked in breaths.

Harry clapped him on the back. “Good job, Ron.”

Ron shrugged Harry off, dropped the sword, and walked out the door.

Hermione was crying when Harry looked at her. “He’ll calm down,” he told her. “Horcruxes can really mess you about. At least . . . that’s what Ginny says.”

She nodded, remembering the image of Draco she’d seen when she destroyed the diadem. It had been terrible, what the Horcruxes had shown them. True but not true. She didn’t know what she could say to Ron to make him forget it.
“He just needs some time—” Harry started, then fell to the floor with a cry of pain.

“Harry!” Hermione flew to his side. What now?

He clapped his hand to his head—his scar. For several long seconds, he cried out and writhed, and Hermione hadn’t a clue what to do.

Then, he stopped and sat up, panting. “The cup!” he gasped. “Wormtail! The Horcruxes!”

“What about them, Harry? You’re not making any sense.”

Harry’s green eyes locked with hers. “He knows.”
A wild, writhing snake of terror coiled around Hermione’s heart. “He? Harry, you don’t mean—”

“Voldemort. He reached into my skull and pulled it all out. I couldn’t stop him. We thought we’ve been hiding so well, but—Hermione, we have to tell the others.” He jumped to his feet and dragged her out the door.

They didn’t stop until they’d reached the Entrance Hall, where they found McGonagall, Kingsley, and Mad-Eye talking in front of the House hourglasses.

“Potter!” McGonagall gasped upon seeing them nearly fall over themselves to reach her. “Were you successful? Did you—”

“The Horcrux, yes, we destroyed it,” Harry said between puffs of breath.

“You’re positive?” she asked. “This is very import—”

“Yes! Yes! It’s killed!” he snapped. “But Voldemort knows!”


Harry pointed frantically at his head, still trying to catch his breath. “No. Yes. He saw it in my head.”

“The connection Voldemort has to Harry’s mind,” Hermione translated. “He hasn’t used it in two years, but . . .” Of course. They were seen. “Bellatrix. She must have told him we’d stolen the cup, and he looked in Harry’s head to find out why.”

Harry nodded. “He saw everything. He knows what we’re doing. And he’s furious.”

McGonagall’s eyes were wide as she turned to Mad-Eye and Kingsley. “Gather everyone. Quickly.” They were moving to do so before she’d got the words out. “Ronald just ran outside,” she told Harry and Hermione. “You’d best go get him. This is no time for anyone to be wandering around alone. Then hurry back.”

With a nod, Hermione and Harry ran out the front door, onto the grounds. They could see Ron in the distance, tramping over the grass, but they hadn’t got fifty yards before Harry suddenly stopped short.

“Ginny! She was going to visit Charlie in the hut while we were gone. I’ve got to tell her! Can you get Ron?”

“Yes! Go!”

Ron was at least eight inches taller than Hermione, with long legs, and his anger was giving speed to his strides. She had to break into a full sprint to catch up to him, and even then she didn’t manage it until they were far away from the castle, with Harry nowhere in sight.

“Ron, stop!” she cried, gasping deep breaths, as she grabbed his arm. “Haven’t you heard me yelling at you?”
Ron yanked his arm out of her grip and kept walking. “Leave me alone, Hermione,” he snarled.

“Ron, it’s not what you think!”

He spun on her, his eyes blazing. “Not what I think? I think you married that greasy git, our bloody teacher, who’s old enough to be your father! I think you’ve let him shag you and made little git-babies with him!” His voice dropped into a low, dangerous growl. “And now . . . I think you liked it. What am I wrong about, Hermione? What part of that is it not?”


Ron’s jaw had gone slack with shock, but now he snapped it shut. “You’re right. I’m sorry. But, Hermione . . . Snape.” He said it as if the name itself was all the explanation and argument he needed.

“What about him?”

Ron rubbed a hand over his hair and paced with agitation. “When it was just some mysterious random bloke, I could almost ignore it, could almost pretend everything was normal. And then it was Snape, and even then I thought I could handle it because I knew you didn’t really want him, that if you had your choice, you’d pick me, and if I waited long enough . . .” He stopped pacing and looked at her intently. “Do you like it, Hermione?” His tone wasn’t harsh as it had been before, just honest and serious. “When he shags you. Do you like it?”

Heat flushed Hermione’s face, and she grasped for something to say. “That’s none of your business, Ron!”

He stepped closer, until his body seemed to take up her entire field of vision. She looked up and found him staring at her, his blue eyes bright and desperate. There was wetness in them. “I love you, Hermione,” he said. Then he kissed her.

His mouth was hot and hungry, and he wasted no time in slipping his tongue between her lips and urging her mouth open for him. She complied instantly, without reservation, acting on instinct born of seven years of growing desire. Spurred by her response, he pulled her against his body, his arms wrapping around her waist as she wrapped hers around his neck, weaving the fingers of one hand in his tousled ginger hair.

Ron’s kiss was not like Snape’s kiss. Ron had technique. He did things to her that elicited tiny moans of pleasure and made her heart flutter wildly against her ribs. Lavender, it seemed, had taught him a few things.

Thoughts of Snape and Lavender brought Hermione back to herself, and she pulled away. Another time, another world . . .

“I love you too, Ron,” she said, staring at a spot on his chest.

He was silent at first, then let out a slow, anguished sigh. “But you want him.”

“I have him. That’s all that matters right now.”

“Right now?”

She looked up into Ron’s eyes. They were wary and hopeful. She should have told him the truth, that she did want Snape, even if she still wanted Ron, too. That, if given the choice, she honestly
didn’t know that she’d pick her friend over her husband. But she couldn’t shatter what was left of his heart when he was holding it bare and open to her. Not now, not when everything was still so wrong, not when Voldemort—

“Voldemort.” She took a step back, out of Ron’s arms. “Harry.”

Ron’s expression went from lovesick boy to battle-toughened man in the space of a blink. “What’s wrong?”

“Voldemort saw into Harry’s mind. He knows about the Horcruxes, about everything. McGonagall’s gathering everyone. She sent us to get you, then Harry went to the hut to get Ginny. They’ll probably be back at the castle soon.”

“Come on, then!” Ron took her hand in his, and they ran back to the castle.

Hermione dropped his hand when they arrived at the main entrance, reaching instead to open the door. They hadn’t even got it closed behind them when McGonagall met them.

“Where’s Potter?” she asked.

“He’s not back yet?”

“Obviously not, Hermione. When did you last see him?”

Hermione told her.

McGonagall frowned. “The rest of the Order are on their way here. If Harry doesn’t return soon—”

“I’m here!” said a breathless voice behind them. Hermione looked out the doorway to see Harry jogging up with Ginny, Charlie, Peach the werewolf, and—

“Horace!” McGonagall gasped.

Slughorn shuffled up behind the others, panting and wheezing like the past-prime, overweight wizard he was.

“We found him at the gate!” Harry explained as Slughorn reached the doors and leaned on one, trying to catch his breath.

“Horace, what’s wrong?” McGonagall asked sharply.

“Dark . . . Lord . . .” Slughorn said between great, heaving breaths. “Going to . . . attack . . .”

McGonagall pursed her lips. “Yes, we thought as much. How far off is he?”

Slughorn shook his head. “Not . . . now . . . Five . . . days . . .”

“What?” Ron said, sounding as surprised as Hermione felt. “Why wait?”

“Oh, no,” murmured Peach.

Charlie’s eyes widened in horror. “The full moon.”

#

Ten minutes later, everyone was gathered in the Great Hall. Not just Order members, but the
civilians and most of the werewolves were there (those that weren’t left to patrol the grounds during the meeting). The babies had been brought in so that no one would have to miss the meeting in order to watch them. Even the Hogwarts house-elves were standing around the walls, listening silently. McGonagall had called a war council, and this time, it wasn’t just an Order matter.

“The Dark Lord plans to attack Hogwarts five days from now, at sunset,” said Slughorn. He was standing at his spot at the High Table, where most of the senior Order members sat, leading the meeting.

The werewolves in the room—and those who thought it prudent to pay attention to moon phases while living with them—erupted into murmurs and questions. McGonagall held up her hand, and they gradually fell silent.

“We knew an attack was likely to happen eventually,” McGonagall said calmly as she stood before the group. “We’re fortunate to have as much advance notice as we do.”

“And how did that bloke get away from You-Know-Who to warn us?” asked one of the werewolves, the shifty-eyed red-haired boy Hermione’s age. “And won’t You-Know-Who notice he’s missing? And if he does, won’t he change his plan? If it wasn’t a misdirect all along.”

Slughorn looked uncomfortably at the young man and fiddled with his hands. “I admit, it was a close thing, and I’m afraid the Dark Lord did notice my escape—but I don’t think he’ll change his plan. Once some of his followers talked him out of charging off immediately, before he could gather his army, he seemed quite keen on waiting until the full moon. I doubt he’ll think his victory is in danger even if you—that is, we—have advance warning.”

“Oh?” said the werewolf. “And why’s that?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” barked Spears in an impatient tone that sounded a lot like Shut up, you imbecile. “We’ll either be out of the picture or on his side once the moon rises. If we’re smart, we’ll be away from the others, which will cut their fighting force dramatically, and he’ll overwhelm them with sheer numbers in a matter of minutes. If we’re not smart, we’ll still be around, and we’ll cut our own people down from the inside, and he might not even have to attack us at all, just wait until sunrise and pick off those of us who are left.” The room had grown eerily silent as Spears spoke, the full weight of the danger sinking in. And then he added, “That’s what he thinks, anyway.”

“What he thinks?” Harry repeated hopefully.

McGonagall’s eyes slid to her right, to Snape. He stood and said in a calm, clear voice, “Yes, Potter. The Dark Lord is, as usual, overconfident in his own omniscience. Or at least he will be, if our guests don’t bungle things before then.” There were a few low, insulted growls at his tone, but he ignored them. “With the help of some of the less incompetent potion-brewers among us, I’ve been gathering ingredients, brewing, and supplying Wolfsbane Potion to all of our resident werewolves. Provided this task continues uninterrupted and the wolves continue to take it as instructed, they will be as much in their right minds when the full moon rises as they are now.”

Waves of relieved sighs and chatter flowed around the room. The coming battle was still a grim prospect, but at least now it didn’t seem like an absolutely hopeless one.

And Hermione now had an explanation as to what Snape had been doing for the past several days and why she hadn’t seen him. She hadn’t wanted to think he’d simply been avoiding her after their disastrous anniversary night (even if it was probably the truth, even if she’d been doing her part to avoid him), and knowing he’d been keeping himself busy with such an important task helped to ease her mind.
Neville raised his hand. “But won’t You-Know-Who’s werewolves attack his people as well as ours?”

“Ordinarily, yes,” Lupin explained. “An individual werewolf under the full moon, without the benefit of Wolfsbane Potion, will attack his friends as quickly as his enemies. But when gathered together in a pack under a strong Alpha such as Greyback, they follow the Alpha.”

“But how will Voldemort control who Greyback attacks?” asked George. “Won’t he be as wild as the others?”

“Fenrir Greyback is not a typical werewolf,” Lupin said, his tone going hard. “Greyback has given himself over to the wolf to such a degree that there’s very little change when he actually transforms. At times I wonder if the wolf didn’t take him over completely long ago, so that it’s only when he’s transformed that he’s in his true form, or if his human nature is so similar to the wolf’s that the two coexist within him without the power struggle native to the rest of us. It’s not so much a matter of Greyback staying in his right mind when he’s transformed. It’s more that he’s never in his right mind the rest of the time. Whatever the cause, Greyback is the same beast no matter what form he takes.”

“Now then,” McGonagall said once the reaction to these statements died down, “there is still much for us to do and only five days to do it in. I hope I have everyone’s attention, because I don’t want to have to repeat myself.”

The next days were a blur of activity and adrenaline, one task blending into the next in an endless stream of preparation.

Hermione knew it must have been longer, but it seemed only minutes from the time she touched her wand to her D.A. coin, causing it to heat and the words ‘It’s Time—Hogwarts—8-8-98’ to appear around the edges, until people began arriving at the gate.

At first it was the younger D.A. members, those who were of age but not yet entrenched in careers. Parvati and Padma arrived nearly at the same time as Michael Corner and Terry Boot and were swiftly assigned tasks and put to work. Most of the rest of the D.A. arrived less than twenty-four hours after Hermione sent the message. Most were set helping the Order secure the castle and prepare extra healing potions and the like, though McGonagall gave Oliver Wood the task of assembling and leading some sort of aerial strike force. He swiftly gathered most of the better Quidditch players regardless of House affiliation and began organizing maneuvers on the pitch.

Some of the Hogwarts teachers started showing up almost immediately, as well. Flitwick went straight to reinforcing the protective charms on the castle and moving some of the furniture and suits of armor near the castle’s entry points. When Sprout arrived, she snagged Neville and a few other people and went to the greenhouses. Hermione couldn’t imagine what Herbology could possibly have to do with defense or battle, but they seemed intent on something.

Fred and George’s shop assistant, Verity, arrived on the third day of preparations with a wagon’s worth of items from the shop. As soon as she checked in with her employers, Verity set to passing them out, and Hermione found herself with a brand new Shield Cloak and a handful of Decoy Detonators. She wondered how much use they’d be (she didn’t imagine there’d be much need for diversions during a battle, and she knew the Death Eaters wouldn’t be using jinxes tame enough to be deflected by the cloak’s simple Shield Charm), but she appreciated the gesture, and she hoped that those among them with less battle experience would find such things helpful.
Adults came, too. A fair number came with their adult children, insisting that even if it had been twenty years since their D.A.D.A. N.E.W.T.s, they weren’t about to let their kids participate in such madness alone. (Presumably, those who could talk their kids out of participating entirely had simply not shown up.) Some, however, looked too old to be in school and too young to be parents of students. Bill recognized a fair few of them, as did Tonks, and even Lupin and Snape had classmates among them. As the corridors grew more populous, Hermione could recognize shopkeepers from Hogsmeade and Diagon Alley among the throng. Reinforcements, it seemed, were coming in from all corners of wizarding Britain.

Well, not quite all. According to Arthur Weasley, Umbridge had made it clear to all Ministry personnel that if they were found to be even in the vicinity of Hogwarts during the next week, their employment would be immediately terminated. Which meant no Aurors, no Unspeakables, no Hit Wizards, not even any standard Magical Law Enforcement Patrol officers (aside from such people as were already Order members, of course). As encouraging as it was to have ordinary civilians coming out of the woodwork to help Harry and the Order defend Hogwarts, Hermione wondered if they could really do much against Voldemort’s forces or if they’d be little more than cannon fodder. And if Umbridge meant to bring the Aurors against them, either on Voldemort’s side or when they were all weakened from the battle, she doubted the civilians would have the strength or will to stand against them.

“We can’t worry about what might happen,” Lupin advised as he, Hermione, and Harry made their way across the grounds. “We need to focus on what we know will happen or is likely to happen. We don’t have the time to think about every single potential contingency, and imagining an army of Aurors being sent against us is likely to drive out what courage many on our side have.”

“And it’s not like there’s anything we can do if it does happen,” added Harry. “I mean, we can’t fight the Aurors, right? They’d just be doing their jobs, and they’d probably be made to think it was the right thing to do.”

Lupin nodded grimly. “Exactly right, Harry. If it comes to that, we’ll have to trust them not to blindly follow orders. It’s the best we’ve got. Besides, you don’t get to be an Auror by being dim-witted.”

Hermione decided the two of them were right just as they arrived at their destination. “You know, we could have handled this ourselves,” she observed, ducking a lazily-swung branch. “Fred and George could have sent anyone with us for backup. Shouldn’t you be working out plans with the other werewolves or something?”

Lupin raised his wand, Levitating a branch toward the trunk of the Whomping Willow, and it became as still as any normal tree. “They can spare me for a few minutes. I’m sure the twins are more than capable of assuring the other entrances get sealed, but . . . this one’s personal.” There was a strange hint of wistfulness in his tone. Hermione and Harry kept a look out for surprises as Lupin approached the tree. “And I wanted to make sure this particular path could be opened again once this is over. I have a feeling there might be need of it before too long.”

Waving his wand at the tree’s opening in an odd, fluid motion Hermione didn’t recognize, Lupin spoke a soft, lilting incantation. A jet of blue mist shot from the tip of his wand, plunging into the hole, deeper and deeper, filling the tunnel. Finally, the flow of mist stopped, and the blue mist in the tunnel solidified into something like gel, then a spongy material, then hardened completely. He went up to it and rapped his knuckles on the substance. It sounded as solid as concrete.

“What is it?” Hermione asked. She’d never seen such a spell before.

“Something I invented in school, in case anyone was foolish enough to follow me. I wanted to
make sure I could seal the tunnel so that no one could break through. It’s impenetrable to normal blasting curses, and only I know the counter-spell to dissolve it. I can’t make a wall with it, only fill spaces. Not very versatile, I admit, but I had a very specific purpose in inventing it. Of course, the one time I did need it, it was too late for me to cast it, but . . .” He shrugged. “At least I can use it now. Go ahead. Try it.”

“Confringo!” Harry shouted, but his curse bounced off the blue substance, knocking a few leaves from one of the Willow’s limbs. “Wow. How many spells did you guys invent in school?”

Lupin chuckled. “A few, I suppose. Most of no practical value for everyday usage, though. I can write them down for you if you’d like.”

“Yes!” said Harry. “Please do. Are there any of my dad’s that you can remember?”

“Aside from the one on the Map to let it detect a person’s true identity even through disguises?” Lupin said as they moved away from the Willow. The opening closed, and the tree began to sway and take agitated swings at them. “I recall an amusing charm he cast on his spectacles occasionally which made it look as if everyone were dressed as their opposite—or something like it. Made me look like a shepherdess, apparently. Not much use to the rest of us, since none of us wore glasses and it didn’t change the corrective properties of his, but we could always tell when he was using it. He’d start giggling madly for no reason at all. Whatever it did to Severus seemed to be his favorite, but he never told us what he was seeing. Said it would make us weep with envy that we couldn’t see it as well. Thoughtful man, your father.”

#

The next day, after helping Sprout and Neville plant Venomous Tentaculas at strategic points outside the castle walls, Hermione found herself with no task to move immediately to. So, she mustered her courage, resolved not to allow Snape to remind her even obliquely of the embarrassment she’d suffered on their anniversary, and headed for the Potions classroom.

If she didn’t know better, she’d have thought a class was in session—except that while some of the people hunched over the bubbling cauldrons that filled the tables were around her age, others were older, and some were older than Snape himself. She noticed Terry Boot wearing a look of intense concentration as he stirred his cauldron. Tonks was at the table beside him, also working intently. Fred and George were there as well, and Slughorn was working at a table at the front. Moving silently among the crowded tables, Snape kept an eye on the brewing, offering a suggestion now and then, but not snapping at anyone as he usually did in class. He had hand-picked those he knew to be most trustworthy when it came to brewing correctly, and given the importance of this potion in warding off a gruesome death for them all, she was glad to see it. She was also, however, a little hurt that Snape hadn’t asked her to help brew the potion as well. Hadn’t she proven herself more than enough? Hadn’t she found the cure for an incurable poison?

She walked up to him, careful not to disturb or startle any of the brewers. “Severus,” she said, and his eyes snapped to her. “I need a task. I’d like to help.”

A carefully guarded expression slipped over his features. “There are enough volunteers here to brew the potion. However . . .” He moved to the nearest brewer and peered into his cauldron, which had begun to exude a faint blue smoke. “Well done, Mr. Macmillan. That potion is finished.”

Ernie sat back and wiped a bit of sweat from his brow. “Thank you, sir.”

“You may go. Be back at the same time tomorrow.”
Ernie slid off his stool, nodded at Hermione, and left. Taking four goblets from a nearby shelf, Snape ladled the contents of the cauldron into them. “Miss Smith,” he said calmly, then moved to the desk at the front and made a few marks on a parchment.

Cecilia got up from a bench at the side of the room and walked toward Hermione. She hadn’t even seen the other girl sitting there.

Snape returned to them. “Miss Granger,” he said, all professionalism, and Hermione had to fight not to roll her eyes, “you and Miss Smith are to take these goblets to the wolves.” He handed two to Hermione. “Give these to Lupin and Spears.” He handed the other two to Cecilia. “Give these to Scratch and Tessa. Stay until you’ve watched them drink every drop of it, and then report back to me.”

Hermione gaped at him. Delivery duty? That was it? That was the best use he could make of the talents she knew he knew she had?

He raised an eyebrow and said in a very low voice, “Is that task not important enough to satisfy your ego?”

Her mouth snapped shut, and she lowered her eyes in shame. It was an important task, after all. If the werewolves didn’t drink the potion, brewing it wouldn’t matter. And besides that, he was right about her ego. They all needed to work together, and that meant doing the task that needed to be done at the time, not just picking and choosing the ones that matched her skills and intelligence.

She couldn’t muster a response, so just turned and followed Cecilia out of the Potions classroom.

Cecilia didn’t mention the exchange as they walked. She didn’t so much as look askance at her, though Hermione was sure she’d heard Snape’s words. They walked in companionable silence for a while, taking care not to spill any of the potion.

Eventually, Cecilia said casually, “Do you remember what I told you about the reason I decided to help you?”

Hermione wondered what the other Gryffindor could be getting at, but she was glad to talk about anything other than Snape at the moment. “You said your mother was sick before, and that now you could help because she’d passed away, so you didn’t have to worry about taking care of her anymore.”

Cecilia nodded. “That was actually only partially the truth.”

That got Hermione’s attention. “What do you mean?” She dearly hoped Cecilia wasn’t about to turn traitor on her or something. It was a terrible thing to think, but it wouldn’t have been the first time something like it had happened, and the timing was ripe for it.

Instead of answering her, Cecilia offered a non sequitur. “Most people probably think I’m one of the pure-blood Smiths, like Zacharias.”

Hermione had assumed exactly that, and she was all but certain Voldemort had also assumed so. “You’re not?”

“I’m actually a half-blood. My dad is one of the pure-blood Smiths, but my mum’s a Muggle. Her maiden name was Smith, though (it’s a pretty common one among Muggles), and the Smith family’s so large and not really very dogmatic about the whole blood purity thing in general, so it’s easy to pretend. Dumbledore seemed to think it was important to pretend.”
“What does your blood status have to do with anything?” Hermione was trying not to be rude, but the girl wasn’t making any sense. Then again, it wasn’t like they had anything better to talk about while they walked.

“I was named after my great-great-grandmother. She was a Muggle too. My mum’s whole family were Muggles.”

Hermione sighed and resigned herself to listening until Cecilia got around to saying whatever it was she was trying to say. Hopefully she spat it out before they reached the room where the werewolves were meeting. “How interesting.”

Cecilia looked sidelong at her. “That’s not the interesting part yet.” She gave a little self-deprecating smirk. “Sorry, I’m getting there. I’m not always very good at explaining things. The thing is, what my mum died of was an illness of the heart. The Muggle doctors couldn’t figure out what it was exactly, but according to Mum, it was the same thing that her mum had died of, and her grandmother, and my great-great-grandmother Cecilia. None of them ever knew what it was either, but they always contracted it when they were around thirty and died within a handful of years. My dad thought that surely the wizard Healers could figure it out and cure her. They did figure out what it was, but they couldn’t cure her.”

“What was it?” Hermione asked, curious now.

“A curse,” said Cecilia. “A very powerful bloodline curse, passed from mother to daughter. They tried breaking it, but they couldn’t.”

“But why would a wizard curse a Muggle like that? The level of spite and viciousness it would take to curse a person’s entire bloodline—”

“I know. The wizard—or witch—would have to be almost crazy, wouldn’t they?”

Hermione looked at Cecilia in shock. “You know what happened, don’t you? What was it? How did you find out?”

“Dumbledore,” she said simply. “He learned of it somehow and told me. Not until after Mum had died, though. Guess maybe it wasn’t relevant until then.”

“But what happened? Who cursed your family?”

“A witch. A mad, lovesick witch who’d stolen my great-great-grandmother’s fiancé with a love potion. When he finally broke away from it, he went back to Cecilia and married her, but the witch was already pregnant with his child. She cursed Cecilia because she was the one my great-great-grandfather had wanted all along. Maybe she wasn’t powerful enough to make a curse that would have immediate effect, but I think it’s more likely she wanted Cecilia to suffer as much as possible. Apparently she didn’t live long enough to see the curse in action, though. I guess she died as soon as she gave birth to the child.”

Her story had some sickeningly familiar elements to it. Hermione was beginning to feel vaguely nauseated. “Your great-great-grandfather. What was his name?”

Cecilia looked at her, meeting her eyes with a calm, flat expression. “Tom Riddle.”

Hermione nearly dropped the goblets of Wolfsbane Potion and tripped over her own feet at the same time. After she recovered from the near blunder, she hissed, “You mean Voldemort is your . . .” She tried to work out the lineage.
Cecilia sighed. “Half-great-grand-uncle.”

“Does he know?”

Cecilia threw her head back and laughed harder than Hermione had ever seen her do. “Do you think I’d still be alive if he did?”

“Considering he murdered his own father and grandparents, I guess not.”

“So, do you see now why I helped you? I helped you because I thought it would help defeat Voldemort—and I still think that. You’re important to this war, much more than me, anyway. But my motives weren’t entirely as heroic as I might have led you to believe. I wanted to see Voldemort dead, but not just because he’s evil and wants to shape the world in his own twisted image. I had a more selfish stake in it, too.”

Yes, she did see. “The bloodline curse. Merope Gaunt’s curse will only be broken when the last of her bloodline is dead.”

Cecilia nodded. “In order for me to live—past my thirties, anyway—Voldemort would have to die.”

*Neither can live while the other survives.* The thought flitted through Hermione’s mind, and she brushed it away. “Why are you telling me this now? And why are you saying it like that was the case but isn’t any longer?”

Cecilia shrugged. “Because it looks like there’s a fair chance I’ll die anyway. I’m not a nurturer, Hermione. I don’t plan to sit back and take care of the kiddies while everyone else does the fighting. The fact is, I do want to fight. I am a Gryffindor, after all, and part of me is ashamed that I didn’t join the D.A. when I could. I mean, I knew the odds weren’t good that my mom would live no matter what I did. And I know that if I don’t fight now, if Voldemort’s defeated and I live to be a hundred, I’ll always be ashamed that I didn’t fight while others did. I know I might die if I fight, but I also know that living with the shame of letting others die for my life would, in a way, be worse. So, I’ll take my chances and fight. I just thought I’d tell you the whole truth while I could. Just in case.”

They walked for another minute or two in silence as Hermione thought about this. “Thank you,” she said at last. “I’m glad you told me.”

Cecilia nodded acknowledgment, then said, “We’re here.”

The werewolves had set up their temporary meeting area in one of the larger classrooms on the ground floor—the same one, Hermione thought, that Firenze used for his Divination classes. It looked like a little slice of the forest, with trees and grass growing all around, and leaves so thick they made the light coming through the windows look green. Werewolves were perched on branches or lounging in the grass, only some of them paying attention to what Spears and Lupin were saying.

“He’ll probably have a large snake with him,” Lupin explained. “And he may also be wearing a locket or have one on him somewhere. One way or another, these both need to be destroyed before he can be killed.”

Spears swatted the red-haired werewolf upside the head, interrupting the young man in an activity that really oughtn’t to be done in public and which provided Hermione with proof that his hair color was natural, not that she’d doubted it. “Ginger, pay attention! And stop that. There are
humans present.” Spears gave Hermione and Cecilia an apologetic look as Ginger grudgingly rearranged his robes. “Sorry about him. You can take the werewolf out of the wild . . .”

Hermione cleared her throat and tried to erase her own memory. *Note to self: look into auto-Obliviation.* She cast a quick look to her right, hoping, she supposed, to share a commiserating look of disgust with Cecilia, only to find that Cecilia appeared more amused than anything. At least, she hoped so. She didn’t want to think what else Cecilia’s smirk might mean this time.

Deciding to simply pretend she had no idea what Spears was talking about, Hermione went in and walked over to Spears and Lupin.

“Hello, Hermione,” Lupin said, offering a smile. “Cecilia. Did Severus send you?”

Hermione handed one goblet to him and the other to Spears. They drained the goblets without needing to be told, then handed them back to her. “The other two are for Tessa and Scratch.”

Tessa, who’d been standing nearby, came forward to take the goblet from Cecilia and dutifully drained it. Scratch had to be sternly called down from a high branch and leered suggestively at Cecilia as he took his goblet, but he drank it without protest.

Before they left, Hermione thought of what Lupin had been telling the wolves when they’d entered, and a question occurred to her. “What will one of you do if you can get to the snake or locket? Wouldn’t you need Gryffindor’s sword to destroy it?”

Lupin leaned on the room’s lone table. “That could work. Harry will likely have the sword, and it’s possible that one of us could snatch the locket or the snake and get them to Harry to kill. But I don’t really think that’s entirely necessary. Werewolf bites are cursed, remember.”

“They may be cursed,” Hermione pointed out, “but they’re not lethal.”

Lupin stared at her, going very still. “But they are, Hermione. Sooner or later. No werewolf has ever died a natural death of old age.” He leaned back, the gravity in his expression slipping away. “That we know of, anyway. It’s only a guess that a bite might kill a Horcrux, and maybe I’m wrong. If one of us gets the chance to try it, I suppose we’ll find out.”

#

Hermione spent much of the last full day before the battle assisting Harry in some last-minute battle training. Even with several days’ worth of brushing up, many of the adults who’d come to help still didn’t know adequate defensive magic, and most couldn’t even produce a corporeal Patronus. It was exhausting and frustrating work trying to cram important knowledge into their brains, and Hermione got a taste of what Snape must have experienced during all those years of teaching children with small talent in Potions. Still, she had to admit, it was fulfilling when one of them finally grasped a concept or successfully executed a spell, and she felt a rush of joyous adrenaline when a silver turkey shot out of Brighid Finnegan’s wand and flapped wildly around the room.

Seamus, who’d been playing practice dummy for a waitress from the Three Broomsticks, let out a whoop. “Mum! You did it!”

Mrs. Finnegan stared in disbelief at the turkey, then let out a laugh. “I did, didn’t I? And at my age. Who’d have thought?”

A few hours later, Hermione took a break to go help Kingsley and Bill check the wards along the perimeter for gaps. As they made their way along the edge of the forest, Hermione stopped to peer
at something odd in the ground.

“What’s this?”

Kingsley approached, looking at the sprig of green at her feet. “Looks like a young tree. It must have sprouted this spring.”

Well, not so odd, perhaps. Except . . .

“Most of the trees in this forest are coniferous, but this one looks deciduous.” And that’s when she realized where she was standing.

Kingsley seemed to realize the significance of this at the same time. He let out a low whistle and knelt closer to the tiny sapling. “I’ve heard of this happening with yew, but not with oak.”

“What is it?” Bill asked from where he stood a few paces away, keeping an eye out.

“Hagrid’s wand,” Hermione murmured. “It’s regrowing, isn’t it?”

Kingsley nodded. “Looks that way. Remarkable.”

“An improbable tree,” mused Bill. “I wonder if it’s a sign.” He sounded like he was only half joking.

Footsteps tromping through the grass not far off brought them to sharp attention—but it was only Charlie, leading a group of people into the forest. They had bags and poles and leather straps slung over their shoulders, like they were going to trap something. Then she saw the other red-haired figure bringing up the rear, a determined look on his bespectacled face.

“Percy’s here?” she asked. “He hasn’t left his post at the Ministry, has he?”

Bill shook his head. “He’s only here for an hour or two. He should be back before anyone suspects anything.”

“But why’s he going into the forest?”

“Liaising,” Bill said, and didn’t elaborate.

#

Dinner that night was a feast.

Though all but some of the oldest students were absent (several younger students had tried to join, but McGonagall had sent them home because they weren’t of age; Colin Creevey had taken this particularly hard), the tables were full. Some of the werewolves and Order members were out patrolling, but the rest sat with civilians at the tables. Many people sat at their old House tables, but divisions were much more muddled than was usual, particularly at the Slytherin table. There were only a handful of actual Slytherins in their little cobbled-together army (Slughorn, Snape, Mad-Eye, Andromeda, and Evelyn were the only ones Hermione actually knew, though she’d heard of a few others), so their table was filled largely with werewolves and others who either didn’t have House allegiances or didn’t care about them.

Hermione sat at the Gryffindor table with Harry, Ron, and many of her other friends. Dobby and some of the other house-elves were baby-sitting the infants, leaving the new parents to eat, drink, and be merry with the rest of the defenders of the school and freedom.
So, they ate. And drank, though Hermione and Harry had no taste for the firewhiskey that others passed around. The crowd was nearly riotous, and neither McGonagall nor anyone else tried to bring them to order. They all knew the stakes, and if some chose to spend potentially their last night alive in a drunken revel, who had the heart to stop them?

Snape wasn’t at the feast. Hermione assumed he was among those patrolling the grounds in case Voldemort changed his mind and decided to attack them early. She wondered if she’d ever get a moment alone with him before the battle. If she died—or he did—she didn’t want their last private interaction to be his rejection of her.

After eating what they could, Hermione, Harry, and Ron left the Great Hall and returned to the Gryffindor common room. They didn’t speak as they walked through the corridors, passing corners and alcoves where people were rutting, praying, and everything in between.

The common room was empty when they reached it, but a fire burned warmly in the fireplace, and they curled up in the squishy armchairs around it.

“My parents were twenty-one when they died,” Harry reflected. “Looks like I might beat their record.”

Hermione wanted to comfort him, to tell him that was ridiculous, but she couldn’t. The time for lying and self-delusion was past. Harry’s death was a very real possibility, as was all of theirs. So, they just stared into the fire.

“I hate him,” Harry said after another minute. “I really, really hate him.”

Ron grunted agreement, but as there was nothing more to add to that, the silence continued.

After several more minutes during which Ron picked a hole in the arm of his chair, Harry said, “You two are my best friends in the world. You’ve been by my side through so much, from the very beginning. You’ve done more for me than anyone . . . . But I need you to promise me something else.”

“Of course,” Hermione murmured.

“Whatever you want, mate,” said Ron.

Harry met each of their eyes before saying, “If I die, look after James for me. I know what it’s like to grow up without a father. And if something happens to Ginny, too . . . .” His eyes grew desperate, though his posture didn’t change. “Don’t let him grow up thinking nobody loves him. Please. Promise me that.”

Hermione flew off of her chair, kneeling before Harry and grasping his hand. “Of course, Harry. Of course. That’s not going to happen, I promise.” She leaned forward, and he met her half-way, wrapping her in a rib-crushing hug.

“Yeah,” Ron said. His tone was casual, but there was steel behind it. “Can’t happen, Harry. Aside from us, James has the rest of my family, most of the Order, and probably a lot of other people who’d take him in if something happened to you.”

Harry pulled away from Hermione and looked at Ron. “My parents had friends, too, and I still ended up with the Dursleys, with no idea of who or what I really was.”

“Can’t. Happen,” Ron said again.
Hermione sniffed and wiped tears from her eyes with the sleeve of her jumper. “Me too,” she said, and the boys looked at her in confusion. “If I die, I mean. Look after my children. They won’t have all the family that James does. I’m an only child, and my parents are in Australia with no memory of me, and Severus is an only child and his parents are dead, and I know Severus is difficult but—”

Harry laid his hand on hers. “I promise.”

Ron nodded, pain in his expression. “Me too.”

There was a lull as the significance of their vows sunk in. It did ease Hermione’s mind somewhat, knowing that if something happened to her, her best friends would be there for her children. She didn’t think she could ever love any friends more than she loved Harry and Ron in that moment.

Then Ron said, “And if I die, promise you’ll look after my Chocolate Frog cards for me.”

Harry met his gaze gravely. “As if they were my own.” Then the corners of his mouth curled up, and Hermione laughed.

They spent the next hour or so together, trying to act like they were just students and friends, hanging out, enjoying each other’s company, and generally pretending that Voldemort didn’t exist, until Ginny came through the portrait hole, took Harry’s hand, and led him up to their room. Before things could get awkward with Ron, Hermione said goodnight and headed down to the hospital wing.

The babies were already down for the night, so she went to each crib, kissed her children on their foreheads, and said goodnight to Partridge, Pomfrey, and the surrogates before moving to her own bed. A flicker of hope stirred in her that Snape would be lying in the bed they’d left open beside hers . . . but it was empty, as it had been since their anniversary.

“He came to say goodnight to the babies,” Antoinette whispered when she noticed Hermione staring at the empty bed.

She nodded, acknowledging the information but offering no further response. At least he still cared about their children, then. At least it was only Hermione herself he didn’t want to be near. That was something.

Wasn’t it?

#

Breakfast the next morning was a quiet thing. Those who had partied a little too hearty the night before sat around groaning and alternately drinking coffee and water (the school’s limited supply of Sober-Up Potion having been exhausted before most of them were awake). For those who weren’t suffering from hangovers, the grim reality that battle was coming that night and this may be the last morning they’d ever see settled heavy around them. Hermione ate porridge and drank juice and cast looks to the High Table where Snape sat staring into his own food and talking quietly with McGonagall.

After the meal, they all moved to their tasks with a sort of terrified resolve. Hermione spent the morning helping move a few last of the castle’s defensive statues into position, ready to be charmed awake when the time came.

Lunch was set out buffet-style, and people came and went as their duties gave them time to. Hermione ended up sitting with Neville and Antoinette, listening to Antoinette chatter nervously about her family while they ate sandwiches. Hermione hoped that it wouldn’t be her last meal. It
seemed far too anticlimactic.

Afterward, they went to help some of the others move the children from the hospital wing to the Hufflepuff common room, which had been determined as the safest spot in the castle for them to be when the battle came. It was protected by the usual charms that meant not just anyone could get in, and it was deep in the castle’s underbelly, with far less risk of direct assault from the outside. If Voldemort wanted to get to the children, he’d have to get past their entire army and march through the castle to do it.

The Hufflepuff common room was much smaller than the hospital wing, so there was only room for two cribs and one hospital bed, and even then most of the furniture that was already in the room had to be pushed to the walls. Hermione had just handed Cedric over to Antoinette for a feeding when Andromeda took her aside.

“Would you do me a favor?” Andromeda asked. “Would you find Remus and tell him that Ted and I would like to speak to him?”

“Sure,” said Hermione. “I need to go find Evelyn to tell her things are ready down here anyway.”

The Slytherin surrogate had been taking it easy lately, and Hermione didn’t blame her. The baby she carried was nearly two weeks past due, and she was getting worn out pretty quickly. Once the battle was done, provided they lived through it, Hermione meant to see about inducing labor before the pregnancy became dangerous.

Hermione hurried to the forested classroom where the werewolves had set up a sort of pack headquarters. Since Lupin hadn’t been with the group setting up the babies and Tonks was off somewhere with Kingsley and Mad-Eye, Hermione figured that was the best place to find him. The door was open a crack, and she could hear a fair amount of talking and movement from inside. She pushed the door, and it swung silently open.

She’d have thought by now that she couldn’t be that surprised by what the werewolves did anymore, but she couldn’t help staring at what she found when she opened the door. The thirty or so werewolves were standing around the room, most of them completely naked, all but one of them at least partially naked, rubbing paint all over their bodies in random patterns. Precious, who was wearing a sundress and carrying a bowl, moved from werewolf to werewolf, dipping her hand in the paint and applying handprints to the backs of the other wolves.

Searching the crowd for Lupin, she spotted him with his back to her by the table, where he dipped his hands in paint, then crossed his arms over his chest to grab both shoulders, leaving handprints. She was about to call out to him when he untied a towel from around his waist, dropping it to the floor, in order to grab his own arse with paint-dripping hands.

Hermione blushed, torn between laughing and fleeing. Instead, she made a squeaking sound, and Lupin looked over his shoulder at her as she stood in the doorway. His face went red, though he didn’t give any other outward sign of embarrassment. He stooped to pick up the towel and held it over his dangly bits as he walked over to her (not retying it around his waist so as to avoid smearing the fresh paint).

“Hermione,” he said with remarkable poise for a gentleman covered in paint and standing buck-naked with only a wadded hand towel preserving his decency. “Er, did you need something?”

“Andromeda wants to see you,” Hermione blurted, instinctively wanting to lower her eyes out of embarrassment for both of them, but knowing that would only make things worse. “She’s in the Hufflepuff common room.”
“Ah,” he replied. “Thank you. I’ll be down once we finish here.”

“So, erm, what’s with the handprints?” She knew why they were painting themselves in a general sense, of course. It had been decided that the wolves would apply the paint in order to differentiate themselves from Greyback and his pack on the battlefield, so no one accidentally attacked the wrong wolves. The paint itself was a special blend that would stick well to their bodies once dry and transfer to their fur when it sprung out of their skin, so that the patterns on the wolves would more or less be similar to what they were applying now.

“It’s a simple and easily-recognized image,” Lupin said. He was standing straight, wrapping his teacherly manner around himself as if to make up for his lack of clothes. “The human handprint is recognized instantly by the human brain, often bypassing even conscious thought. And in the midst of battle, every moment counts. As for the, er, placement . . .” He glanced at two nearby wolves, who were grabbing their arses in the same manner he’d done. “The shoulders and flanks are large and easily-seen areas on a wolf, providing visibility where the calves, for example, would not.”

That made perfect sense, which comforted Hermione, the logic driving away some of the embarrassment. “What about the other marks?” Aside from the handprints, the wolves had a variety of other markings, seemingly random in nature. Lupin had a large T painted on his face, crossing his forehead and running down his nose to his chin.

“Individual identifiers,” he said simply. “We can tell each other apart by smell, but we figured it might be nice if others could too. There’s not all that much difference in our appearances once we’re all wolves—at least, none that’s easy to tell without getting far closer than most people care to get to a transformed werewolf.”

Taking that in, Hermione looked around again, making note of some of the markings on the wolves she recognized. Scratch had three parallel hash marks on his face, looking like someone had taken a swipe at him with a paw and left paint instead of wounds. Spears had a triangular shape pointing down from his hairline which sort of resembled the head of a spear. Tessa had covered her lower jaw and the front of her neck with white, a broad stripe which ran down between her bare breasts.

“Right, well,” said Lupin, “I’ll finish up here, shall I, and when the paint’s dry, I’ll go see what Andromeda wants to talk to me about.”

Taking the hint, Hermione backed out of the doorway. “Oh, yes, I’d better go find Evelyn.” Then she hurried away down the hall before she could wonder if she’d looked at some of those naked bodies a little longer than was strictly necessary to remember their markings.

She found Evelyn in the library, mindlessly flipping through an issue of *Transfiguration Today*. The orange-haired girl looked up when she entered. “Hi, Hermione. What’s new?” Evelyn sounded bored and annoyed at being bored.

“We’ve moved everything down to the Hufflepuff common room. You should be comfortable down there.”

Evelyn hauled herself to her feet, bracing her huge belly with one hand while keeping her balance on the table with the other. “Wonderful. No offense, Hermione, but your kid is really starting to overstay its welcome.”

Hermione moved to give her a hand. “Yeah. Sorry. We’ll see about doing something about that once this is all over.”

“You know what the worst part is?” Evelyn asked. “It’s not the swollen feet or the aching back or
even when the kid presses on my bladder and nearly makes me wet myself. The worst part is knowing I’ll have to sit in a room being comfortable while everyone else is out there fighting. The one chance I get to point my wand at that son of a bitch who took my dad away, and I can’t take it because this kid doesn’t know when it’s time to come out.”

Hermione laughed humorlessly. “You sound like Cecilia.”

“Yeah? Well, Cecilia gets to fight, doesn’t she? And she’s a Gryffindor, so even if she couldn’t, it’s not like there was any House honor at stake. Don’t think I don’t know how under-represented Slytherin is on our side.”

“I’m sure no one cares about that. And you’re doing more than—”

“Ah!” Evelyn clenched her teeth and hissed, curling over her belly.

“What is it?”

Hermione’s question was answered when a burst of fluid ran down Evelyn’s legs to puddle at her feet.

Evelyn groaned. “Merlin, but this kid has a dramatic sense of timing.”

“You’re in labor!” She was glad they wouldn’t have to induce after all, but Evelyn was certainly right about the timing. Hermione ran to the girl, putting one of Evelyn’s arms around her shoulders and helping to steady her as they rushed out of the library. “Healer Partridge is already downstairs. We’ll have to go there instead of the hospital wing.”

“Naturally,” Evelyn groused.

“Look at it this way,” Hermione said as they rushed down the corridors as quickly as possible. “You don’t have to feel bad about being comfortable while everyone else fights.”

They made it to the Hufflepuff common room without having to stop more than twice for contractions, and Hermione tapped the code rhythm on the wooden barrel. When they got through the tunnel to the common room, Hermione called out for help, and Partridge rushed forward. With professional expediency, he helped Evelyn onto the hospital bed, pulled out stirrups that were attached to the underside (someone had been thinking ahead), and got her settled before asking Antoinette to help Evelyn get comfortable and properly dressed.

“I thought this might happen,” Partridge told Hermione and the others who were gathered in the room. “Stress can sometimes induce labor, and I can’t think of many situations more stressful than the current one. She’ll be fine, Hermione—at least as far as the delivery. I’ve got everything I’ll need here.”

Hermione thanked him, and he got back to keeping an eye on Evelyn. Then she felt a hand on her shoulder and turned to see Harry standing behind her. “I’m sure it’ll be fine, Hermione.”

She relaxed into his touch, glad to see him. Ron was with him. Lupin (now dressed) had beat her there as well, and was currently talking with Ted and Andromeda while Precious held Teddy.

“I’m not worried about the delivery,” Hermione said, although she was a little, after Trelawney. “But what if the distraction means they aren’t as ready if someone tries to break in? What if it means they’re taken off-guard and can’t defend themselves in time?” Then something occurred to her. She pulled on the chain around her neck, withdrawing the locket-shaped pendant from her robes.
"Excuse me," she said, walking up to Andromeda. "I have something I think might help here. I know it’ll do me no good in the middle of a battle, anyway, and maybe it’ll at least give you all here some warning." She held it out.


Hermione nodded, and she glanced at Precious. "Shouldn’t she be with the other werewolves? I mean—not that there’s anything wrong with her being here."

"Oh, she won’t be fighting," Lupin said. "Greyback may force children to fight, but we haven’t sunk quite that far yet."

Hermione felt like a heel. "I didn’t mean—"

"I know," Lupin said in a softer tone. "She’d . . . actually like to stay here."

Hearing them talk about her, Precious walked the few steps over to them, her head ducked submissively. "I’d . . . I’d like to help, if that’s okay. I’ve drunk all my Wolfsbane, so I’ll be safe. And if someone does break in, maybe I could at least help protect the babies."

"Oh. Er . . ." Hermione didn’t want to sound like she didn’t trust Precious, but she also couldn’t say that she was totally comfortable with a transformed werewolf being locked in a room with her children, even if she was on Wolfsbane.

"I understand," Precious said immediately. "I probably wouldn’t want me left with babies either."

Hermione knew she was being ridiculous and even a little hypocritical. After all, she did have faith in Snape’s ability to make sure the potion was made and administered correctly. So, what was she afraid of? If she knew the wolf wouldn’t be in charge, was it the twelve-year-old girl she didn’t trust?

"I don’t know . . ." Harry said. "Remus?"

Lupin gave Precious a considering look. "I don’t think she’ll harm the children. And there’s nowhere safer in the castle for her. Greyback might go looking for her, and if he does, she’ll need as much protecting as anyone. She’d be nothing near a match for him, and he’d want to punish her in particularly nasty ways for leaving him."

Hermione grimaced at the thought. Lupin was right. Precious was a child that needed protection, almost as much as her babies were. Could she deny her that protection?

"But how can we be absolutely sure that the potion will work properly?" Harry asked.

"How about this?" offered Ted. "Have her go into the corridor to transform. Once she’s done, she can tap the code on the barrel. She can do that with paws as well as hands, right? If the door opens, we’ll know she’s kept her mind, and she can curl up in a corner where she won’t risk accidentally hurting the kids. If she can’t tap out the code, then at least we’ll have a secure door between us."

This plan was swiftly agreed upon by all. Precious went out into the corridor to await the full moon, and those not planning to stay in the room said their goodbyes to those inside. While Harry held James close, whispering to him, and Lupin smiled fiercely down at Teddy, stroking his purple brush of hair, Hermione picked up each of her three children, hugged them, and placed kisses on their foreheads and cheeks.
“Goodbye, my loves,” she murmured, too softly for anyone else to hear. “Be safe. Mummy and Daddy have something to take care of.” To this, Luna made no response, Cedric merely blinked bemusedly, and Cubby swung a fist in the air as if egging her on to battle. She laughed, her heart aching with the fervent hope that this wouldn’t be the last time she’d see them, then went to the young woman on the hospital bed. “Take care of them for me?” she asked Evelyn, who was focusing on steady breathing, and Antoinette, who stood beside her.

Antoinette nodded, smiling reassuringly, and Evelyn grabbed Hermione’s hand and placed it on her belly. Hermione could feel the baby moving around inside her, and she fought back tears from her eyes. “With my life if necessary,” said Evelyn. “It’s the least I can do. Literally. The very least.”

“Thank you.”

Then Harry and Ron were beside her again. “Let’s go, Hermione,” Harry said. “The sooner we get this over with, the sooner we can come back to them.”

She nodded and went with them through the short passage back to the hallway. The great barrel lid closed behind them with a soft thud.

“Now what?” Ron asked. Night was coming, and they didn’t have much time left before they’d need to get to their positions for the battle.

“The kitchen,” said Harry, and led them off.

Hermione wasn’t quite sure why they were going to the kitchen, but it became clear the moment they stepped inside. It seemed as if every last house-elf had gathered there, standing around or sitting, and they gave Harry, Ron, and Hermione their full attention the moment they stepped inside, as if they’d been waiting for them. Dobby stood at the front of the group, standing as tall and proud as a house-elf could.

“Thank you for gathering them, Dobby,” Harry said, then addressed the crowd of house-elves. “Professor McGonagall wanted to remind you all that you’re under no obligation to stay here and fight. She doesn’t consider it part of your contracted service to risk your lives in battle, so those of you who wish to go somewhere safe until it’s over are free to do so. It had better be now, though, as it’s nearly sunset.”

Hermione smiled, joyful that the elves had been remembered and respected and given choice, even in the hecticness of recent days. Her smile broadened as the house-elves continued to stand there, not a single one acting as if they had any intention of leaving the castle.

Harry smiled, too, and nodded. “Okay, then. In that case, your orders are to go to the corridor outside the Hufflepuff common room. There are people holed up in there who need to be protected. The babies are there. All of them. We’ll all be outside or in the outer halls, and there are only a few people in with the babies to take care of them, so you’ll be their primary line of defense if anyone or anything tries to get through to them. Can we count on you to hold this corridor and not let any of our enemies through, no matter what?”

A tinny cheer went up from dozens of voices, and Hermione’s heart swelled. If she survived the battle, she was definitely going to get back to S.P.E.W. She’d been woefully neglecting it the past year or so.

Harry stepped aside, and the regiment of house-elves rushed past them, out the door, waving ladles and kitchen knives and other makeshift weapons in the air. Once they were all gone, Harry turned to Dobby, the only elf left in the room.
“Dobby, where’s Kreacher? I didn’t see him.”

“Dobby doesn’t know, sir. Kreacher left just before Harry Potter arrived. Said he had somewhere to be, sir. Does Harry Potter wish Dobby to retrieve him?”

Harry looked thoughtful, then shook his head. “No. If he’s still in the castle somewhere, there’s no need to get him back. And if he’s fled, let him be. No one should be made to fight here unwillingly.”

“Yes, sir,” Dobby said. Then he flew at Harry, wrapped his arms around Harry’s legs, and clung tightly. “Harry Potter needs to be careful. Dobby will be busy. Not there to help should Harry Potter need him.”

Harry grinned and knelt down to look Dobby in the eyes. “You just keep my son safe, Dobby. That will be more than enough help.” Then he returned Dobby’s hug. After a few seconds, he released him, and Dobby gave a little salute, then ran off to join the other elves.

As they made their way back toward the main entrance, a beautiful silver horse galloped up to them and, in Ginny’s voice, asked Harry to meet her in their rooms immediately. With a quick look at his friends, Harry hurried off to meet his wife.

Which left Hermione alone in an empty corridor with Ron.

They stood there together for several seconds, very much not continuing to make their way to join the others at the entrance.

“Ron,” she began, not knowing what exactly she was going to say. As it turned out, she didn’t have to decide.

Ron’s lips were softer than before, gentle, not demanding. He wrapped her in his arms, but it wasn’t frantic or passionate, and his tongue didn’t seek entrance to her mouth. He held her and kissed her tenderly, and Hermione’s heart fluttered wildly all the same. And then, right before he released her and pulled away, she realized what he meant by it.

“I . . . just had to do that one more time,” he admitted. “That’s what you can have if Snape doesn’t live through this.”

A surge of anger rushed through her: anger at him for suggesting she should hope for such a thing . . . and anger at herself that at least part of her did.

“And what if he does?” she said, too harshly.

Ron shrugged. “Then I wanted to get one last kiss before I had to give you up forever.”

Her anger abated, and she took his hand. “I love you, Ron. I always have. I always will.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I know.” By his tone, she knew he understood what she meant. Even if romance wasn’t in the cards for them anymore, she’d always love him as a friend. And he sounded like he could accept that, if he had to. “Love you too, Hermione.”

She held his hand for a moment more, then let go. “Go on. I’ll catch up.”

He raised his eyebrows. “It’s almost time.”

“I know. I won’t be long.”
Ron nodded, then headed down the corridor with his hands in his pockets. After a few steps, he stopped, half-turned back to her, and mused, “He looks like Krum, a bit.” He shook his head and walked away from her, muttering to himself, “I just realized that.”

Hermione found her husband in the corridor part-way between his classroom and the stairs leading to the Entrance Hall. He was wearing jeans and a black t-shirt, probably because it provided greater freedom of movement than billowy robes (the same reason she’d dressed in a jumper and knee-length skirt), and the top part of his hair was tied back, keeping it out of his eyes. She hadn’t seen him in a t-shirt since their time in hiding, and even then he’d only worn it once or twice. His bare arms were pale and wrapped in tight cords of muscle, and his Dark Mark stood out in stark contrast on his left forearm.

He stopped walking when he saw her.

She hurried toward him before he could slip away. She didn’t know what she meant to say to him, but guilt at kissing Ron ached dully inside her, and she knew that she needed to see her husband before they risked their lives in battle. In case this was the end for them, she needed some kind of closure, needed some kind of interaction that wasn’t avoidance or humiliation or professionalism to keep with her, in case this was the note their strange marriage ended on.

He didn’t try to leave or storm past her. He just watched as she approached, his hand twitching at his side, until she stood in front of him. He wasn’t as tall as Ron, nor as muscular, but he was more solid somehow, as if all the softness of youth had been burned out of him, leaving only an animate statue of cold iron.

She looked into his eyes and saw that they blazed with something she couldn’t name. Unspoken words, perhaps. His jaw clenched and unclenched in a ragged rhythm as he stared at her.

“Severus,” she said carefully, hoping that he wouldn’t shut her out. She didn’t understand the emotion she saw in his face, but at least it was something other than a blank mask. But she couldn’t bring herself to maintain eye contact as she said what she now knew she was about to. “I’m sorry. For . . . pushing you. The other night. I put my own desires first and completely disregarded your feelings, and I was wrong. I . . . wanted to tell you that. In case . . .” In case I die tonight. In case you do. She couldn’t say those words to him. Not now, when the possibility was so very real. She didn’t have to. “Just . . . please say you don’t hate me for it.” She looked up at him.

Snape’s face contorted in pain. “Hermione,” he said, his voice low and rough, “I don’t hate you.” There was a world of meaning in those words.

His gaze roam in sted over her, from her eyes to her mouth, her neck, her hair, and all the while his own expression was full of pain and conflicting emotions. He raised his hand, the one that had been twitching, and brushed her cheek. Then, all at once, whatever conflict had been raging in his mind resolved itself.

Before she realized he would do it, Snape was crushing his mouth to hers, his hands clamped on her shoulders, holding her in place. When her mind caught up to what was happening, her head whirled, and for a moment she thought she might collapse. But then something else took over where her mind gave out, and she wrapped her arms around Snape’s neck, pulling him closer to her, and opened her mouth to him, tasting and teasing with her own tongue.

With a deep, animal growl, Snape pushed her back until she smacked hard into the stone wall, but she didn’t feel any pain. His hands ran down her sides, clinging to the curves of her hips as if his
sanity depended on it. His mouth moved away from hers, going to the spot where her neck met her shoulders and biting just hard enough to send a shock of desire racing through her.

“Hermione,” he moaned, ragged, desperate, and she moaned in response.

In the back of her mind, the part that she could still call her mind, she wondered what was happening. Where had this come from? Snape had made it clear that he didn’t want her, that he didn’t even want to be around her, and now here he was, kissing her, clutching at her, pressing himself against her as if all the fires of hell had ignited inside him. What was this? What were they doing?

*It’s just the adrenaline,* her mind supplied. *We might die tonight. The danger’s heightening our responses to everything, making us do things we wouldn’t normally. Didn’t I see numerous other couples in the halls last night doing this very thing? It’s purely a psychological and biological response. It doesn’t mean anything.*

She told her mind to shut up.

Snape’s body was a hard, unyielding thing crushing her against the wall. He kissed her again, inexactly, more raw enthusiasm and need than technique, and something else hard and unyielding pressed against her. He wanted her, she was sure of it. Well, mostly sure. She didn’t want to make the same mistake twice. So, she rocked her hips against him, letting out a little whimper of desire, making the offer, but not forcing the issue.

He took her up on it. Never removing his mouth from hers, he moved away just enough to get his hands between their bodies. She heard him adjust his clothing, then his hands were on her hips again. With far less effort than she’d have expected it to take, he lifted her to his waist, pushing her skirt up in the process. Instinctively, she wrapped her legs around him, locking her ankles behind his back, noting the hard, wiry muscles of his torso that she’d admired before.

He joined with her suddenly, and she didn’t realize until that moment how much she’d been craving this.

“Hermione,” he groaned again, and this time it sounded like relief.

“Severus!” she gasped, moving against him, urging him on.

It was not dispassionate. It was not romantic. It was hard and fast and rough. She clung to him with arms and legs, holding on for dear life as he drove her to the edge of madness with pleasure and need. His strong, slender hands gripped her bum, supporting her weight as he crushed her against the wall.

When her pleasure took her, it was almost painful in its intensity. She let out a sound somewhere between a gasp and a whimper and clung to Snape even more tightly, her legs trembling. Then he cried out as if in surprise, and his body shook like he was about to collapse.

But he held her, pulling her against him, resting his forehead against hers. “Hermione,” he whispered, and she smiled. They remained like that for a few seconds, panting to catch their breaths. She grinned. He hadn’t needed a potion this time. Just her.

Gently, she ran her fingers through his hair, smoothing it down over the back of his neck.

He froze.

*No.*
He pulled his head back from hers, not meeting her eyes, and set her on her feet.

_No. Not again._

He straightened his jeans, staring at the ground. She took his face in her hands, trying to get him to look at her. He didn’t, but he didn’t pull away from her hands either. “No. Severus. Don’t do this. Please. Don’t do this to me again.”

“I’m sorry.” His voice was barely audible, and Hermione didn’t know if he was talking to her . . . or to Lily.

Then he stepped back, out of her reach, turned on his heel, and strode off down the corridor.

Hermione glanced up at the small windows near the ceiling as the last rays of orange sunlight slid out of sight. She stood there, alone, wanting to curl up and cry. But she couldn’t. Not now. Not tonight.

An alarm sounded, coming from nowhere and everywhere at once. Three sharp blasts with one clear message.

Voldemort was at the gates.
“How long will it take them to break through the wards?” Harry asked.

They were lined up in ranks on the lawn in front of the castle, Order members in front with students and civilians behind them. Hermione stood beside Harry with Ron on her right and Ginny on Harry’s left. The werewolves stood a dozen yards ahead of them, naked and painted, awaiting the change.

“Most of the wards were laid down by the founders when the castle was built,” Kingsley said. “And a dozen or more powerful wizards and witches have added more layers within the past week.”

“So they shouldn’t be able to get through at all,” Ron guessed.

“Theoretically, no,” said Tonks. “But Voldemort wouldn’t be coming here if he didn’t have some way to get through. And we still don’t know how Bellatrix got onto the grounds a few months ago.”

Harry pursed his lips. “So, don’t hold our breaths that the wards will do anything at all.”

“We’ve tried to plan for the worst,” Ginny said. “Doesn’t mean we can’t still hope for the best.”

“We’ll know soon either way,” Tonks observed.

Hermione gripped her wand tighter and glanced past Ron, down the line of makeshift soldiers. Snape stood in the gap between Tonks and Mad-Eye, his face stony as he stared with the others toward the gates. Hermione followed his gaze. Lights flashed in the distance: Voldemort’s forces launching their attack on the wards guarding the school grounds. Above her, more lights flared brilliantly as McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout cast spells from the three highest towers of the school, momentarily illuminating the faces of the gathered throng.

They were all terrified. Some managed not to show it, but Hermione knew they weren’t ready for this, despite their preparation. They weren’t soldiers. They were students and housewives and shopkeepers and parchment-pushers. And even if, somehow, the good guys won, many of them would not see daybreak.

A brilliant flash filled the sky above the gates.

“What was that?” Hermione asked.

Kingsley grimaced. “Not good.” He glanced over his shoulder and shouted, “Look sharp! They’re coming!”

Voldemort’s forces poured through the gates and onto the Hogwarts grounds as if the wards weren’t even there. Hermione watched in horror as shapes swarmed toward them, still too far away to see distinctly, though what she could see even in the darkness was terrifying enough. Crawling, flying, running shapes, some human-sized and some far larger, surged toward them over the grass. Hermione tensed, wondering what came next.

Voldemort’s army charged toward them until they were close enough that Hermione could make
out individuals among the crowd. Then, suddenly, the bulk of the mass stopped and only the first line of attackers continued forward.

“Hurkh!”

Hermione looked sharply at Spears, who’d doubled over as if punched in the gut. The next moment, the other werewolves began groaning and crying out in pain, clutching at their bodies.

The moon was rising.

The werewolves on Voldemort’s side, that first rank that had kept running after the others stopped, were in the same state as Spears and the others. Hermione watched in fascination and disgust as the werewolves closest to her, people she knew and liked, writhed in agony as their bodies stretched and contorted, sprouting fur and claws, growing snouts and tails, until their human cries of pain became wolffish howls, greeting the full moon as it rose over the mountains.

She looked toward Voldemort’s wolves. The largest and meanest-looking of them stepped forward, and the others fell in behind him. They charged.

With snarls of anger and challenge, Spears and Lupin led their wolves at a sprint toward Greyback’s pack. In the middle of the grounds, the two groups of werewolves clashed in a gut-churning collision of growls and yelps, fangs and claws flashing as they tore through flesh and fur. Bone-deep terror gripped Hermione as she watched, something old and primal. Any one of those wolves could rip her to shreds in moments. Watching dozens of them go at each other with bloodthirsty fervor was akin to witnessing a volcanic explosion. It was a force of nature, one that would kill her in an instant if she dared get too close.

The rest of Voldemort’s forces hadn’t continued their approach yet, apparently content to let the wolves take out as many opponents as they could first. The Order was not so content to stand by and watch their own fighters die. Motion at the corner of her vision caught Hermione’s eye.

“Get ready,” Kingsley said as Oliver and his squadron of Quidditch players flew silently over the wolves, toward Voldemort’s lines. Hermione’s grip tightened on her wand.

Cries and explosions rang out across the grounds as Oliver and the others dive-bombed Voldemort’s forces, throwing spells and dropping Weasley products. A dark cloud of Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder completely blotted out one section of Voldemort’s ranks, which had already been difficult to see in the moonlit night. Blinded, the Death Eaters cast spells wildly into the air, but the Quidditch players easily avoided them, weaving back and forth through the air with practiced ease.

Bangs and bright flashes of light joined the scuffle as the fliers dropped explosives, and Death Eaters screamed in pain and fury. Oliver’s team had landed some fatal blows there, but it was not without cost. The light from the explosions gave the Death Eaters a clearer view of their targets. Two of Oliver’s fliers fell from the sky in quick succession.

“Fall back!” Oliver’s shout carried across the distance, and his squadron darted away from Voldemort’s forces, narrowly dodging the curses chasing after them.

With a collective howl made up at least partly of voices Hermione knew could not be human, Voldemort’s forces chased Oliver and his team toward the castle.

“Now!” Kingsley shouted, then ran toward the oncoming horde.

Hermione ran with the rest of the Order, charging toward the enemy with a shout, hoping they
could stop them before they reached the castle. Along with the fact that fighting indoors would be more difficult, a battle in the halls would likely damage the school severely.

Their enemy picked up speed, reaching the battling werewolves and flowing around them as if they hardly noticed them, blinded by their hunger to kill the castle’s defenders. But the werewolves weren’t as single-minded. Hermione saw several wolves from both sides break away from their fights and clamp their jaws around Voldemort’s oncoming forces. Perhaps Greyback’s control over his wolves only went so far. In the grip of blood fury, not all of them could resist the tempting offer of humans venturing so close. Six or seven wizards went down as the mass passed through the mob of werewolves, but the rest didn’t even slow.

The Order met them on an open, grassy part of the grounds. As soon as she could make out faces clearly among the oncoming throng, curses and Shield Charms were flying.

It was madness. Pure madness. Hermione had thought she knew what battle was like, but nothing she’d experienced so far could compare to this. She was surrounded by people, but she could hardly focus long enough on one form to make out individuals. She heard Harry somewhere to her right, and she thought Ron was fighting someone behind her, but she couldn’t keep track of the rest of the Order. Curses came from all sides as the two small armies clashed and mingled. The night was lit dimly by the full moon, but spells flew like flares and fireworks, illuminating the battle from within with constant bursts of colored light.

Her initial attack had been at a witch in black robes, but almost immediately she was broadsided by a huge wizard. His body, easily twice the size of her own, knocked her to the ground. He’d probably been knocked back by a spell, because for a moment he seemed confused and she was able to scramble part-way to her feet. Then his dark eyes lit up and his ugly, lopsided face twisted in a snarl as he reached for her. She screamed and tried to curse him, but she was too close and couldn’t get her wand pointed at him. Every time she tired, he made a grab for it, even as he kept one huge hand clamped around her calf. Hermione kicked at his face with her other foot, but it did nothing except make him angrier. As she struggled, in the back of her mind she wondered if this was really how she would die, beaten to death or strangled by some anonymous Death Eater in the first moments of battle, before she’d even done any good.

“Fodio!”

A burst of white light appeared behind the man grappling with her, and he jerked and cried out, though it was more surprise than pain. In that moment, his grip loosened, and Hermione was able to get away from him and get to her feet.

Bill and Fleur ran to her from behind the Death Eater. “Fodio!” Fleur shouted again as the Death Eater reached for the wand he’d dropped on the ground, and the Stinging Hex made him jerk his hand back.

Hermione recovered her footing, pointed her own wand at the man, and yelled, “Tarantellegra!”

The Death Eater’s legs began twitching and jerking, sending him into a wild, rhythmless dance that tripped him up and sent him sprawling on the ground.

“Incarcerous!” Ropes flew from Bill’s wand and wrapped the still-jerking Death Eater in a cocoon of hemp.

“Thanks!” Hermione gasped, looking from the bound wizard to Bill and Fleur. Bill gave her a nod, but that was all the response they had time for. The next moment, they ran to help Arthur, who was fighting two Death Eaters at once.
Hermione found another opponent almost as fast, and by the time she looked up from helping Ginny take out Alecto Carrow, the battle lines of humans and werewolves had begun to merge. The Patil twins’ mother was being herded toward the wolves by a couple of rough-looking wizards, and as Hermione watched, a small, mangy werewolf ran out of the tangle of fur toward her.

“Look out!” Hermione shouted, but Mrs. Patil didn’t hear. Just as the small werewolf snapped its jaws on her long plait and she turned with horror to see what had grabbed her, another werewolf—one with a broad white stripe covering its chest and lower jaw—leapt from the throng, knocking the smaller wolf aside, and bit hard into its neck.

But it seemed someone else had heard Hermione’s shout. Some of the Quidditch players had maneuvered above them, throwing curses from the air. They flew above the wolves, hitting the unpainted ones with hexes and curses which did no good. Perhaps thinking his shots simply weren’t landing, one of the fliers dove down recklessly toward a cluster of wolves.

“No,” Hermione breathed. She could see what was coming. Knowing she wouldn’t get close enough in time, she ran through the crowd toward the swooping flier. “You’re too low!” she shouted at him just as he flew low enough for her to recognize him.

Roger Davies pointed his wand at one of the wolves, a determined look on his face. “Confund—”

A huge grey wolf leapt into the air, grabbed Roger’s leg in its jaws, and pulled him clean off his broom.

“Davies!” Oliver dove like a missile toward his fallen man and tried to grab Roger’s arm as he lay on the grass, but a third wolf rammed him with its shoulder, knocking him out of the air. Wolves descended on the two of them.

It all happened in seconds, and Hermione was still winding her way through the crowd to help. She saw some of the other fliers go to help Oliver and Roger—and then a flash of green flew past her face, and she turned to see Amycus Carrow snarling with rage as he raised his wand to her for a second shot.

Instinctively, she waved her wand, putting a Shield Charm between herself and the mad Death Eater. With a shout, he threw another curse at her, but she dived to the side and it glanced off her shield.

“Hermione!” someone shouted, and then Ron was there, tackling Amycus to the ground from behind. He struggled physically with the older wizard long enough for Hermione to get closer, then pinned Amycus’s arms behind his back and raised his torso enough for Hermione to get a clear shot.

“Immobulus!” she hissed. Amycus fell unmoving to the ground, and she helped Ron to his feet. “A tackle, Ron?” she asked lightly. “Have you forgotten you’re a wizard?”

“Nah, I just . . .” he began, about to offer a witty rejoinder of some kind, but the false lightness drained from his face before he could finish.

Hermione felt it, too. An overwhelming sorrow and fear and cold that sapped her energy and her will to fight. With a despair that wasn’t imposed, she looked into the sky. A swarm of Dementors drifted lazily toward them over the battlefield.

“Dementors!” she screamed, and the next moment Patronuses shot into the air as Order members and students found a moment to spare in their dueling with Voldemort’s forces. The glowing silver
menagerie was enough to keep the Dementors briefly at bay, but not enough to drive them away.

“It’s holding them off,” Ron said.

“No.” Hermione pointed to the sky, where a dozen or so people on brooms were flying away from the mass of werewolves, back toward the castle. “They’re just looking for easier targets.”

Two of the brooms at the front of the squadron had extra bodies draped over their shafts, held in place by the fliers. These continued toward the castle, while the rest of the group banked sharply, trying to draw the Dementors away.

The Dementors took the bait, following the main group of fliers and leaving the two carrying wounded alone—but once again Hermione saw what the people in the air were too close to see. The Dementors weren’t just following the fliers blindly; they were herding them toward the forest. The squadron had nearly reached the forest when they finally saw the trap and tried to fight back. A silver swan led five or six other Patronuses toward the Dementors, but it wasn’t enough for their casters to get free of the trap.

A woman’s scream spurred Hermione to action. “Ron, come on!” she yelled, prodding him forward.

He looked where she was indicating, murmured, “Oh, bloody hell,” and grabbed his two nearest brothers as he ran after her.

Hermione sprinted toward Cho and the other cornered Quidditch players, hoping they’d hold out long enough for Hermione and the others to get there. She passed Snape, who cast her a questioning look.

“Come on!” she yelled at him, seeing he wasn’t currently engaged with an enemy.

“What?”

“Severus, look!”

He did, and his face went hard. “Bloody hell,” he muttered, unknowingly echoing Ron. “Vampires.”

At least a score of the bloodsucking Beings lurked at the edge of the forest—and the Dementors had driven the Quidditch players straight to them.

Snape shouted an alert to Kingsley and Mad-Eye, then followed Hermione, Ron, and the twins toward the vampires.

It wasn’t a clear path. George was nearly blindsided by a werewolf on the way, Hermione was knocked to the ground by some low-level punk on Voldemort’s side, and Snape left a Death Eater lying bloody in the grass. But eventually they made it through, and by the time they were close enough to be any help, Kingsley and Mad-Eye had caught up to them.

“Expecto Patronum!” shouted several voices in quick succession. Hermione watched her otter shoot from her wand and swim through the air toward the swarm of Dementors alongside the twins’ matching foxes, Ron’s terrier, Kingsley’s lynx, Mad-Eye’s owl—and something so massive that its glow left her momentarily blinded.

She blinked as the monstrous Patronus flew toward the others. No, not flew. It skittered, on eight enormous legs. She gaped at it, then at Snape, who looked as shocked by what had come out of his
wand as she was.

Where was his doe? Where was the shining embodiment of his love for Lily? What did it mean that this huge spider—this Acromantula—had taken its place?

There were loud curses of surprise and awe from the others, and Mad-Eye looked askance at Snape for a moment, as if wondering whether Snape was really Snape or not.

There were questions on each of their tongues, but this wasn’t the time to ask them. In a matter of seconds, Snape’s new Patronus overtook the others, plowing through the swarm of Dementors, which broke on it like waves on a rock. The other Patronuses, dwarfed by Snape’s, went after the scattering Dementors, rounding up those that tried to escape the spider and chased them back toward the fleeing mass.

Once the Dementors had fully retreated, the Patronuses faded, one by one, until the sky above them was empty and dark.

But they weren’t finished yet. Hermione and the others ran forward. Barely visible in the moonlight, the ground was strewn with bodies and snapped brooms. Hermione’s stomach turned. Vampires crouched over some of the bodies, heads lowered to their victims’ necks. Others stood nearby, licking their lips like cats after a meal. A few of the nearest vampires looked up with interest at the Order members’ approach.

There was a blur in the darkness, and then something had Hermione in its grip, bony fingers wrapped tightly around her arms, holding her in place. The sick, metallic smell of blood filled her nose, and a face filled her vision—pale grey skin, sunken eyes, and a mouth full of red-painted fangs.

“How delightful,” said the vampire in a voice like honey. “Dessert.” The bloodstained mouth leaned toward her—and then the pressure was gone from her arms, and a cloud of dust hovered in the air before her. Snape pulled his wand back from the place the vampire’s heart had been a moment ago (crude, and a bit overkill, but wood was wood), gave her an indecipherable look, and then turned toward the rest of the vampires.

“Aprixi Exilio!” he shouted, and a Sunburst Charm exploded from the tip of his wand, for a brief instant bathing the area around them in blinding yellow light. Vampires that had been struggling with the other Order members screamed and crumpled to the ground seconds before disintegrating. The rest of the vampires, farther away, let out shrieks of agony and retreated to the shelter of the forest so quickly that Hermione barely saw them go.

Fred ran to the nearest body and knelt down. “It’s Cho! She’s alive!” Maybe alive, but not unharmed. Her face and neck were splashed with blood, and her black hair gleamed with it.

“Get her inside!” Kingsley shouted. “Everyone, check the bodies! Take the wounded back to the castle!” In a lower, angrier voice, he added, “Leave the dead.”

Six had survived, out of the ten current and former Quidditch players who’d been trapped by the vampires. The bodies they were forced to leave lying in the grass were so damaged and bloody that Hermione couldn’t tell who they were—which was, for the moment, a good thing.

She stumbled through the grass, supporting the weight of Professor Burbage, whose fist was still clenched around the broken shaft of her broom though the rest of her body was nearly limp. Burbage was awkward and heavy, and the teacher’s blood seeped through Hermione’s jumper at the shoulder, cooling and sticky. Hermione kept her wand clenched tight in her hand, her eyes
scanning the battlefield for immediate threats, and followed Kingsley and the others toward the castle.

She stumbled suddenly, and Burbage fell to the ground beside her. *Why did I fall?* Hermione thought, momentarily disoriented. She hadn’t tripped. Her legs hadn’t gone weak. Burbage hadn’t fallen and dragged her down. It was as if the ground had bucked beneath her. Was the earth itself fighting against them now?

No. Another rumbling jolt, and she saw the situation clearly, though she could hardly believe it.

Seven huge figures had come out of nowhere and were already nearly to the main mass of Order forces. The giants were intolerably huge and ugly and mean, and they loomed high in the darkness like figures from a nightmare.

*This is it,* Hermione thought. They could wipe out all of the castle’s defenders with a few well-placed steps and swings of their clubs, then demolish the school for dessert. How could they possibly fight something that big, in such numbers, things resistant to the only weapon they could even attempt to bring against them?

But somehow, it seemed, someone had anticipated this contingency.

“Oh no,” Ron yelped. His face was a study in primal terror. But he wasn’t looking at the giants.

“You have got to be kidding me!” Hermione shouted when she saw what Ron was staring at.

Spiders flowed out of the forest like water—small ones at first, gradually getting larger the more they came.

Hermione was not one to use coarse language, but she employed such a phrase now. The giants were bad enough; the spiders were overkill. She turned toward the spiders, wand outstretched, irrational anger flaring inside her. If that was how it was going to be, she’d go out fighting to her last breath.

“Wait!” Kingsley shouted. His tone was one of command, not surprise. “Watch!”

Hermione watched, her wand still at the ready. The spiders coming from the trees were now the size of large dogs—but they weren’t actually coming toward Hermione or any of the other Order members. They were, she realized suddenly, making their way toward the giants.

With a crash, something burst forth from the tree line—something huge and black . . . with three heads.

“Fluffy?” she said, dazed. The surprises just kept coming.

With a trio of deep, throaty growls, Fluffy leapt forward, charging toward the giants with a score of Aragog-sized spiders at his flanks. As Hermione watched, awed by the miraculous horror of it all, she saw a figure sitting just behind Fluffy’s middle head, wand raised high in the air.

“Who’s—”

“Charlie,” Mad-Eye supplied. “He’s tamed the dog and put the spiders under an Imperius.”

“Man has a way with animals,” Kingsley observed.

“Next family picnic, he’ll get the award for Most Badass Weasley for sure,” Fred said, sounding
slightly annoyed.

“Such a showoff,” George agreed. “It’s like he’s never heard of subtlety.”

The banter was lost on Hermione. She just stared, slack-jawed. Fluffy leapt at the nearest giant, a smallish one (relatively speaking), clamped down on it with two of its pairs of jaws, and ripped the giant in two. Before the pieces of the giant had settled on the ground, Fluffy had bounded to another. How Charlie stayed mounted through it all, Hermione didn’t know. Perhaps after dragons, a giant three-headed dog was no big thing. While Fluffy brought the second giant to the ground and tore into its neck, the Acromantulas swarmed the other giants.

The fight between the giants and the spiders could hardly have been called a battle. It was barely a skirmish. After taking down a third giant, Charlie directed Fluffy back out of the fray. The mass of spiders churned over the giants, overwhelming them, chewing parts of them to the bone even as they fought back and screamed.

The screams of giants. It sent chills through her.

“What’s happening?” Ron asked nervously, looking between Charlie and the giants.

“The Imperius is slipping,” Mad-Eye grumbled. “He’s losing control of them.”

For a few terrifying seconds after the last giant fell, the spiders paused, made a small movement toward the main group of battling wizards—and then, with a collective jerk, skittered back toward Charlie and the forest.

Without waiting any longer, Charlie rode Fluffy back through the trees. The spiders followed.

“Will he be all right?” Ron asked, watching the last trail of spiders disappear into the forest.

“Trust that he will,” said Kingsley. “We’ve got to get moving.”

Hermione helped Professor Burbage up again, cast one more look at the forest, and hoped that Grawp was somewhere out of harm’s way.

They made it back to the castle, and some of the civilians who’d stayed back whisked the wounded off to parts unknown. Hermione didn’t have time to wonder who was seeing to them when Partridge and Pomfrey were both holed up with the babies. There was a battle to get back to.

Outside, Hermione rejoined the chaos. Ginny had been set on by a Death Eater wannabe and was holding her own pretty well. But the man had got in several cheap shots already. Once Hermione took the man from the other side, they subdued him quickly.

Ginny went to help Harry, and Hermione was about to find someone else to fight when she saw the subdued wizard reach for a knife to cut through the Conjured ropes binding him. She Disarmed him in time, but thought it best to find somewhere secure to put him, or he’d get free in some way and keep causing trouble. Seeing a group of parents off to the side who already had a few bound or unconscious enemies in their midst, keeping an eye on the prisoners, she Levitated the wizard and moved toward them.

A sharp yelp of pain—animal, but somehow familiar—cut through the air nearby. Keeping the Levitation on her prisoner, she looked to see a werewolf with a white T covering his muzzle and head. Lupin was fighting a smaller werewolf, but a Death Eater (Hermione was fairly certain it was Dolohov) was coming up behind him, trying to attack him while he was busy with the other werewolf. Hermione considered abandoning her prisoner to go to his aid, but the next moment,
Tonks ran between Dolohov and her husband, engaging the wizard in a duel.

Still making her way toward the parents guarding prisoners, Hermione kept an eye on Tonks’s duel, watching in case she needed help.

Dolohov was a skilled fighter—but so was Tonks. Hermione didn’t think she’d ever seen the witch fight with such ferocity or focus. Tonks drew Dolohov away from Lupin. Their duel took them close to the castle walls. Hermione wondered if this was part of a deliberate strategy, but if so, it backfired. Unable to land a hit on her directly, Dolohov directed his next spell above her—right at the castle wall.

Tonks saw it too late to get out of the way, and Hermione was too far away to help now that it was needed. The Blasting Curse hit the wall like a cannonball, and the wall exploded, hundreds of pounds of stone tumbling toward the Auror.

A flash of purple fabric collided with Tonks, shoving her out of the way at the last moment. Kingsley saved her—but took the brunt of the impact himself. Hermione felt sick as she saw Kingsley buried under a mountain of rubble.

Tonks yelled in distress and fury, and turned on Dolohov, her hair bleeding to crimson and growing to whip around her head as if it were alive.

“Levicorpus!” Tonks screamed, and Dolohov flew straight up into the air, dangling by his ankle as if an invisible giant held him. He rose higher and higher into the air, shouting threats and throwing spells that went wide from their mark, but Tonks’s face was fire and stone. When Dolohov had risen higher than the castle walls, Tonks released the spell.

Dolohov plummeted to the fallen stones. It took only a moment, but the image burned itself into Hermione’s brain. The useless flailing, the momentary look of pure terror, and the sick thud of meat as Dolohov’s body broke against the stones.

Was that what Draco had looked like in the last moments, after she’d killed him but before he’d died? Her gorge rose, and she almost lost control of the prisoner she was still Levitating.

She saw Tonks begin Levitating the stone off of Kingsley, tossing Dolohov’s body aside with the rubbish. Hermione didn’t want to wait to see what she’d find at the bottom of the pile. Arriving at the makeshift stockade, Hermione handed her prisoner over to the volunteer guards and went back to the fight.

She didn’t know how long the battle went on. Her life became a series of moments—any one of which could have been her last. There was a strange fluidity about it. One moment, then the next, then the next, like a ticking clock. Her thoughts sped up to the point that they disappeared entirely, and she acted purely on instinct. Soon, there were no teachers, no students, no parents, no Death Eaters, no werewolves, no civilians, no criminals; there were only friends and foes. Friends, she protected. Foes, she attacked. She had become an animal, only her weapons weren’t teeth and claws, but words, and they were the only words worth knowing.

A momentary lull jolted her out of this strange battle trance when she found herself in a pocket of friends, the enemy held at bay in the ranks around them.

“This isn’t good,” panted Harry. “We’re losing.”

“Worse,” said Snape, not quite as out of breath, but close, “the Dark Lord still hasn’t shown himself.
“Coward,” Ron spat. “What’s he planning to let his minions take care of us? Keep his bloody hands clean?”

“Yes,” said Snape. “It seems so.”

“But I thought he’d want to kill me himself,” said Harry.

“Maybe he’s got to the point where he just wants you dead,” Bill suggested. “Or maybe he’s told his forces to kill the rest of us and capture you. Either way, we can’t keep going as we are.”

“Maybe we need to try a more offensive tactic,” Hermione offered. Staying strictly on the defense wasn’t getting them anywhere.

“You heard the woman!” Fred said eagerly.

“Time for Operation Yellow-Bellied Snake Hunt,” George added.

“Accio broom!” they shouted in unison before anyone had time to ask what they meant. Their brooms must have been close, because it was only a matter of seconds before they’d rushed off into the air.

“Wait! It’s too dangerous!” shouted Bill, but they were already on their way. He sighed. “I hope they don’t get themselves killed.”

The words were barely out of his mouth when a dark, feathery shape flew over their heads and swiped at George with huge, curved talons. He dodged, tossed something in the creature’s near-human face which exploded with a bright flash, and kept flying.

The harpy reared back with an angry screech, looked around wildly, and flew at the first person on a broom it saw. Katie Bell screamed when its talons dug into her shoulders, and her broom fell ineffectually to the ground below. The harpy’s mouth spread in a wide, victorious grin. Hermione, Bill, and Snape all tried to hex the beast, but they couldn’t get a clear shot with Katie in the way. Hermione watched in helpless anger as the harpy flapped its great wings and turned away with its prey writhing in its grasp.

An arrow flew through the night, striking the harpy between its eyes. It dropped, lifeless, toward the earth, and Katie screamed again. Before she could hit the unyielding ground, a centaur leapt toward her, catching her in his arms and landing on strong, graceful hooves. Katie looked up at him with bleary eyes, stroked his bare chest once as if unable to believe he was real, and then passed out. She was bleeding badly from the wounds to her shoulders, but it looked to Hermione like there was a good chance nothing vital had been hit.

“Get her inside!” Snape barked, but Firenze was already on his way.

Hermione looked in the direction Firenze had come from and saw a handful of other centaurs trying to fend off at least a dozen Death Eater wannabes with their bows and hooves. She, Harry, Ron, and Ginny ran to help them, and Hermione fleetingly wondered where the rest of the centaurs were, or if only this handful had felt like joining the fight.

After they helped chase off the hoodlums, Ginny turned, and even in the poorly-lit darkness, Hermione saw her face turn ashen.

On the outskirts of the fighting, Molly and Arthur were surrounded by Dementors. They stood back to back, trying to fend them off, but their shining weasel and bear weren’t enough to drive the Dementors away, and some were getting dangerously close. A second later, a stag and horse
The combined force of the six Patronuses was enough to drive the Dementors away in search of easier meals, and Ginny and Ron hugged their parents.

"Thanks for that," Arthur told them all. "That one was a touch too close for comfort."

Movement from the sky cut off any reply and had them all pointing their wands again, but it was only Fred and George.

"We found him," Fred reported, addressing Harry. "He’s on that far ridge, near the gate. Got some of his lieutenants with him."

"Standing there watching," George said with disgust. "Like he’s at the bleeding World Cup."

"You didn’t engage them!" Molly gasped.

"Nah," said George. "Just flew over to get a good look. My broom did get a bit singed, though."

"Does he have the snake with him?" Harry asked.

Fred nodded. "And the locket. Both of them around his neck."

"He’s keeping them close," Hermione noted.

"Doesn’t matter," said Harry. "We’ve got to get them. But how?"

"We could attack him from the air," Ron suggested.

"We caught them by surprise, I think," George said, "but I’d wager they’ll be ready if anyone tries that again."

"There must be a way to get him to show himself here," Harry insisted. "But if he doesn’t want me anymore, what could we lure him with?"

"Maybe he does want you," Ron said. "I mean, we don’t know he doesn’t."

Hermione stopped listening.

There had been something Voldemort was looking for. Why hadn’t she put it together before? The missing wandmakers, someone breaking into Dumbledore’s tomb, Voldemort’s superstitious belief that relics meant something . . .

He must have known about the Elder Wand, must have been searching for it discreetly for months, years maybe. And of course. If he believed it existed—if he even thought there was a chance it might be real—he’d want it.

Her fist clenched around the Wand in her hand. This was something Voldemort wanted. This was what they could use to lure him out.

*Neither can live while the other survives.* The true meaning of that phrase wasn’t entirely clear, but Hermione knew one thing: this was Harry’s fight, and it always had been. She and Ron and others had always been there to help and support him, but in the end, they all knew, Harry was the one who’d have to finish it.

"Harry," she said, interrupting a conversation that had moved on without her. "Here."
“What?” he asked, confused, but took the pale wand from her. “Dumbledore’s wand? I don’t—”

“It’s the Elder Wand, Harry.” She heard gasps and hisses of surprise around them, but Harry showed no comprehension. “It’s supposed to be the most powerful wand in the world.”

“Blimey,” Ron said in an awed voice. “It really exists? But why did he give it to you?” She tried not to hear the hint of a childish whine.

“I think maybe he knew Harry would need it. I think maybe he gave it to me to keep for him until a time like this.”

“Er, thanks, Hermione.” Harry held the Wand out to her. “But I’ve got a wand. I think I’ll stick with it.”

“Can I—” Ron started, already leaning toward it, but Hermione stopped him with a look.

“That’s not what I mean, Harry. This wand—I think it’s what Voldemort wants.”

Understanding flowed over Harry’s face, and he nodded. “Thanks.” His brow furrowed. “But now you don’t have anything.”

“Heads up.” Fred tossed her a wand.

The dark wood felt wrong in her hand. “I can’t—”

“It’s a spare. Got it off a Death Eater. I’ve got three already.”

A Death Eater’s wand. Well, it was better than nothing. Hopefully it wouldn’t blow up in her face. Harry stared at the Elder Wand for a long moment. “If he hasn’t told his people not to kill me,” he said in a frighteningly steady, emotionless voice, “this could draw them all here. Can you guys keep them off me while I do this?”

“Do what?” Ginny asked. She was visibly refusing to let herself understand what was going on. “Do what, Harry?” she asked again, and this time it sounded like a threat.

“What I have to, Ginny,” he said calmly.

Tears welled in Ginny’s eyes, and Hermione felt some in her own, but neither of them allowed any more expression to their fear. Ginny set her jaw. “We’ll keep them off you.”

Harry smiled sadly at his wife—then pulled her to him and gave her a kiss so intense it was a bit uncomfortable to watch. Several seconds went by, then Arthur cleared his throat softly. Harry pulled away from Ginny, for once not looking remotely embarrassed about their display being witnessed, and took a deep breath. “Okay.”

Molly flung herself at him, giving him a tight, quick hug that left him dazed, and Arthur squeezed his shoulder. “Be careful, son.”

Harry looked up at him, the shadow of a hopeful child crossing his face, and grinned.

“Son?” Fred said with mock offense. “What are we? Yesterday’s codfish?”

Molly gave him a stern, motherly look. “It’s obviously no use telling you, but we expect all of our sons to be careful.” She looked from Ginny to Hermione. “And our daughters.”
Her kind words were like a fist around Hermione’s heart, reminding her of her own, actual parents, who she might never see again.

They formed a circle around Harry, taking fighting positions. The main mass of the battle had shifted a fair distance away from them, but that could change quickly.

Harry pointed his holly wand at his throat and whispered, “Sonorus.” When he spoke again, his voice boomed over the Hogwarts grounds as if it were being pumped through dozens of enormous speakers.

“VOLDEMORT.”

Motion on the battlefield stalled instantly as Order forces and Death Eaters alike turned to see what was going on. Enraged by the casual use of their lord’s name, some of the Death Eaters and their supporters surged toward Harry. George threw some Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder in their path, Arthur raised a Shield, and Hermione tightened her grip on her stolen wand.

“COME AND FACE ME, YOU COWARD,” Harry continued, speaking with a calm assurance she didn’t think he felt. “I HAVE YOUR WAND. IF YOU WANT IT, COME AND TAKE IT FROM ME.”

His words echoed through the night, gradually drowned out by the outraged shouts and approaching footfalls of Death Eaters.

Finally, Voldemort answered.

“STOP,” he commanded, his high voice even louder than Harry’s had been, and his forces aborted their attack at once. They stood still not ten feet away, just visible through George’s Peruvian darkness, watching like well-trained attack dogs.

“VERY WELL, POTTER. IF YOU ARE SO EAGER TO DIE BY MY HANDS, I WILL GRANT YOU THAT ONE LAST REQUEST.”

An eerie quiet fell over the battlefield, both sides tense with anticipation from Voldemort’s words. Over the lake, a shape appeared in the air, flying over the water, long robes flapping in the wind like bat wings.

“It’s him,” Hermione whispered. He came like a phantom, dark and ominous and inexorable as Death.

“Is he . . . flying without a broom?” Ginny breathed.

He was. As he got close, they could see it. There was no broom under him, only air. It was magic they’d all thought was impossible. The sight filled his enemies with despair and his subjects with confidence. It was, apparently, too much for his followers to handle, and their respectful silence broke.

A shout went up, a Death Eater’s curse flew, and one unwary civilian lost his life. The battle was back on.

Chaos erupted once again around her, she saw the twins, Molly, and Arthur rejoin the fight, but Hermione kept her focus and her place by Harry’s side. She glanced his way—and saw Neville had joined them. No one greeted him. There was no need. This was his place too.

On the shore of the lake, Voldemort touched down, pale bare feet stepping softly onto the muddy
grass, Nagini draped around his shoulders like a living shawl. The battle waged between them, but Hermione could see Voldemort’s red eyes locked with Harry’s green. Ignoring the combatants, none of whom were suicidal enough to get in his way, Voldemort walked toward them.

Harry let out a breath. “One way or the other,” he said softly, “this is the end.” It seemed to Hermione that, through the fear, he sounded relieved.

Harry tucked the Elder Wand into his belt, keeping his own wand in his hand. Then he pulled something from a loop at his hip, something long and stiff, wrapped in cloth. Gryffindor’s sword was sharp and tainted with poisonous venom, so he’d kept it protected until now, insurance against accidentally harming himself or others. He unwrapped it, grasping the hilt in his left hand, and strode forward.

As one, the others moved into position around him, Ginny and Ron on his left, Hermione and Neville on his right. They moved through the battle, and though it waged around them, none stood in their path. It was as if the fighters on both sides knew how it had to be. The Order fought to keep Voldemort’s forces off of Harry and his friends, but the Death Eaters were so afraid of what Voldemort would do to them if they stood in the way of his victory over Harry, they didn’t even try to reach him. But Hermione and the others were there anyway, his seconds, his moral support, lending him their strength and will as much as they could by simply being by his side when he faced his final test. They’d stand as the last line of defense against any enemy that wasn’t Voldemort, should any defy their master and attempt to reach Harry. To their final breath, if necessary, so that Harry could finish his task. This was their purpose, in the grand scheme of things: to help Harry. As it had always—

A flash of green light shot in front of her, breaking her line of sight to Voldemort. From the corner of her eyes, she saw, and for the briefest instant, she knew, long before her brain would accept the truth.

Turning her face away from Voldemort, she looked at Harry. For a split second, she saw a fading green aura around him, and then he fell to the ground.

It had happened so quickly, so unexpectedly, that Harry’s expression hadn’t even changed. He was walking, one foot in front of the other, and then his right foot simply didn’t move ahead of the left one, and the momentum sent his body face-first onto the muddy grass.

*Thud.*

Hermione stared at his body. Blinked.

Twin screams pierced the night: Ginny, anguished; Voldemort, enraged.

Frantically, Hermione scanned the battlefield, but she hadn’t seen where the Killing Curse had come from. While she was looking the other direction for Harry’s killer, she heard a sick, wet sound, and when she spun to look where it came from, she saw Ginny fall beside Harry, her throat slashed. Macnair stood behind her, wearing a nasty, victorious grin.

With an inhuman bellow of fury and grief, Ron launched himself toward the Death Eater, wand apparently forgotten. He reached for the man as if wanting to tear him apart with his bare hands. Before he could even get close, another Death Eater, Rookwood, struck with his wand. A tentacle lashed out from the end of it, wrapped around Ron’s neck, and slammed him into the ground. Hermione saw Ron’s head hit a rock buried in the grass, and his body slumped and didn’t move even after the tentacle had been withdrawn.
Hermione tried to cast a spell at the Death Eaters who’d attacked them, but her stolen wand simply sputtered and shot out useless sparks. When she tried again, already too late to save Ron or Ginny, the wand popped and cracked in two.

It had all happened in seconds. Harry, Ginny, and Ron, all dead. Her brain couldn’t comprehend it. And now she was defenseless, sure she would be the next to go. Any moment now.

It might have been Voldemort who saved her in that instant. He was there, mere yards away from them, having charged forward after Harry got hit. She saw him cast a Killing Curse at someone in a black cloak, and there was so much raw fury behind it that she guessed he must have seen who’d cast the curse that had hit Harry and was exacting swift punishment. Possibly fearing the same treatment, Rookwood and Macnair backed off.

Neville found his voice before she did. “NO! HARRY!”

In her peripheral vision Hermione saw the fighting around them slow and stop as the others looked and realized what had happened. Neville’s eyes were still locked on Harry’s corpse, and Hermione doubted he’d even seen what had happened to Ron and Ginny.

And then Neville did something so completely stupid that every eye on the battlefield could only watch in disbelief—and so brave that she knew no one would ever again question his worthiness to be in the House of Gryffindor. He ran the few steps to Harry’s body, took up the sword, and without a moment’s hesitation, charged Voldemort head-on.

As maddened as Voldemort was, maybe he himself could hardly believe Neville’s actions. Maybe that was what kept Neville from being murdered on the spot. Or maybe Voldemort’s arrogance had always kept him from seeing Neville for the threat he really was.

The sword flashed, and Nagini’s head spun through the air, her body toppling gracelessly from Voldemort’s shoulders a second later.

Neville staggered back as Voldemort, screaming again, raised his wand to him. A huge wolf leapt between them, its hackles raised, and by the mark on its head, she saw it was Spears. With his ears flat against his head and his lips curled away from his teeth, Spears snarled at Voldemort, giving Neville another precious second to get back and ready himself for the next attack.

Voldemort redirected his attention to Spears, a flicker of fear crossing his face at the sight of a large, murderous beast within arm’s reach—but before he could use his wand, another wolf leapt on his back. Scratch didn’t have the size that Spears did, but it was enough to off-balance Voldemort and take him to the ground. Before Voldemort had even landed, Scratch’s teeth snapped at something on Voldemort’s neck, there was the loud snap of metal, and Scratch bounded out of reach with a chain in his jaws.

Grinning, tail wagging, Scratch tossed the chain up, caught the locket in his mouth, and bit down.

Power surged from the locket like an explosion. Scratch flew backward with a sharp yelp and lay panting and unable to move on the grass a dozen yards away.

The locket dropped to the ground at Hermione’s feet, scorched and broken. It was dead. The last Horcrux.

Voldemort was mortal.

He was mortal.
“That’s the last one!” Hermione shouted, scanning the crowd, meeting as many Order eyes as she could find. “He’s mortal!”

A cry went up, and those who hadn’t already resumed the fight did so now with renewed vigor. Harry was dead. So were others. They’d process that later. For now, the fight wasn’t over.

Hermione turned first to Rookwood and Macnair, only to find Arthur and Molly already dueling them, their faces set with looks so hard, Hermione could hardly believe they were the same people she’d known all these years. If she didn’t hate Rookwood and Macnair so much right now, she might have pitied them.

Fred and George were in the sky again, leading the remaining fliers in pinpoint aerial assaults on Death Eaters and keeping the Dementors from encroaching too far into the battlefield. Charlie hadn’t come back from the forest yet, and Percy still hadn’t joined them, but Bill was fighting like a nightmare, Fleur a whirling thing of beautiful terror beside him.

Mad-Eye and Slughorn had joined Neville and Spears in keeping Voldemort busy, all of them weaving, drawing his attention, but unable to land a killing blow. And all the while, Voldemort’s eyes kept darting to Harry’s body.

What was she waiting for, an invitation? She knelt at Harry’s side, refusing to look at him properly. Not yet. Not yet. She pulled the Elder Wand from where he’d tucked it through his belt, feeling its power humming. Its loyalty was still hers.

But Voldemort must have by now thought it was his. He’d have assumed that since Harry had it, he’d somehow become its master, and after killing the person who’d killed Harry, Voldemort would think its loyalty was transferred to him. He’d think nothing of taking it from Hermione by force. Hermione knew she was no slouch at dueling, but she very much doubted she could face Voldemort and win, even with the Elder Wand. She didn’t have the skill, nor the will to cast a Killing Curse.

But she knew someone who did.

She ran through the crowd, ignoring the roar of shouts and blasts and hoofbeats that rang in her ears, until she found her husband. His eyes met hers for an instant, then he returned to his duel, finished off Rodolphus Lestrange, and came to her.

Snape’s eyes were hard and cold, but that didn’t bother her. She knew he was doing the same thing she was: putting the grief and sense of failure away, to be taken out and indulged later, when things were done. If that time ever came for them.

She showed him the Wand in her hand. “This is the Elder Wand.” A string of emotions flickered in his eyes: disbelief, curiosity, surprise . . . desire. “I can’t defeat him, but you can.”

He nodded slowly. “I understand. Give only your utmost.”

“I always do.”

“Sectumsempra!”

Hermione flung up a Shield Charm an instant before Snape’s attack would have slit her throat. She grinned humorlessly and shot back, “Confringo!”

He blocked her with a half-hearted gesture. She prepared to block another spell, but Snape lunged at her, grabbing her by the throat with his left hand. A bolt of panic, terror, and resentment surged
through her at the feel of his fingers tightening around her neck, the memory of a time nearly a year ago when he’d done the same thing and later given his word never to do it again, and she realized he was taking this much further than she’d expected.

The attacks against her body, she’d prepared for, had known were coming, had as much as told him to launch. But this was deliberate. He was going after her spirit, as well. Her will. He was trying to make her hate him.

A brief glimmer of remorse crossed his face when she twisted out of his grip, but he banished it immediately. She sent another curse at him, but he blocked it as easily as the first. “Pathetic,” he sneered after she’d tried and failed to hit him three more times. “How could you think I might ever love someone as weak as you? Lily would have had me on my back by now.”

His words hit like ice water, shocking and freezing her.

Snape’s lips curled in a grotesque mockery of a smile. “And how I would have loved for her to have me there.”

A flame of hatred exploded in Hermione’s breast. How dare he? How dare he bring up such things now, after everything? How dare he tear with his claws at such tender places in her heart?

Through the fire in her blood, Hermione understood. He was trying to make her believe it, trying to burn out the part of her that wanted him to win. So that when the inevitable happened, the Wand would believe it.

So, she let herself give in to the doubt, the fear, the pain, the hate—everything he’d made her feel over the past year that made her want to keep him as far away as possible.

“Reducto!” Hermione screamed. The Reducto Curse actually managed to clip Snape before he deflected it toward a tree, blasting one of its branches to splinters. He was off guard for only a second. Hermione moved to press her advantage.

A body stumbled into her, knocking her to the ground. “Sorry!” Tonks yelled, one hand already offered to help her up. Hermione grabbed it, Tonks pulled her to her feet, and a curse hit the spot on the ground where she’d been lying a moment before. Tonks spun, wand up, but faltered when she saw Snape. “What the hell, Hermione?”

“Leave him,” Hermione snarled, moving between Tonks and Snape. “This is my fight.”

“But—”

“I’ve got this!”

With no time to discuss it, Tonks moved on. But as Hermione continued to spar with Snape, she could sense the questioning looks they were beginning to get from other Order members. It didn’t matter. All that mattered at that moment was Snape, her total jackass of a husband, and not letting him beat her.

She took aim. “Confri—”

Snape’s wand flicked toward her, and his silent spell hit her before she could finish casting her own. For a fraction of a second after she realized she’d been hit, she braced for the worst. Pain. Binding. What would it be? But all she felt was the Wand being yanked out of her grasp. It soared into the air, making a graceful arc into Snape’s outstretched hand.
He had it. Snape had taken mastery of the Elder Wand. At least, as she let her anger at him ebb away, she hoped so.

Snape looked at the Wand more closely, and there was something in his eyes. Something that worried her. Could he now feel the power in it that she’d felt?

Tonks ran to her side, about to engage Snape, but Hermione held out her hand. “No. It’s fine.” She saw again the gleam of lust in Snape’s eyes as he stared at the Wand. “I think.”

Snape stuck his own ebony wand into the back pocket of his jeans, switching the Elder Wand to his right hand. He leveled a look at Hermione, though if he meant to convey some meaning with it, she couldn’t tell.

Then he turned and strode across the battlefield, his eyes blazing more wildly with each step he took toward his former master. Little by little, he was coming unhinged. Hermione was reminded of how he’d looked after they’d saved Sirius, how disappointment that Sirius wasn’t to be Kissed had turned him briefly into a raving madman. He looked very close to getting like that again.

“RIDDLE!” he bellowed, and he didn’t need a Sonorous Charm to be heard above the clash of battle.

Hermione had never heard him call Voldemort by that name before. It certainly garnered a reaction. With a wide swipe of his wand, Voldemort sent Mad-Eye and Slughorn flying, then turned to face Snape.

“Severus,” he hissed. He spotted the Wand in Snape’s grasp. “Come to buy back my favor? It’s too late. But I will take that from you anyway.”

Voldemort shot a Killing Curse at Snape, but Snape was quick. He sidestepped it, and it hit a Death Eater who’d been dueling with Seamus and Dean behind him. After that, the rest of the fighting stopped again, and everyone—Order and Death Eater alike—gave Snape and Voldemort a wide berth.

“IT’S OVER!” Snape roared. “It’s over, Riddle! Do you hear me? You arrogant, delusional lunatic! I’m going to do what I should have done seventeen years ago! I won’t allow you to hurt anyone else! Not while I still stand! TIME TO DIE!”

Voldemort watched Snape’s outburst with an air of cool disdain, but Hermione saw the fury burning in his red eyes. Now he smiled, his eyes narrowing. “As you wish, Severus.”

After the bedlam of battle, the duel between Snape and Voldemort was eerily quiet. All eyes were on them, every combatant watching to see how this fight between the Death Eaters’ master and the Order’s de facto champion would play out. Even their spells were cast silently and more often than not hit with muffled wuffs in the grass as Snape and Voldemort danced around each other.

Several minutes passed, and the two enemies grew visibly fatigued. “What happened to you, Severus?” Voldemort asked, his tone patronizing and mocking. “Was it Dumbledore’s great weapon? Was it love?”

Snape said nothing, just pressed his assault, not giving Voldemort time to rest, but Voldemort kept at it. “Surely you’re not still upset about the redhead?”

Already contorted in determined fury, Snape’s expression grew even harder and he cast a Blasting Curse that would have torn Voldemort to shreds if it had landed.
“Or is it someone else by now?” Snape’s face twitched, and Voldemort sneered, showing white teeth. “Don’t tell me you’ve actually fallen for that bitch I made you breed with. My, my, you really are pathetic, aren’t you?”

With a wordless yell, Snape surged forward, launching curse after curse at his former master, but each was avoided or deflected.

Voldemort laughed. “Give up, Severus. I’ve already won. Do you really believe you can defeat me with my own wand?”

It wasn’t his wand, though. Voldemort may have thought he’d won its loyalty by killing the man whose spell had killed Harry, but he didn’t know the true order of its mastery. Unfortunately, that didn’t seem to matter very much. Snape was one of the best duelists Hermione knew, and he had the strongest wand he possibly could, and still he wasn’t gaining any ground on his enemy.

Maybe if some of them joined the fight, ganged up on Voldemort, they’d beat him. But his Death Eaters were still among them, and if enough Order members turned their attention to beating him, it would leave too many Death Eaters unchallenged, able to pick the Order off one by one while they were distracted.

Snape would do it. She knew he could. She had faith in him.

But she’d forgotten one crucial point: the reason evil so often triumphed over good was that evil fought dirty.

“Serpensortia!” Voldemort shouted, the first curse he’d bothered to verbalize, as he waved his wand in an overly elaborate gesture. Almost as soon as it occurred to Hermione that he was putting on a bit of a show with that one, she realized what he was really doing. It was an old magician’s trick, though Voldemort probably didn’t realize it.

Misdirection.

As Snape Banished the snake Voldemort sent flying at him, Voldemort’s left hand waved. It was a slight movement, easy to miss, but combined with the non-verbal spell he must have been using, it was enough.

A foot-long shard of wood from the tree Hermione’s Reductor Curse had splintered rose into the air and shot forward, Summoned to the Dark Lord. Jagged and deadly, the shard flew like a spear toward Voldemort and might have speared him . . . if Snape were not standing directly in its path.

“No!” Hermione screamed an instant before it hit.

Snape never saw it coming. The shard pierced his body, his flesh putting an abrupt end to its flight. He screamed, a terrible, blood-curdling sound of pain, rage, and frustration. The Wand fell from his hand as his arm went limp and useless at his side, and he looked down with wide, shocked eyes at the piece of wood jutting out of his torso, rough edges glistening with his blood.

His legs buckled, and he fell to his knees as Voldemort’s piercing, triumphant laugh rang out over the battlefield. Hermione ran to her husband, ignoring everything else around her. Her only thought, her only instinct was to be by his side. She reached him in seconds, falling to the ground beside him, letting him cling to her with his good arm to keep himself from collapsing entirely.

“I’m fine,” he gasped. She could hear the pain in his voice that he was already trying to hide, but his eyes were strong as he looked at her. “Only my shoulder. Flesh wound.”
The tension in her heart eased enough to let it keep beating. He was alive. He hadn’t been mortally wounded.

Not yet.

Voldemort’s laughter brought her attention to the Dark wizard. He stood closer now, only a few yards away. He shook his head in a mocking, pitying way. “Pathetic.”

Then, with soft, casual steps, he crossed the grass to where Snape had dropped the Elder Wand . . . and picked it up.

Jealousy flashed in Snape’s eyes as Voldemort held the Wand, laughing triumphantly, and reveled in its power.

All that Dumbledore had done—all that all of them had done—to keep it from him, and it was all for nothing. They’d failed. Voldemort was the master of the Elder Wand. Already so powerful, now he’d become truly unstoppable.

They were all doomed.

Voldemort made a wide sweep through the air with the Elder Wand, and Hermione felt her body tense, every muscle cramping at once, her arms locking to her sides, her limbs going rigid. She tried to move, to speak, but she couldn’t move anything more than her eyes.

A Body-Bind.

Panic rose in her, and her gaze darted to Snape. By the look in his eyes and the stiffness of his body, she could tell it had affected him too. Even his pained quivering had stopped. She looked around at the other Order members and fighters on their side that were in her current field of vision. None of them were moving.

This was it. This was the end. Voldemort had put them all under a Body-Bind, and now he was going to kill them—and maybe do what other degrading things to them—while they were unable to lift a finger against him.

Voldemort’s followers were starting to realize the spell he’d cast over their enemies. They were laughing, jeering, poking and making lewd gestures at people they’d been fighting to the death with minutes ago. Bellatrix cackled, licked Neville’s cheek, then gave him a light shove and he fell on his face. Seeing him humiliated like that, Hermione felt an irrational pang of remorse for Petrifying him in first year. She saw Lupin get knocked down by a couple of smaller werewolves, who proceeded to nip at his paws sticking up in the air. Someone in a black hood groped Molly Weasley while Arthur stood by, unable to stop it. Fear rushed into Hermione anew as she wondered how far Voldemort would let his followers take things before killing them.

“Enough!” Voldemort snapped, and his followers stopped taunting their enemies and gave him their full attention. Bellatrix gamboled over to his side, reveling in his victory even more than he was.

If Voldemort had plans for the rest of the Order, he’d evidently decided they could wait. He paced in front of Snape, considering what to do with him.

“I’m disappointed, Severus,” he said at last. “Once my most trusted servant—” Bellatrix let out an indignant whine, and Voldemort chuckled. “Quite right, Bella. Second most trusted. And you dared to turn against me. For the length and depth of your betrayal, Severus, you deserve so much more than death.” He paced back and forth a few more times, then said thoughtfully, “Before he
died. Wormtail reported something which I must admit came as a shock. He seemed to think you actually care for your whelps. Curious. I hadn’t thought you capable of such sickening sentimentality.” He looked at Hermione with disgust. “I suppose I was wrong on that point. But it serves me to know you have such a weakness.”

No. Nonononono. Hermione’s guts turned into worms, twisting and writhing inside her. A low growl issued through Snape’s clenched jaws, and his black eyes filled with hatred.

“Greyback!” Voldemort snapped. The huge, mangy wolf ran to his master, a manic gleam in his lupine eyes. Voldemort looked down on him and in a flat voice commanded, “Find the infants. Bring them to me.”

Hermione screamed, but the sound came out muffled and weak. She’d never fought so hard to move in her life as she did now, but she couldn’t break Voldemort’s Body-Bind.

Greyback and seven other feral wolves took off toward the castle.

No. Not him. Not this. Hermione kept fighting to move or speak, but it was like trying to push down a castle wall with her bare hands.

Voldemort raised his eyebrows at Snape. “Is it not my right? After all, it is only because of me that they were born at all. Why should they not be mine to do with as I please?”

Snape’s gaze bored into him, and if looks were enough to kill, Voldemort would have already been a gooey mess on the grass.

Possibly tired of gloating when the other person couldn’t give a satisfying reaction, Voldemort just stood there quietly, waiting with growing impatience for Greyback to return. Not daring to interrupt, his followers remained likewise silent. And, of course, the Order could do nothing but wait.

Hermione tried not to picture it, but in the stillness and silence of the night around them, she could hardly think about anything else. The wolves would charge into the castle, scent out the babies, and stop for nothing until they had them. The house-elves would probably slow them down, but eight werewolves would be too much for them to stop. Then the wolves would claw their way through the doorway to the Hufflepuff common room and kill everyone inside. Would Greyback be able to stop the others from eating the children immediately? They were wild werewolves, after all, and humans were a werewolf’s only natural prey. The temptation a helpless infant provided would probably be too much for whatever authority Greyback’s position as Alpha gave him to counteract.

It was like the nightmares from this past year. Image after image of gruesome death for everyone she cared about. They were already coming true. A few more moments, and they’d be fulfilled entirely.

It took a long time for Greyback to return. Long enough that Hermione began to hope that somehow they’d been stopped after all. Then she heard one lone set of pawfalls, heavy and uneven, galloping across the lawn behind her, and a child’s terrified wail like a siren in their ears. Voldemort’s face contorted in anger as he watched the wolf’s approach, and when Greyback finally moved into her field of vision, Hermione could see why.

He was alone, his mouth and paws covered in blood, and one lone bundle of cloth dangled from his jaws. It was so small, it could only have been Luna.
“Idiot!” Voldemort snapped at him, snatching the bundle from Greyback’s grasp. “Couldn’t you control your mongrels for five minutes? I told you to bring them to me, not devour them on the spot!”

A sharp, pitiful keening filled the air. From the ground, toppled on his side, Lupin’s golden eyes were wild. Unable to find a voice of her own, Hermione let Lupin speak for all of them.

Dead. Her babies. All dead.

No. All but one.

Voldemort moved a flap of the blanket away from Luna’s face, and Hermione felt a pang of relief. She didn’t appear to be injured. Greyback had managed to carry her without biting her flesh. Even as her soul felt like it was ripping in two for the deaths of her other children, Hermione clung to that small mercy.

“Very well, this one will have to do,” Voldemort said impatiently. “Get out of my sight! You’ll be dealt with later.” Greyback gave him one challenging growl, then slunk away. Voldemort held Luna up for Snape and Hermione to see. Her little face was red and wet, scrunched up with crying. Hermione yearned to hold her, to comfort her, to save her, but she could do nothing.

“Can you really care for this brat, Severus? This squalling, weak, useless creature? Never mind, I see in your eyes that you do. What a fool you’ve become. Pity. You had such potential once. But you made a poor choice, betraying me for them. Now see of what worth love is.”

As Hermione looked on in helpless horror, Voldemort spread his hand and lowered it toward Luna’s neck. He was going to choke the life out of her, and there was nothing she or Snape or anyone else could do to stop it. Hermione closed her eyes, not wanting to see—then opened them again, feeling that in some way it would be dishonorable to her child not to witness this.

The instant Voldemort’s hand touched Luna’s skin, he screamed in pain and dropped her, blanket and all, to the ground. Fury blazed in his crimson eyes. “Useless brat!” he bellowed, howling with rage. With the speed of instinct unhindered by conscious thought, he pointed the Elder Wand at Luna’s tiny, squirming body and shouted, “Avada Kedavra!”

For one tiny fraction of a second after the words left his mouth, Voldemort’s eyes widened. His brain had finally caught up with his reactions. Too late.

The green light of the spell shot from the end of his wand, hit baby Luna—then bounced off of her, flew back toward Voldemort, and hit him square in the chest.

Voldemort toppled backward and landed with a conclusive thud, the look of wide-eyed shock still on his face.

Hermione felt the Body-Bind lift and scrambled across the grass to Luna. But then Bellatrix was between her and her child, black eyes blazing with madness. “You killed my Lord!” Bellatrix screamed at the infant. “You’ll pay for that you little—”

Someone slammed into Bellatrix, taking her off-guard and knocking her to the ground. While she was still disoriented, her attacker grabbed her wand from her hand and got to his feet. Neville stood over her, wand pointed at her face, terrible and terrifying as a lightning storm. “You’re not going to hurt her, Bellatrix.”

Voldemort’s most loyal lieutenant raised onto her elbows and looked up at him from under heavy brows, smiling as if a favorite pet were acting particularly precocious. “Are you going to kill me,
Neville?” she cooed.

For a moment, Neville seemed to consider it. Then he said, “No,” and before she could taunt him again, he shouted, “Obliviate!” The spell flashed from his wand, propelled by his resentment, rage, and grief, slammed into Bellatrix like a physical force, and knocked her flat on her back.

With the threat of Bellatrix neutralized, Hermione reached Luna, picked her up, grabbed the Elder Wand from Voldemort’s unresisting grip, and returned to Snape, cradling their child in her arms. Shouts of victory and despair went up all around them as the battle resumed.

Snape stared in disbelief at his fallen former master, but when Hermione knelt once again by his side, he blinked and looked at her, then at Luna. “It’s over,” he whispered, placing his hand tenderly on Luna’s head.

Hermione looked at the battle surging around them. “Not quite. Can you stand?”

He made a jerking attempt, then winced and fell back to his knees. “Not yet. Nausea.”

“The pain?” Hermione guessed, and he nodded, though she could tell he was reluctant to admit it. “Okay. Then stay down. It doesn’t look like this will take long.”

The Order’s forces had already gained the upper hand. Thrown into chaos by Voldemort’s defeat, his followers scattered, leaving those still fighting too outnumbered to stand a chance. They were being killed or captured left and right, and those who were fleeing were being rounded up as well. A flock of Patronuses drove the remaining Dementors away. The vampires had already vanished into the night. The rest of the centaur herd had shown up when Hermione hadn’t been looking and was now assisting in rounding up Voldemort’s forces.

Of all the enemy, the werewolves were the last holdouts. Maybe their beastly minds made them unable to admit defeat, or maybe Greyback was just mad enough to keep them fighting long after there was any chance of victory. The Order’s wolves were herding them together, keeping them away from the humans and trying to corral them. Maybe they planned to keep them contained until the sun came up. It wouldn’t do to let them escape into Hogsmeade if they could help it. Then Hermione saw the core of the struggle between the packs.

Lupin was locked in vicious, snarling combat with Greyback. Teeth flashed, blood flowed, and the two wolves leapt and pounced on each other, circling and dancing and deadly serious. It was a fight to the death, and neither wolf was going to back down.

The other wolves gave them room, Spears and his pack keeping the mostly smaller members of Greyback’s pack under control while Lupin and Greyback fought. Hermione wondered if someone was going to break it up before Lupin got himself killed—but a person would have to be suicidal to get in the middle of that, even a wizard.

The fight was shorter than she’d have expected. In the end, youth won out over size. Greyback, bleeding from dozens of bites, fell to the ground, and Lupin stepped back, sides heaving, tongue lolling out. The other wolves waited, looking expectantly from Greyback to Lupin, inching forward or dancing in place. Lupin licked his chops, threw back his head, and howled.

Wolves, feral and potioned alike, rushed forward and surrounded Greyback, tearing into his body, eating his flesh, taking out lifetimes’ worth of hatred and resentment on a creature that deserved every bit of it.

“Hermione.”
Snape’s voice startled her. She’d been so engrossed in Lupin’s fight, she hadn’t been paying much attention to what was going on with the humans around them. As she looked now, though, she saw that the enemy had been almost completely rounded up, and wounded were making their way to the castle.

“Help me up.”

She did so. He winced, but was able to get to his feet. They headed toward McGonagall and some of the other Order members.

Movement in the sky caught her attention, and her head snapped toward it. Was this another attack? Had Voldemort’s forces come back with reinforcements? Was it still not over?

A group of wizards and witches landed, brooms cast aside, wands up, ready to fight. But they weren’t attacking.

“I’m here! We’re here!” Percy turned right and left, looking for something to hex. For some reason, the bottom part of his robes were soaked. “Where are they? I’ve brought the Aurors!”

“It’s over,” Arthur said. He had no smile for his son, nor did Molly run to hug him.

Percy’s wand lowered. “Oh. Sorry. Did we win?”

Molly burst into tears, and Percy looked frantically at his dad.


Mad-Eye raised his wand up, and a stream of golden light shot into the sky, high above the castle towers, where it expanded into the form of a phoenix hovering over the battlefield.

A battlefield littered with the bodies of her friends.

Yeah, they won.

Kind of.
“Severus.” McGonagall looked older than she had a few hours ago, her eyes weary and haunted. “Go inside. You need that wound attended to.”

He put up a token protest, but it wasn’t very convincing when he still had a foot-long shaft of wood protruding from his body. He tried to hide it, but he was obviously in a lot of pain.

“Do it,” Hermione told him, nudging him toward the castle. He gave her a questioning look. “I can’t go inside. Not yet.”

She couldn’t go in there and see whatever pieces the wolves might have left of her babies, see their blood soaking their crib. She couldn’t face that.

Not everyone was so cowardly. Mouth still red with Greyback’s blood, Lupin loped toward them, nearly running Tonks down. His wife wrapped her arms around his neck and cried into his fur for a few seconds as he made soft noises to her, then they ran together into the castle.

Snape followed them, his right arm cradled in his left.

Hermione hugged Luna tightly, wanting to never let her go. It felt like the girl was all she had left.

Numbly, Hermione walked across the grass, passing dead bodies, people rushing by, and others who’d fallen into the same zombie-like state of disbelief that Hermione felt herself slipping into. The Aurors, having finally decided to show up once the battle was over, were taking custody of the prisoners. Hermione made her way toward where the Weasleys were clustered around the fallen bodies of Harry, Ron, and Ginny.

Part-way there, she stopped. She didn’t want to intrude, but they were her friends. Her best friends. Where else was she supposed to go?

“Look!” Fred said suddenly, breaking the chorus of tears and whispers. “He’s breathing!”

She stepped closer. Arthur bent over Ron’s body, his hand on Ron’s back, listening. “He is!” he declared after a moment. “He’s alive!”

Molly gasped her son’s name, and Bill stopped her when she lurched toward him. “Give him room. He’s bleeding and he probably has a concussion. He needs a Healer.”

“I’ll take him,” Charlie and Percy said at the same time. Charlie Conjured a stretcher, and they moved Ron’s limp body onto it.

Hermione watched in fascination as Ron’s two brothers escorted him into the castle. So many emotions were raging inside her that she couldn’t find a way to express any of them.

Ron was alive. He’d survived. She hadn’t lost them both. She sobbed with relief and sorrow. She hadn’t lost Ron . . . but she had lost Harry. She waited, listening, hoping that she’d hear another exclamation of good news. But Harry had been hit with a Killing Curse. She knew that he couldn’t have survived that a second time.

Molly, turning to watch Percy and Charlie take Ron away, saw her and held out a hand, beckoning
Hermione to join them. Tears streamed down Molly’s face, anguish in her eyes. Hermione went to her, allowed herself to be pulled to her knees by Molly and hugged so fiercely that Luna was nearly crushed between them. When she let go, Hermione found herself beside Harry, his and Ginny’s bodies surrounded by the remaining Weasleys. Molly clutched at Ginny’s hand and the boys wept unashamedly for their sister. They had enough grief for Harry, too, but their focus was understandably on Ginny.

Hermione forced herself to look at her best friend. They’d turned him onto his back, and he looked up at the night sky with blank, empty green eyes. His glasses had broken again, probably crushed when he’d fallen. She removed them, folded them, and tucked them into his shirt pocket. With Luna still tucked in the cradle of one arm, she reached for Harry’s hand. There was still some warmth in it, the flesh still pliable, but it was just a little too cold to be living, and her grip on his fingers was not returned.

Her friend. Her best friend. Through good times, bad times, terrifying times. How could he really be gone? Harry had got through so much, it seemed he was invincible. After all that, to be taken out by a rogue curse. How could he have lost? How could she have lost him?

Finally, she broke down. She let down the walls, and the anguish flooded her, overwhelmed her, pouring from her eyes and nose and mouth in an endless stream, until she lost herself in the pain.

She didn’t know how long she knelt there, crying over Harry. At some point, she became aware of someone new standing beside her. She glanced up. Neville. He looked shattered. He knelt and dragged his hand over Harry’s face, closing his eyes.

“You should probably get Luna inside,” Neville said, his voice hoarse and cracking.

He was right. She should have thought of that already.

“I can take her,” he offered, “if you’d rather . . .”

She flinched away from him, turning her body like she was trying to keep Luna out of his reach. A look of hurt flickered across his already agony-ridden face, then was gone.

“It’s all right,” he muttered. “Never mind.”

She put a hand on his arm. “No. I’m sorry. I’m just . . .”

“I know.”

Her gaze fell on a body not far away, and for a moment, a rush of anger overrode the sadness. “Actually, could you hold her for a minute?”

She let Neville help her to her feet, then passed Luna to him. At his soothing, the baby finally began to quiet down.

Hermione walked over to the body of the man whose curse had killed Harry. He was lying on his back, a large hood covering his features. Who was he, the one who’d finally done it? Who would go down in history as the man who’d killed The Boy Who Lived? She knelt and pulled the hood back, revealing the man’s face.

She didn’t recognize him. He was totally nondescript. Unremarkable. He didn’t even look like a full-fledged Death Eater. New, irrational anger burned in her, and she’d chastise herself for it later. All the enemies Harry had fought, and he’d been taken down by a random stranger.
“Who is it?” Neville asked.

“No one.” Hermione pointed her wand at the body. “Incendio.” This man didn’t deserve a place in the history books.

Looking around, Hermione finally realized that the Weasleys were gone, as was Ginny’s body, and other people were beginning to approach Harry. They’d bring him inside. Put him with the others.

“Hermione . . .” Neville said curiously, “have you seen this?” He lifted Luna higher in his arms, one of her tiny hands held in his fingers.

Hermione walked back to them. By the light of the flaming corpse of Harry’s killer, she could just make out what Neville was looking at.

“For some reason, it reminds me of—”

“I know,” she said. “Harry’s.”

There was a scar on the back of Luna’s left hand: a smooth, crescent curve running from the knuckle of her ring finger to her wrist.

“What does it mean? You don’t think Greyback grazed her with his teeth, do you?”

“I don’t think so,” Hermione mused, and it all fell into place. “Luna’s love. Like Harry’s mum. She sacrificed herself willingly for my child. That’s what protected her. That’s why Voldemort couldn’t touch her and why his spell rebounded. Just the same as before. He couldn’t hurt her. All he could do was give her this scar.” She looked up at him with tears in her eyes. “Luna wasn’t even here, but she saved us all.”

Those of them who had been saved, anyway.

She looked at the Elder Wand still clutched in her hand. It had been Voldemort’s, but he’d been defeated—by the mark of Luna’s good love that infused the skin of Hermione’s daughter. Could a dead person become the Elder Wand’s master? If so, then the Wand’s line was broken, its power no longer absolute. But if the Wand had given its allegiance to her infant daughter, then Luna was in great danger—and would be as long as the Wand existed.

She wouldn’t lose her only remaining child because of some idiot’s desire for power.

The Wand snapped easily, like any ordinary stick. For good measure, she broke the pieces in two again. They dangled there, still held together by the Thestral-hair core. She yanked it out and let it drift away on the wind, then dropped the splinters of elder wood to the ground.

Neville watched all this in silence. When she was finished, he said, “We should go inside and see what happened. Maybe things aren’t as bad as they look.”

Unable to see how things could be much worse than they looked, she took Luna back and went inside with Neville.

#

The castle’s corridors were crowded. Injured were being helped to the hospital wing. Healers were arriving and seeing to them, probably called in by the Aurors who were wrangling Voldemort’s surviving forces and collecting statements from the castle’s defenders. Hermione and Neville wound their way through the crowd. Someone called to them, but Neville said he’d see what they
wanted and waved her on.

The corridor leading to the Hufflepuff common room reeked. The mingled stench of blood, dirt, burnt fur, and vinegar assailed her nose. Bodies were strewn across the floor, wolves and elves. Hermione fought not to be sick. So many house-elves had been torn to pieces. Those that had survived were limping or shuffling along, weeping and searching for anyone who still lived among the fallen. The bodies of the wolves were less mangled, but their fur was spotted with singe marks, and their skin was blistered and bubbly. Hermione counted six wolves, but at least two of them were still letting out soft whines of pain or huffs of shallow breath.

Hermione faltered, for a moment unable to move forward. These elves had died, at least in part, for her children. And had it even done any good? How could mere infants have survived an assault that left this kind of carnage in its wake?

Steeling herself, she pressed on, stepping over and around bodies, promising herself that these elves—living and dead—would be honored for their sacrifice. Seeing as none of the Healers or others seeing to the human injured had come down here, it seemed likely that most of them wouldn’t give the elves a thought.

At the end of the corridor, the barrels making up the entrance to Hufflepuff had been ripped to splinters, though the puddle of vinegar showed that at least Hufflepuff had tried to defend itself. But the repelling device was meant for mischievous students from other Houses, not rampaging werewolves. She heard voices coming through the passageway and hurried in.

She expected to see more mangled bodies, walls painted with blood, something that would haunt her the rest of her life. What she saw instead made tears of relief spring to her eyes, and her knees went weak.

Tonks was talking with Ted and Andromeda, Teddy in her arms and Lupin beside her, all well and whole. Partridge was kneeling on the floor, tending to an injured wolf while another lay on its side with a rope around its muzzle. Antoinette was fussing over Evelyn, who was lying exhausted and calm on the hospital bed. All four other babies lay uninjured in their cribs.

They were alive. They were okay. She felt faint with relief.

In a chair in the center of the room sat Snape, bare-chested, his wound being treated by Madam Pomfrey. Tucked into the crook of his good arm was a dark-haired baby.

“Is that . . .”

Snape looked up at her. He appeared at a loss for words and, for some reason, a little ashamed.

“Yes.” Antoinette came over to her and held out her arms, offering to take Luna. Still staring at the child pressed against Snape’s lean, pale, wiry chest, she handed Luna over. “She was born only a few minutes before Professor Snape got here.”

*Before the last breathes first, the two to whom they owe themselves will die.* Lavender’s prophecy. So it had meant Dumbledore and Voldemort. The thought left her head nearly as soon as it entered. It was all moot now anyway.

Antoinette was still talking. “Evelyn wouldn’t name her, so she waited until Professor Snape got here to tell her what to call her.”

With a sinking feeling, Hermione guessed the reason for Snape’s guilty look. “What’s her name?”
“Eileen Lily,” Antoinette said happily. “Isn’t that pretty?”

_Lily_. He’d named their daughter Lily. Middle name, but still.

“Hermione,” Snape said. “I didn’t—”

“It’s fine.” She should have been happy. She _was_ happy. Her children were safe, and the last one had been born. It was more than she’d dared hope for a few minutes ago. So why did she want to cry? “It’s good you got to name one, especially after Cubby.” She swiped at a tear. “I’m just so happy everyone’s okay. I . . . I should go help now. There’s a lot to do.” She turned and ran out before anyone could try to stop her.

There _was_ a lot to do, but Hermione couldn’t stop the tears. It was petty, she knew, getting so upset over a name. But it was more than just a name. Wasn’t it proof that Snape would never let go of Lily, that even now she held a large piece of his heart? _But what of his Patronus?_ another part of her wondered. It had changed, hadn’t it? If the doe had represented Lily, did the Acromantula represent Hermione? No, that couldn’t be. Himself, then, like her otter? And what did that mean?

The tears ripped open the gaping hole in her heart where Harry used to be. Harry, and Ginny, and how many others had she lost tonight? Sorrow overtook her, threatened to cripple her, and she ran to Gryffindor tower before she broke down in the middle of the hallway. Her feet took her up the stairs to her room. She couldn’t remember who, if anyone, had been using it since the school closed, but no one else was there now. She threw herself on her bed, buried her face in her pillow, and sobbed.

When she woke up, it was still dark. Her head throbbed, her eyes stung, and her nose was painfully dry. For one glorious second, she remembered nothing of the past day. And then it all returned at once, threatening to crush her again, and she threw up walls around her heart to keep the pain at bay. She wasn’t the only one who’d lost someone tonight, and it wouldn’t have been fair to leave all the cleanup work to others.

The corridors were empty as she made her way through the school. Everyone was gathered in the main areas; there was no need for them to be wandering around random corridors. Her footsteps on the stone echoed like the emptiness inside her.

And then her footsteps weren’t the only ones she heard. She looked around, wondering who else was here, and a cold dread grew in her chest. She wished she still had her Foe-Glass.

The air rippled, a Disillusionment Charm melting away to reveal an angry, pug-faced young woman in tacky, trendy robes.

“Pansy,” Hermione said warily. She realized she didn’t have a wand anymore. “What do you want?”

“We have unfinished business,” Pansy snarled, twisting her wand in her hand.

More Disillusionment Charms melted, revealing Pansy’s Slytherin friends—at least six of them. They had Hermione surrounded.

“How did you get in?” Hermione asked. “The school’s been closed for months.”

“Not closed now, is it?” Pansy replied mockingly. “We strolled right in past all the bodies.”

“Voldemort’s dead, Pansy,” Hermione stated. She didn’t like the looks on the Slytherins’ faces at all. She needed to stop this before it turned into a fight she couldn’t win. “It’s over.”
“This isn’t about him!” Pansy spat. “It’s about Draco. It’s about you getting what you deserve, you Mudblood slut!”

Pansy raised her wand, the Slytherins moved in, and Hermione tried to think of some way she could defend herself, outnumbered and wandless.

“Stop,” a voice commanded. It was familiar, but Hermione couldn’t quite place it. The Slytherins recognized it, though. They stopped at once and turned toward the speaker.

Lucius Malfoy stepped out of the shadows. There was tiredness about him that crept into a person’s bones. He was clean-shaven and his robes looked expensive as ever, but his pale blond hair had been cut short. He looked at the Slytherins with a sort of weary disgust. “It’s over, Pansy.”

Pansy’s jaw dropped. “Mr. Malfoy, you can’t be serious. She killed Draco! We’re just trying—”

“I know perfectly well what she did,” he said, eyes narrowing dangerously. “But killing her won’t bring him back.”

“But—”

“You have a lot to learn about the ways of the world, young lady. Clearly Wilfred and Ophelia have been remiss in teaching you.”

Pansy glared at him defiantly. “My parents taught me that we take care of our own. Are you too weak to avenge your own son?”

“Fool!” he snapped. “Draco’s gone, and he’s not coming back. All revenge will accomplish now is getting you and your friends sent to Azkaban. Pay attention to the way the wind shifts. The Dark Lord’s gone. There will be a new order, and the friends of Potter will have all the power. We’ve lost. Don’t make it worse for yourself now.”

The Slytherins were taking his words in, and Hermione could see their conviction wavering. Finally, Pansy put her wand away. “All right, Mr. Malfoy. If you say so.” She gave Hermione a last withering look, then she and her friends slunk off down the corridor.

Hermione turned to Lucius. Despite what he’d told Pansy, she knew she wasn’t out of the woods yet. What if he wanted to kill her himself?

Lucius looked at her, his eyes calm and considering. “You’ve killed my heir and made me a widower, Miss Granger. What do you suppose I have left to lose?”

It was true. Accidental or not, she’d taken his family. He had every right to want her dead. But she wouldn’t beg this man to kill her himself.

Lucius watched her silently for another long moment, then put his wand away. “It takes more than I’ve suffered to break a Malfoy. Now then, Miss Granger, shall we discuss a deal?”

“A deal?” She should have known. Lucius was slick as a serpent, right to the core. “For not killing me, you mean?”

He gave a lazy, one-shoulder shrug.

“And what’s to stop me from backing out of it once I’m not alone and vulnerable anymore?”
“I might be mistaken,” he drawled, “but I do think I just saved your life.”

He was right. Again. “After all you’ve done, I doubt that’s enough to buy your freedom.”

“Then what about information? I know where those of us who escaped might hide. I know who else in the Ministry is not entirely working for the public good.” He smirked, as if about to play his ace. “And I know what weakness in the school’s wards allowed Bellatrix to get in and what made them so useless in our attack tonight.”

Hermione’s eyes widened. “You do? How—”

His smirk stretched. “Ah-ah. A deal, Miss Granger?”

“This information,” she said, “in return for your freedom?”

“A complete pardon, my record expunged, my seized assets released back to me. In short, my return to being an upstanding member of society.”

The idea made her a little sick. Lucius had committed so many crimes, and to let him just make a deal and get off scot-free? It was repulsive.

But his information could be invaluable, and after killing his family, Hermione couldn’t find it in herself to hate him.

“I’ll do my best to get your deal,” she promised, “though I’m not the one who’ll make the decision.”

“You’re a war hero now, Miss Granger. I’m sure your best will be sufficient.”

She turned to leave, but he wasn’t finished.

“I won’t say that I forgive you.”

She stopped and looked back at him. His eyes had gone hard and lifeless.

“There is no replacing what you’ve taken from me. I won’t forget it. But I meant what I told Pansy. There’d be no point in seeking revenge. As far as I’m concerned, whatever’s between us is over.”

Hermione met his eyes, nodded, and walked away.

#

In the Entrance Hall, things were just as hectic as she’d last seen. People were gathered in groups, moving about. Healers were seeing to the wounded and ordering others to get them upstairs to the hospital wing. Other people, still dirty and bloody and exhausted, were carrying bodies in from the field. Following them, she went to the Great Hall, where rows of bodies were lined up on the far end, near where the High Table normally stood.

She couldn’t face that. Not yet. Later. She backed out of the room and nearly ran into Angelina and Seamus, who were carrying another body between them. Hermione glanced at the corpse’s face before she could stop herself and felt a sick tightening in her stomach. It was Cecilia.

Hermione rushed back to the Entrance Hall, hoping there was something she could do for those still living. She passed Cho, Burbage, and several others being looked over by a Healer. An official-looking witch stood with them, explaining about what would happen, their rights and responsibilities and so forth, now that they were going to become vampires. Hermione tried not to
see Cho’s tears.

She saw Mad-Eye barking orders and considered telling him about Lucius, but knowing Mad-Eye, it seemed more likely to her that he might enact swift justice on the Death Eater rather than see about his pardon deal, and Hermione had made a promise. Instead, she told McGonagall, who Hermione felt confident was more likely to treat him fairly. When Umbridge was ousted as acting Minister (as Hermione hoped she would be, with such a gruesome battle occurring and her doing nothing to help stop it), Hermione would speak to whoever the new Minister was on Lucius’s behalf.

For a while, Hermione found ways to help and to keep her mind off of what she’d lost tonight. She went outside to help those searching for survivors who’d fallen off the beaten path and were too injured to make it back on their own. Neville met up with her, and they searched together, saying little. It was comforting to have him beside her, one friend who’d come out of this alive and well. They searched the rest of the night and managed to get five badly injured people inside where they could get help. They only found a few dead bodies that hadn’t been carried in by others, and Hermione was grateful that she didn’t know any of them.

Aurors patrolled the area, capturing any of the enemy who hadn’t been able to get away or were hanging around for some dark purpose. Spears and his wolves kept Greyback’s pack corralled and in control until the sun came up, when they all transformed. She saw several members of Dumbledore’s Army go out to them then, bringing clothes and food. Soon, they all went inside.

Searching some bushes at the edge of the lake, Hermione saw a flash of skin in the dawn light. “Here, Neville,” she said, and he helped her. They pulled out two bodies, both naked and covered in vicious bite marks. Their mouths were full of blood.

“They’re kids,” Neville said with horror. “They don’t look older than first years. How . . .” He trailed off, probably figuring it out.

“Werewolves,” she said anyway. “Remus said Greyback’s pack was mostly women and children.”

Neville swore softly. A soft groan came from the bushes, and they hurried to pull out another werewolf. She was alive, not as badly mauled as the two dead ones.

“I’ll take her inside,” Hermione volunteered at once. It was cowardly, but she preferred to leave the dead bodies to Neville.

The girl was maybe nine years old and very thin. Neville Conjured a blanket to wrap her in, then Hermione lifted her in her arms and carried her back to the castle.

Once inside, she started toward the stairs up to the hospital wing, but two wizards who seemed to have the job of regulating traffic started directing her firmly toward the Great Hall.

“She’s not dead, just injured,” Hermione protested, but they were adamant.

Confused, she took the girl to the Great Hall and was met outside by Percy. He had a resolutely professional expression fixed on his face, and she could tell he was using order and paperwork to distract himself from the grief of losing his sister. She related.

“Yes, through there,” he told her, barely looking over the rim of his glasses as he made a note on a clipboard. “A mediwizard will come by to assess her and prioritize for when the Healers come.”

“When they come? There are Healers all over the place. Why can’t I take her to the hospital wing? Is it full?”
Percy looked at her straight on, regret in his eyes but not his voice. “She’s a werewolf. The Healer-in-Charge has classified them as low-priority.”

“Of course he has,” Hermione muttered and went in.

The rows of bodies at the end of the Great Hall only took up a portion of the space. Near the entrance, a group of werewolves sat or lay on the floor. Some were injured, some not. A mediwizard was moving among them with professional expediency, though he couldn’t hide the disgust on his face, or wasn’t trying to. The werewolves were mostly women, children, and teens, with a few weak-looking men scattered about. Hermione didn’t recognize any of them. Greyback’s pack, or what was left of it.

Hermione laid the girl down and called the mediwizard over. She turned to leave, eager to be away from the dead bodies at the other end of the room, when she noticed a second group of werewolves.

These were the ones she knew, the ones who’d helped defend the castle, and yet they were being treated with the same carelessness and disdain as the enemy. She looked aside to an Auror patrolling the area between the werewolves and the bodies. She’d thought maybe he was looking for someone among the fallen at first. Now she saw that he was guarding the dead from the wolves. Anger flared inside her, and she tamped it down. Ignorance and bigotry could be dealt with later. She went to the familiar werewolves.

At least cots had been Conjured for the more badly injured of them. She saw Precious and Scratch, both in bad shape but breathing. Most of these wolves had only minor injuries—but they were almost all bigger and stronger than Greyback’s wolves. She approached Spears.

“How many did you lose?” she asked.

“Three, if those two pull through.” He nodded grimly toward Precious and Scratch. “The count from the other side’s at sixteen so far. Mostly children.”

Hermione shook her head, reluctant to deliver more bad news. “Eighteen. Neville’s about to bring two more in.”

Spears growled. “Damn Greyback.”

Hermione glanced around for Lupin and found him talking to a group of people, most of whom she recognized: Oliver Wood, Madam Rosmerta from the Three Broomsticks, Colin Creevey (who must have snuck back somehow after McGonagall sent him away), Alicia Spinnet, Parvati Patil, Lee Jordan, and some others she thought might have been Hogsmeade residents or parents of students. It seemed an odd collection of people.

“What are they . . .” She trailed off, realizing. She remembered Oliver being set on by werewolves as he tried to rescue Roger Davies, saw the bloody bite marks on his shoulder.

“New werewolves,” Spears muttered unhappily. “We knew it was likely, but damn, I hate to see so many.”

Hermione watched them, people she knew, their lives now changed forever—like so many others, really. She heard snatches of what Lupin was saying, and it amounted to the same sort of information the Ministry witch had been giving Cho and the other vampire victims. Parvati was crying, Colin looked dazed, Oliver and Alicia’s faces were set in bleak determination, and Lee looked like he was already trying to work around to making a joke out of it. They all had bloody
bite wounds, though these, at least, had been properly tended to as much as possible.

Hermione glanced again at the Auror guarding the bodies, then marched back to Percy. “What took you so long?”

He looked at her, startled. “What?”

“You brought the Aurors. If they were going to come, why didn’t they come sooner?” *When it would have mattered. When people might have been saved.*

Percy pursed his lips, and his eyes drifted to a spot among the bodies. “Umbridge. She held them back.”

“Then why are they here now, and where is she?”

“She’s dead. I sort of . . . lured her away. The centaurs and merpeople took care of the rest.” He tried to bury his face in his clipboard. “It had to be done.”

“Oh.” Hermione felt like she should have felt bad about Umbridge’s demise, but all she felt was impressed and vindicated.

“Ron’s in the hospital wing,” he told her, his tone somber, “if you want to see him.”

#

The hospital wing was crowded, every bed filled, extra cots Conjured, and many people standing or sitting where they could find room. The aisles were mostly clear, but she still managed to bump into someone as she looked for Ron’s bed. A cane clattered to the floor, and she hurried to pick it up before whoever she’d bumped into fell over.

“Sorry about that,” she said, handing it over. “Here you go.”

A dark-skinned hand grasped the cane, and a weary voice said, “Thanks, Hermione.”

Her head snapped up. “Kingsley? But . . . but . . . I saw you die!”

Kingsley chuckled humorlessly. “Not quite, though that wall did shatter my leg.” He leaned lightly on the cane. “The Healer was able to patch me up. Mostly.”

Hermione was amazed at seeing him alive. “You’re like a cat. That’s twice you’ve cheated death now.”

He gave her a weak smile. “Three times, actually, but the first was a long time ago and more than a little embarrassing.”

“Well, I’m glad. I’ve lost enough people as it is.”

He grimaced. “Yes. I heard. And very nearly our children, too. If you’ll excuse me, I’ve just been released, and I’d like to go check on my son.”

“Of course.” She moved out of his way. “Oh, Kingsley, do you know where Ron’s bed is?”

He directed her to a far corner, and she hurried through the crowd, nodding to people she knew, looking out for anyone else she might mistakenly believe dead.

There were three chairs pulled up by Ron’s bed. Hermione took the empty one and looked at her
friend, unconscious but breathing steadily. He seemed to be only asleep.

“He hasn’t woken up yet,” Fred told her. Across the bed from Hermione, he sat with Lavender leaning against him, hugging his arm. “We’ve been taking turns sitting with him.”

“What did the Healer say?” Hermione asked. She took Ron’s hand in hers. It was warm with life, and she let it comfort her.

Fred sighed. “Concussion. Bleeding. But they got all that fixed already. He should be awake.”

“Why isn’t he?”

“They don’t know.” Fred looked across at her. It was disturbing to see his eyes so serious. “The Healer thought . . . maybe he just doesn’t want to wake up.”

Hermione stroked the hair away from Ron’s forehead. Maybe subconsciously she expected it to wake him up, like in some Muggle movie. But he didn’t even twitch.

“I’ll stay with him,” she offered, “if you’d rather go.”

“No,” he said. “I mean, you can stay too if you want. But . . . it’s kind of a family thing.”

She met Lavender’s eyes. Neither of them said anything, but they both understood. No matter how close a friend was, sometimes what a person needed was family. And after losing Ginny, the Weasleys weren’t about to walk away and lose Ron too.

Hermione sat with Ron for two hours, watching him, watching others in the hospital come and go. He never stirred. After a while, Bill and Fleur joined them with a basket of muffins and a large bottle of pumpkin juice. They nibbled, but none of them were very hungry.

“We were just downstairs,” Bill said after Fred and Lavender left. His voice had the same hollow, empty quality that most people’s had this morning. “Percy says they’re getting ready to move the . . . the bodies . . . somewhere else. If you want to see Harry and Ginny again, you’d better do it now.”

Hermione swallowed. No more putting it off. She had to face them again. Say goodbye to Harry. To Ginny. She wondered if anyone had taken James to see them once more, or if that would be more cruel than kind.

She squeezed Ron’s hand, promising herself that she wouldn’t let him slip away from her too, and went downstairs.

The werewolves were gone from the Great Hall. She hoped they’d just been moved somewhere more comfortable, not arrested. The only other people in here now were those saying their goodbyes.

Cold, creeping emptiness filled Hermione with every step she took toward the rows of bodies. Her breath grew more rapid as the stark reality of her loss reasserted itself. At the end of a row, she saw two red-haired figures huddled together, and she walked toward them.

As she passed the dead laid out in poses of rest, she looked at their faces. Some, she’d already seen: Cecilia Smith, Elphias Doge, Cormac McLaggen. Some, she hadn’t known for sure, but they didn’t come as a shock: Roger Davies, Eloise Midgen, Professor Vector. Others came as ghastly surprises, carving out the hole inside her a little more: Sturgis Podmore, Professor Sprout, Justin Finch-Fletchley.
When she finally got to the end, she hesitated. Molly was on her knees, shuddering with grief. Arthur knelt with her, his arms around her, tears silently flowing down his face. Harry and Ginny had been laid together, his hand resting on hers. Aside from the determination frozen on his face, he looked like he might have been sleeping. The gash in Ginny’s throat belied any such appearance in her, but she’d long since bled out, and the wound was clean. Molly was beside Ginny, bent over her with a hand clutching desperately to each body.

Arthur looked up and met Hermione’s eyes. Seeing his weakness, she stepped back, meaning to leave, but he beckoned her forward. She joined them, kneeling by Harry’s and Ginny’s heads and reached out shaking hands as she began to weep once again. Their hair was the only part of them that still felt alive, so she rested her hands on their heads, like a priest performing a benediction.

She broke apart.

#

“What exactly did you tell them to get them to invite us to dinner?” Hermione asked in a low voice.

“That you are my grand-niece, recently graduated from Roedean and visiting for the summer.” Mrs. Figg’s lip curled up, as if she was about to say something distasteful. “I implied you wanted to meet their strapping young son.”

Hermione’s eyes widened. “They think I’m here to be set up with Dudley?”

“The goal was getting in the door, wasn’t it?” Mrs. Figg asked. “Think they’d let you in if you told them right off who you are?” She reached over and rang the doorbell to number four, Privet Drive.

The door opened almost immediately, and a blonde, horse-faced woman gave them a big-toothed smile. Lily’s sister. “Mrs. Figg, how lovely to see you. And this must be . . .”

“Jean,” said Mrs. Figg before Hermione could introduce herself. From the corner of her eye, she gave Hermione a *don’t upset the Muggles* look. “Jean Granger.”

“Jean,” Mrs. Dursley repeated, her smile widening with approval of the entirely normal name. “How good to meet you. Please come in.”

“Thank you for inviting us,” Hermione said, following Mrs. Figg into a perfectly respectable and completely dull living room. *This is where Harry grew up.* She looked around, searching for something that reminded her of him: a photo, some toy or trinket that might have been his, a chair she could imagine him curling up in as a child. There was nothing. Not a single thing about the Dursleys’ house even suggested Harry. It was as if he’d never even been here.

“So sorry if it’s a bit of a mess,” said Harry’s aunt, evidently mistaking the frown that had crept onto Hermione’s face. “I’ve been cooking all afternoon, so I suppose I haven’t had time to give the place a proper cleaning.”

Hermione didn’t know what the woman was talking about; the room was pristine. She forced a smile. “Oh, no, I’m sorry, Mrs. Dursley. Your house is lovely. I was just thinking of something else for a moment.”

Appeased, she smiled again. “Quite all right, Jean. And please, call me Petunia.” She led Hermione and Mrs. Figg to the fireplace, where two very large men were waiting. “Jean, allow me to introduce my husband, Vernon,” she said, indicating the older of the two men, whose face was dominated by an imperious black mustache.
“Lovely to meet you,” Vernon said, thrusting out a hammy hand and giving hers a hearty shake.

“And this,” Petunia said, sidling up beside her son and placing her hands on his shoulders, “is our son, Dudley.”

Harry had spoken of Dudley often enough for Hermione to have formed a mental image of him, but the young man before her didn’t quite match. He was certainly more than big enough, but rather than having the appearance of a blubbery walrus like his father, Dudley’s bulk was mostly muscle, though thick and poorly-defined muscle. His shoulders were broad, his blond hair cut close and neat. In fact, he wasn’t altogether a terrible-looking guy. His face was almost pleasant, in a plain and meaty sort of way.

The biggest difference, though, between what she’d expected and what she saw was his expression. He didn’t look like the kid who’d bullied Harry mercilessly all through his childhood. He didn’t have the cruel, cold look that she’d come to associate with real criminals. Right now, he just looked shy and embarrassed. And, yes, more than a little dim, but lack of intelligence did not, in itself, make a person a brute.

“Hullo,” he grunted. He wasn’t quite meeting her eyes, and his cheeks were tinged slightly pink.

_Well, thought Hermione, why shouldn’t he be embarrassed? He’s eighteen and his parents are hovering and treating him like a child. And setting him up with a girl. What if he’s never even got a date of his own?_ She smiled in as disarming a way as she could. “It’s nice to meet you, Dudley.”

Petunia beamed at this, and Vernon slapped Dudley on the back as if he’d just wooed, wed, and impregnated Hermione. She fought not to roll her eyes. With such low expectations from them, it was no wonder Dudley had so little to show for his life.

They’d arrived precisely on time, so dinner was hot and on the table. Petunia led them all in, got them seated, and filled their drinks. Mrs. Figg was seated next to Petunia, with Vernon on the end, which left Hermione sitting next to a very awkward Dudley. They made polite small talk as they ate their salads and moved on to the soup. Vernon and Petunia seemed quite interested in her parents’ dental practice and told her about the interview at Grunnings that Dudley already had lined up.

When she was nearly finished with her soup, Hermione decided she’d softened them up enough and laid her spoon down. “I’m afraid I have a confession to make. I’m not really Mrs. Figg’s grand-niece.”

Vernon and Petunia looked at her warily, then looked at Mrs. Figg, but the older woman was intently studying her soup.

“The truth is, she only told you that so that you’d let me in to speak with you,” Hermione continued.

“Who are you, then?” Petunia asked, sounding like she didn’t know whether to be worried or not, perhaps still hoping that Hermione might be interested in her son even if she had some ulterior motive.

“My name’s Hermione. I’m a friend of Harry’s.”

Petunia gasped, and Dudley finally looked directly at her for the first time. “What?” Vernon growled, his mustache twitching with indignation.

“I have bad news,” she went on. “He’s told you about Voldemort?”
“How dare you?” Vernon blustered. “Coming into our house on false pretense? Bringing your nonsense in here! Get out!”

“Listen to her,” Mrs. Figg insisted. “She has something important to tell you.”

“You!” He pointed a thick finger at the older woman. “We trusted you, and you bring this—_this_—into our home? What have you got to do with it?” A look of fear crossed his face suddenly. “You’re not one of their lot, are you?”

“I’m a Squib,” Mrs. Figg said, her patience fading.

“Squid? Squid? What do you mean you’re a squid?”

“Squib,” she snapped. “It means I haven’t got magic but my parents did. Now listen to the girl, Vernon!”

“I will not!” He stood, throwing his napkin on the table dramatically. “I want you both out of my house this instant! And don’t come back!”

“Harry’s dead!”

Hermione’s declaration stopped the argument in its tracks. The Dursleys stared at her in disbelief.

“What . . . did you say?” whispered Petunia.

Hermione fought back the pain of loss and said what she’d come here to, though she had hoped to work up to it more delicately. “There was a battle against Voldemort. We won, but a lot of people died. Including Harry.”

“Harry’s dead?” Dudley asked.

How many times was he going to make her say it? “Yes.”

Vernon got over his shock quickly. “Serves him right, I’m sure, getting tangled up in all that nonsense. I knew he was no good, right from the start. Nothing but trouble, that boy.”

Something inside Hermione snapped. “Harry was a hero! And he was a good, _good_ man! He was my best friend!”

For a moment, Petunia looked as if she wanted to say something, then her eyes went to Vernon, and she said nothing. But her hand was shaking.

“And he had a family, you know,” Hermione added.

“Yes, he said something about that right before he left,” Vernon huffed. “Got some girl up the duff, did he? Had to marry her? Disgraceful.”

“It was nothing like that!” Hermione squealed in outrage at the slander. “His marriage was perfectly respectable! But his wife died too! His son’s an orphan now!”

Dudley was staring at the tablecloth, his brow furrowed like he was trying to puzzle out what she was saying. Petunia was trembling, but still she said nothing to stop her husband’s ranting.

Vernon huffed. “Marge was right. The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, does it? Well, we’re not taking his brat. We’ve done our bit of charity.”
Hermione felt like she would explode in a fireball of fury if she stayed here any longer, but she wasn’t finished, so she forced herself to take a deep breath and calm down enough to speak. “I just came to tell you that. The funeral’s on Saturday, if you’d like to come. Just meet at Mrs. Figg’s house at two and someone will take you there.”

Vernon scoffed, not even bothering to voice his lack of interest in such a thing. “Why’d they send you, anyway? Why couldn’t that Shacklebolt fellow have told us? He at least seemed like a halfway decent sort.”

“Kingsley’s been chosen as the new Minister for Magic,” Hermione ground out. “So he’s a bit busy at present.”

“Finally put someone proper in charge, have you lot?” Vernon said with a sniff. “I guess that’s something, at least.”

“Thank you for dinner.” She pushed her chair out and stood as calmly as she could. “It was nice meeting you, Dudley, but I already have a husband.” Her gaze hardened and shifted to Petunia. “You may know him. His name’s Severus Snape.”

Petunia’s hand flew to her mouth in horror. “That—awful—boy,” she stammered. She looked like she was about to be sick.

“Man,” Hermione corrected. “He’s a man now. Believe me.” She shot Vernon a look. “And he’s far more of a man than you are.” Her anger had unleashed a viciousness she hardly knew she possessed. “Though not in terms of actual volume, of course.”

Vernon’s mustache shivered furiously, and his eyes were beginning to bulge.

“We’ll let ourselves out.”

Once they were safely outside and out of range of the Dursleys’ infuriating presence, Hermione slumped. “I blew it. Fred and George told me it wasn’t worth trying.”

Mrs. Figg laid a hand on her arm. “No, you were right. They had to know, even if they didn’t care.”

Hermione wiped at the tears that had come to her eyes. “You’re right. I just wish . . .” She sighed and shook her head.

Mrs. Figg nodded. “So do we all.”

#

By the Thursday after the battle, the hospital wing was nearly empty. Those with less severe injuries had been patched up and sent on their way. Those who needed more care were transferred to St. Mungo’s. The babies had been moved back in, so it was being used as a makeshift nursery again. Evelyn was still recovering and now feeding both Eileen and Cubby, though her desire to go home to her mother was evident. Antoinette kept her comfortable, though, and fed Cedric and Luna without complaint. Hermione was grateful for the hard-working Hufflepuff, though she suspected that Antoinette’s eagerness to stay and help might have had something to do with the fact that Partridge was also still hanging around to see to Luna’s continuing care. Aside from the unusual scar, Luna had made it through her ordeal unscathed, and the boys had probably already forgotten it had happened. Eileen was already bigger and healthier than Luna was, though she had been conceived before her, so that wasn’t so surprising.
Aside from the babies, Partridge, Pomfrey, the two remaining surrogates, and Hermione herself, the hospital wing’s only regular overnight resident was Ron. The Healers had been unable to find anything else physically wrong with him, so they’d seen no point in transferring him to St. Mungo’s. It was, they thought, only a matter of time before he got ’round to waking up. But that had been five days ago.

“He’ll come out of it any day now, Molly,” Tonks said. She and Molly were sitting with Hermione around Ron’s bed, as someone had done around the clock since the battle. As the three women were the only conscious adults in the room at the moment, Tonks was taking the opportunity to breastfeed Royal. Kingsley had saved her life, she’d explained. The least she could do to repay him was see that his son got a proper meal. The sight made Hermione feel guilty, though. With their losses, they only had three lactating women to feed a total of seven children, four of which were Hermione’s. She wished there was something she could do, but actual human milk was still healthiest for them at this point, though at least Cedric was getting weaned onto food.

“I hope so,” Molly said and squeezed Ron’s hand. “But why hasn’t he already?”

“The last thing he saw before he was injured was his best friend and sister getting killed,” Hermione murmured, trying to hold back the tears that still came at any mention of Harry or Ginny. “Maybe he’s afraid to wake up and face a world without them . . . or find out who else he lost.”

Molly started crying again, and Hermione wondered if her moment with Ron in the hallway didn’t also have something to do with it. He’d lost his best friend and his sister . . . and the woman he loved had made it clear that his chances of ever being with her were slim.

But were they, really? A poisonous thought had been growing in the back of Hermione’s mind for the past few days. Snape had not sought her out, and he seemed to come see the babies only when she wasn’t there. Was it just guilt for naming their daughter after his lost love? Or was he reluctant to be stuck with her now that it seemed they’d both lived through the war. She could see that he cared for the children and would at least try to be a good father to them. And that frantic sex in the corridor before the battle made it clear that at least he found her sexually appealing, and she him. Perhaps they could live their lives, raise their children, fulfill their physical desires, and that would be enough.

But she needed love. She needed someone to want her for her. Someone to love and desire her. Not her brain, not her body—her.

Ron had been her friend for seven years, and she knew that he truly, genuinely loved her. He could give her that.

It wouldn’t be the first time a married woman looked to another man for something she couldn’t get from her husband. In fact, it was almost cliché. She didn’t want to destroy what she had with Snape, but maybe she didn’t have to. Maybe he’d never have to know.

She sighed.

Holding Ron’s hand, she bent over him until her lips were right next to his ear, and stroked his hair. Then she whispered to him, softly enough that Molly and Tonks couldn’t hear.

“Ron. I love you. I want you. Come back to me, please. We can work something out. We can be together. It’ll be okay. But you have to wake up. Please, Ron. Come back. I love you.”

Tears were falling from her cheeks. Before she sat up, she pressed a soft, lingering kiss to his lips. Molly and Tonks gave her curious looks, but didn’t say anything. They watched Ron.
His eyelids fluttered. Then again. For a full minute, they watched his eyes move behind his lids as if he were searching for a way through the darkness. Then, slowly, they opened.

He blinked, his eyes going to each of the women around him. They settled on Tonks, whose shirt was still open as she fed Royal.

“Nice tits, Tonks,” he teased, grinning faintly.

Molly was too relieved to scold him. She let out a cry of joy and fell on her son, smothering him in a hug. Tonks tugged her shirt closed, blushing, and said, “Cheeky,” but she was smiling.

Relief rushed through Hermione. Ron was awake and alive. She realized that it hadn’t truly felt like he’d survived until that moment, and now that he was back, a dangling, quivering piece of her heart settled back into place.

Ron gently pushed Molly away and smiled at them. And then Hermione watched as the memories of the battle came back to him. His smile melted off, his face sinking into dismay. “Ginny,” he said, tears filling his eyes. “Harry. They’re . . .” He looked to Hermione, pleading.

She couldn’t lie to him again. It wouldn’t do any good now anyway. “They were killed.” She could barely get the words out through her own tears.

He bit back a sob, trying to be strong. “Who else?”

“There were forty casualties on our side,” Tonks told him.

“The rest of the family’s fine,” Molly said, which was probably what he was really wanting to know.

“Neville’s fine, too,” Hermione told him. “And most of the Order made it through okay.”

Ron nodded numbly. He stared at his lap, working through it. Then his eyes lit with another memory, and he looked at Hermione, hope dancing cautiously at the edges of his eyes. “Hermione . . . you said . . .”

“Can we have a minute alone?” she asked Tonks and Molly. This wasn’t something they needed to hear.

They both agreed. Molly hurried off to tell the other Weasleys, and Tonks went to take Royal back to his father.

Once they were alone, Hermione met Ron’s eyes and said, “I lied. I’m sorry.”

He blinked. “You said . . . we could be together. I heard you.”

“I’m sorry, Ron. You’ve been unconscious for five days. The Healers said it was because you didn’t want to wake up. I had to try anything I could to get you to come back.”

Betrayal flashed across his features. “You lied? How could you lie to me about that?”

“It’s okay if you hate me, Ron. You’re awake. That’s all that matters. Your family’s been worried sick. They didn’t want to lose you too.”

She could see him fighting back the sadness those words caused, clinging to his anger. “Is that all? You did it for my family?”
“No, of course not.” She laid her hand on his, but he pulled it away. “I didn’t want to lose anyone else. I do love you. I told you so, and I meant it. I just . . . can’t love you in that way.”

“So I guess Snape survived, huh?” he said bitterly.

“Yes, he did. And I’m sorry, Ron, but he’s my husband. I want our relationship to work, even if . . . even if it’s not the marriage I’d dreamed of having. And for that to happen, I have to let you go. Completely. Not as a friend, of course! But . . . as anything else. It can’t happen, Ron. Ever. Please, do me a favor. Let me go too.”

She was crying freely now, but at least they weren’t tears for the dead. Though they were still tears of loss. Ron was crying, too, though he was refusing to acknowledge that fact.

“Just friends. Right,” he muttered.

He’d work through it. She knew he would. And hopefully they really could keep their friendship. But she’d patched his heart together only to rip it apart again. She needed to give him time. Time to let go of her, to grieve for his friends, and to figure out what he wanted from his life now. And she needed time herself, to mourn the relationship that she’d never have.

“I’m glad you’re awake,” she told him, standing. The twins ran in then, taking his attention and allowing her to slip out quietly.

#

Ron was released from the hospital wing by nightfall, and Hermione didn’t expect to see him again until the funeral. But on Friday, while she was sitting with Neville, Molly and Kingsley, the four of them feeding Luna, James, Royal, and Eileen from bottles, Ron marched in and walked straight to Molly.

“James?” he asked.

“Yes, of course,” Molly said. “Ron, dear, what’s this about?”

Ron held out his hands. Confused, Molly passed the baby to him. He held James in his arms, seeming to gain strength from looking into the child’s eyes as tenderness also crept in. “Who’ll raise him now?” he asked.

Molly let out a sad breath, but said, “Remus is his godfather. I imagine he’ll be taking him. Of course, he’s already got a baby of his own to handle, and now there’s all that werewolf business . . . . Your father and I were thinking that we’d—”

“I want him.”

They all looked at Ron, shocked. His voice was firm, allowing no room for debate, and his face was set with resolve.

“Ron,” Molly argued, “what do you know about raising a child? You were almost the youngest.”

“I’ll learn. I want him, Mum.” He could have sounded like a petulant child asking for a new toy, but he didn’t. He sounded like a man who knew what he wanted and wasn’t going to let anyone stand in his way. “I made Harry a promise.”

Hermione had rarely seen Ron so serious and insistent. Molly wavered. “I suppose . . .”
“Besides,” Ron added in a more thoughtful tone, looking at his nephew, “he doesn’t have anybody that’s just his anymore. Neither do I. We need each other.” Then his eyes snapped back to Molly and the commanding tone returned. “I’m not asking, Mum. I’m raising him.”

Hermione, Kingsley, and Neville could only sit silently and watch as Molly looked at her son with new eyes. The confident set of his jaw slipped, and he glanced at the others. “I’d . . . better go talk to Lupin.”

#

Saturday was clear and warm, and the sky was filled with puffy white clouds. Hundreds of chairs were set out on the Hogwarts grounds, not far from where the battle had taken place. Dumbledore’s tomb and the graves of Luna Lovegood and Sybill Trelawney had been joined by forty more. A graveyard of heroes.

The families of the fallen had agreed to let their loved ones be buried here together, as a sort of monument. Here, where the nation’s youth could walk over at any time and get a very real lesson in history, so that they’d remember that actions have consequences, that good people had died so that they’d remain free from evil and tyranny, and as a warning that such evil could arise again at any time.

Harry and Ginny and all the rest would not be soon forgotten.

It was small consolation to the hundreds gathered here for the mass funeral.

Hermione sat with the Weasleys, right next to Molly. Ron was at the other end of the family line, the wounds she’d caused to his heart still too fresh. She’d left the children in the castle, cared for by some of the house-elves who’d survived. Snape was sitting with the teachers.

She saw Tonks and her family in the next aisle over, joined by a couple of people Hermione didn’t recognize. On the other side of Lupin from Tonks was a young woman with the same brown hair he had, and a boy who looked like a second-year was with Ted and Andromeda. Spears and his pack were in the row behind them. Scratch, who’d recovered from the Horcrux’s death throes and had been unbearably cocky for the past three days, kept eying the young woman beside Lupin with interest.

The centaurs had come, most of them hanging back well behind the human gathering.

Rita Skeeter was there, the infuriating woman, her Quick-Quotes Quill already scribbling. But at least she was keeping silent. Hermione didn’t look forward to seeing what she’d write about all this. At least the article about the battle had been written by someone with more professional detachment.

Lucius Malfoy, though he’d been pardoned, had not turned up. Having his name cleared on the official record had been one thing, but it seemed he knew not to push his luck. His widowed sister-in-law, Bellatrix Lestrange, had been sent to the Janus Thickey Ward in St. Mungo’s, where she would likely spend the rest of her life playing Gobstones with Lockhart and the Longbottoms. Hermione couldn’t decide if that was poetic justice or a kindness she didn’t deserve. Aside from Rabastan Lestrange, who’d managed to flee the country before the Aurors could catch up with him, all of Voldemort’s other Death Eaters had been killed. Many of his supporters who hadn’t moved quite so far up the ranks, however, had escaped and were still being tracked down.

There’d been some argument over what to do with the bodies of Voldemort’s slain forces. Some thought they should just be piled up and burned like rubbish. Ultimately, kinder hearts won out,
and most of them were sent back to their families for a proper burial. Voldemort himself, however, was another story. For two days, his body had been under strict guard lest his supporters steal it and try to enact some ill-conceived resurrection plot. (No one wanted to deal with a Voldemort Inferius.) When it came to disposal, it didn’t seem proper to mount his head on a spear and parade him around Diagon Alley. On the other hand, given his near-mythic status and the fact that he’d already returned from the apparent dead once, some sort of public display seemed necessary to assure the populace that he was ultimately just a man and had died as dead as any man ever had. In the end, his body had been embalmed and donated to St. Mungo’s as a cadaver to be used for the training of new Healers.

Having been voted Minister for Magic in an emergency election, Kingsley was the first to step to the platform in front of the graves. Even with the slight limp, his cane managed to make him look even more respectable and authoritative, rather than weaker. He kept his speech short and poignant, and then began the long line of friends and relatives of the dead, each saying words about one or more of the fallen. It was a long, somber service, but not one of the hundreds there got up or tried to take a break. Midday fell into afternoon, and the sun was nearly at the horizon before Kingsley got up again to close the service. Hermione hadn’t gone up. She’d wanted to, but everyone who’d known Harry already knew everything she’d have said, and those who didn’t were mostly those who hadn’t believed him or thought him an attention-seeking liar, and the words she had for them were not fit for a funeral.

Finally, everyone rose and made their ways to the individual graves, paying more personal respects. A long queue formed before Harry’s grave. Hermione was surprised to see Dudley standing in it with Mrs. Figg, hunch-shouldered and nervously watching the wizards around him, though his parents were nowhere to be found.

Hermione hung back, waiting for everyone else to pass by Harry’s grave first. She didn’t want to be rushed, and she was in no hurry. She was still staying at the castle, so it wasn’t like she needed to hurry home. Instead, she talked with her friends, all of them trying to console each other and knowing it was no use. As darkness descended, even they drifted away, heading back to the castle or their own houses. Finally, there was only one person standing before Harry’s grave. Hermione went to stand beside him.

Molly and Arthur had suggested a joint headstone. As his parents had also had one, Hermione thought Harry would have approved. Though he’d have given anything to have avoided it.

Harry James Potter 7/31/80 – 8/8/98
Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.

“Your choice?” Snape asked. He hadn’t moved away when she approached, nor did he look up at her. They stood side by side, staring at the gravestone in the dim moonlight.

“Yes.” The Weasleys had deferred to her and Ron, and Ron had wanted the epitaph to be They died and now life sucks.
Snape nodded, but didn’t comment on her choice. They stood in silence for several minutes. Hermione was surprised at first to see the despair in his eyes. He’d never liked Harry. Could he really have been sad that he was gone? And then she realized that even this was probably about Lily, about failing her by letting Harry die. Hermione clenched her hands at her sides, furious at him for feeling sad over the wrong thing, but she bit her tongue.

“What did you do with the Elder Wand?” he asked after a while.

“I destroyed it.”

A pained look came over him, then passed, and he nodded again. “That’s probably best. Still, to think it was real all this time. I wonder if the other two Hallows exist too.”

At a time like this, that’s what he’s thinking of? And then she realized where it was likely coming from, and she sighed.

She couldn’t have Snape and Ron both, but, if it would make him happier, could she really begrudge him contact with his love? Maybe if he could get what he needed emotionally from Lily, even a shade or ghost or whatever it was, he could be content with his life with Hermione. She knew that what she was about to do would make futile all hope of his ever loving or needing her. But she was trying to be the bigger person. For the sake of her children, who needed both their parents. For the sake of her husband, who wanted something she couldn’t give him. For her own sake, in the hope of at least an amicable marriage that would last and benefit them both.

“They are real,” she told him. “Harry’s had his Invisibility Cloak—the Invisibility Cloak—since first year.” She glanced over to find that he’d finally turned to look at her. “And . . . that stone Dumbledore gave you, from the ring. The one you’ve been carrying around.”

He pulled the Stone from his pocket and looked at it in disbelief. “This is the Resurrection Stone?” Dismayed at the hope in his voice, she nodded. “Yes. As I understand it.”

Snape’s eyes lit up with wild, childlike need. He hesitated, looking from Hermione to the Stone.

“It’s okay,” she said quietly. “I know you want to talk to her. I think that’s why Dumbledore gave it to you in the first place.”

He huffed. “Of course. Omniscient old bastard.” Then he turned and ran away.

She didn’t watch him go. She doubted she’d see him again any time soon, and she wondered what he’d be like when he returned. Maybe she’d made a mistake. Maybe Snape would spend so much time with the Stone that he’d end up neglecting his children altogether. It was a chance she had to take. Her battle with Lily’s memory was one she’d had to forfeit, lest it tear her and Snape apart entirely. At least this way, there was a chance at some kind of truce.

The night was warm, and she was alone in the graveyard now. The thought of going back inside a castle filled with people consoling each other, staying close in one another’s arms, held no appeal to her. The longer she stayed out here, the longer she could pretend everything would be okay between her and Snape, the longer she could hope that she hadn’t just doomed what good there was in her marriage by giving him a way to contact the woman who’d held his heart for longer than Hermione had been alive.

It was so still, so quiet. She closed her eyes and let the breeze caress her skin. It was probably the only thing that ever would. Her feet moved of their own accord, taking her away from the graveyard a short distance, to the side of a small, grassy rise where she could lie and look down on
the tombstones, remembering a better time. She sat on that hillside, losing herself in memories, turning grass into clover with simple wandless magic, letting her mind drift to a place where her friends were alive and her future was full of freedom and possibilities.

A sound startled her back to full awareness, and it occurred to her that it was possible the Aurors had missed some of Voldemort’s people who had fled the battle. She stood and searched for the source of the sound. It didn’t take long. He wasn’t trying to hide his approach.

A man was walking toward her out of the forest, his robes billowing behind him. Seeing her looking at him, he picked up speed until he was running straight for her. She was frightened for a moment, until she realized that it was Snape. Why had he gone into the forest? To be alone with Lily? Had he been that unable to wait to see her?

As she watched, wondering, the distance between them vanished second by second, and then Snape was before her, out of breath, beaming like a man just released from prison. His yellow, crooked teeth taunted her with his joy. So, the visit with Lily went well, she thought, trying to ward off the pain in her heart.

“Hermione,” he said, his voice full of longing and . . . hope? He moved to her and took her face in his hand, drawing her eyes up to his. With his other hand, he drew his wand. “Look at me.”

“Why?” she asked. Why are you acting so strangely? Why are you back so soon? Why are you looking at me like that?

“There are things I want to show you. Things you deserve to know. Please. Do you trust me?”

She stared into his black, fathomless eyes. “Yes, but—”

He pulled her into his mind.
When the mists of Snape’s memories solidified into identifiable forms, Hermione saw an elegant dining room. There were plates on the table, still dirty from a meal, a graceful M in their design.

In front of the fireplace, Voldemort stood staring into the flames.

“Do you know why I wanted to speak to you alone, Severus?”

On the opposite side of the room stood Snape, the only other person present. “No, my Lord.”

“Of course you didn’t.” Voldemort turned to look at him, his red eyes narrowing. “You have failed me, Severus.”

“My Lord?”

“You made an Unbreakable Vow, putting both my plans and my spy in danger.”

“My Lord,” Snape said, a slight edge of worry in his voice, “Narcissa Malfoy—”

“Lucius’s traitorous wife will be dealt with in due course,” Voldemort assured him. “But what of you, Severus? How do you propose to prove yourself useful to me after such a display of carelessness and . . . misplaced loyalty?”

“Whatever you wish of me, my Lord.”

“Yes . . .” Voldemort stepped around the table toward him, eyeing him thoughtfully. “Then you are fortunate indeed that I have devised such an opportunity for you.”

Snape didn’t respond for a moment, then said only, “My Lord?”

“I require children, Severus,” Voldemort stated.

Hermione saw Snape’s Adam’s apple bob, but his face showed no sign of distress. “Of course, my Lord. As a teacher, I could secure whichever—”

“Oh, I don’t want you to abduct any of your students,” Voldemort said with a dismissive wave, and Snape let out a soft breath. “I want . . . fresh children.”

Snape looked at him blankly, clearly not knowing what to make of that. “Fresh?”

“Infants. Newborns.”

“Yes . . . Yes, my Lord. I will go to St. Mungo’s—”

“No, no, no.” Voldemort seemed to be taking pleasure from drawing out Snape’s confusion. “I want very . . . special children. Your children, Severus.”

“My—my Lord, you know I have no children, or I would of course offer them eagerly to your service.”

“I am not an idiot!” Voldemort barked. “I know you don’t have children. You could never hide
anything from me, Severus.” He took another step closer to Snape so that Snape was forced to look up at him. “What I want is for you to produce children.”

Another long pause. “If I may ask, my Lord . . . for what purpose?”

“That is not your concern,” Voldemort snapped, his robes fluttering as he turned and went back to the fireplace.

“With whom shall I produce these children, my Lord?”

“A pure-blood, obviously,” Voldemort answered.

“Another of your followers?”

“Alecto, perhaps?” Voldemort asked sarcastically, and Hermione cringed at the thought. “I’m sure Bellatrix would relish the honor—if she were not completely insane. No, Severus. None of the witches who already serve me possess the qualities I require for this task.”

“Qualities?”

“I need a witch of extreme talent and skill, with a brilliant mind . . . Young and nubile, whose body could withstand certain hardships without harm coming to the unborn . . . One naïve enough for you to control her easily, who will not uncover the truth of what is happening before her role is complete . . .”

“Have you found such a witch, my Lord?”

Voldemort was silent for a moment, then said, “No. I have considered some, but none have quite fallen into all of the required categories. But I will find one, Severus. Soon. For this plan must be put into motion very soon. I’m informing you now because you must begin preparations for when I find the witch I’m looking for.”

“Of course. What preparations do you wish me to make?”

“You are familiar with a potion called Wentworth’s Brew, I presume?”

Snape’s lips tightened. “Yes.”

“You will prepare this potion so that it will be ready when needed.”

“Is someone ill, my Lord?”

Voldemort looked at him from under naked brows. “Severus, do not dissemble so. You can guess what use I have for this potion.”

Snape paled. “Then . . . you do not expect me . . . to survive . . .”

“Is that a problem?” Voldemort asked. “Are you not prepared to give your life to me, as you have sworn to do?”

“Of course I am, my Lord,” Snape insisted. “I am flattered that you would think of me for this task . . . but are you certain I am the correct—”

“Are you questioning me, Severus?” Voldemort asked dangerously. When Snape didn’t answer, he continued more calmly. “If I cared what the children look like, I would of course assign this task to Lucius. But you are, unfortunately, the most brilliant and resourceful of my followers—and that is
what matters at this juncture.”

“It thrills me beyond measure to hear such praise from you, my Lord,” Snape said, bowing his head in acknowledgment of the backhanded compliment, “however, I am but a half-blood. Surely one of the—”

Voldemort spun at him again. “As am I—a fact I’m well aware Dumbledore has shared with you,” he hissed. “And while that fact disgusts me more than I can say, it does cause me to believe that, provided the mother is a pure-blood and the children are raised in the proper environment, more important factors may win out.”

Snape’s eyes darted around oddly. “If you will no longer require my services as a spy, do you believe your victory to be close at hand, my Lord?”

Voldemort laughed. “Close enough. But my giving you this task does not mean you will not continue spying for me, Severus.”

“Then the children do not need to be . . . legitimate?”

“Oh, you’ll make whatever woman—or girl—I choose your wife. I will not have bastards for—” Voldemort cut off, his face twisting with annoyance at his near slip. “They will have all the proper magical bonds in place—as many as can be assured. It is just that your wife need not take up time that is better spent serving me. You need not worry about your relationship, Severus. It is doubtful either of you will be alive to cultivate it for long.”

“Then she is to take the potion, as well.”

“Of course she is. Naturally, it is unlikely she will do so of her own accord, so you will need to slip it to her discreetly. In her tea, wine, another potion . . . I’m sure you’ll come up with something suitable.”

Snape’s jaw tightened as each of his excuses was batted down one after another. “Yes, my Lord.” Then, as if grasping for his last hope, he blurted, “Wentworth’s Brew works very quickly. If we take it, it is likely we will be dead within a matter of months. Perhaps a year at most. How can a single child, let alone multiple children, be produced in that time?”

Voldemort dismissed that with a wave. “Surrogates, Severus. Once conceived, the fetuses will be transferred into approved vessels to be carried to term, at which point they will be handed over to my faithful servants to raise up to my service.”

Snape was surreptitiously grinding his teeth. “How many children do you require, my Lord?”

“Only four,” Voldemort said simply. “I trust you’ll be more than capable of producing that amount in the time given?”

Hermione could see the barely-veiled rage and hatred pouring from Snape’s eyes, but Voldemort’s back was turned again.

“Very good, my Lord.”

“You may leave now,” Voldemort told him. “I will inform you when I’ve decided who your bride shall be.” The serpent bastard was smiling.

Snape gave him a terse nod, and the dining room disappeared in a swirl of light and shadow. The next moment Hermione found herself in Dumbledore’s office.
Dumbledore was sitting calmly at his desk, his withered hand resting beside his ink and quill.

In front of the desk, Snape was pacing. “No,” he spat.

“Pardon me?”

“I said no, Albus. I refuse. This is where I draw the line.”

“Severus—”

“I have lied for you, spied for you, put myself in mortal danger—”

“I remember.”

“I would have murdered you if Granger hadn’t shown up and ruined your plan. You’ve already told me that Lily’s boy has to die anyway, and now you ask this of me, as well. No, Albus. I can’t. I won’t.”

“You must, Severus. If you defy Voldemort—”

“DON’T! Don’t pretend for one instant that you only want me to go along with this to keep my cover. I know you too well for that. You could find some way around it if you wanted to. No, you’ve got a plan rattling around in that ancient brain of yours. You know what he’s planning, don’t you?”

“Merely a guess.”

“A guess. And you don’t see fit to share your guesses with me, even when you ask me to give up what little I have left of myself to indulge them.”

“Do you trust me, Severus?”

Snape looked at the old man, his lip curled in a silent snarl.

“We are coming to the end, my boy. Now is not the time to doubt my judgment. The time for second thoughts passed sixteen years ago.”


“Perhaps,” Dumbledore conceded, no hint of humor in his voice. “Then you will obey me in this?”

Snape grabbed a crystal trinket from a nearby shelf and threw it against the wall, shattering it, then hung his head and clenched his fists. “You know I will.”

“Good,” said Dumbledore, “because there is a very important element of this which we must take control of before Voldemort does.”

“The woman.”

“Yes. We must ensure Voldemort picks a woman of our choosing. As you can imagine, if he were to select a witch sympathetic to his cause, or even so much as an innocent bystander, the results could be disastrous.”

Snape looked alarmed. “You mean to suggest an Order member?”

“Or close to one,” Dumbledore said with a nod.
Snape resumed pacing. “Minerva’s too old, Molly’s already married, Miss Delacour will wed Bill Weasley any day now . . . . Surely you can’t mean Nymphadora!”

Dumbledore shook his head. “She is already too well-known in Voldemort’s circle, and not favorably so.”

“My thoughts exactly. Then who, Albus? Hestia?”

Again, Dumbledore calmly shook his head. “Hestia is a wonderful person and valuable Order member, but is too much a Hufflepuff for this task. She has neither the intelligence to meet Voldemort’s standards nor the temerity to see it through.”

“Then there are no options, Albus!”

“You haven’t considered everyone yet, Severus. You’ve forgotten those who are very nearly old enough to join the Order. There is a whole new generation of witches and wizards who are all but members already.”

Snape scoffed. “The children? You want to force one of the children into this debacle? You mean the Weasley girl, I suppose? Yes, why don’t we go suggest this plan to Molly and Arthur immediately? I’m sure they’re available for tea.”

“I do not mean Miss Weasley, Severus,” said Dumbledore, an edge creeping into his voice.

“No, of course, what was I thinking? Potter’s got his eye on her, hasn’t he? And we can’t possibly ask the golden boy to give up the girl he loves for the cause.”

“As you have already pointed out,” Dumbledore snapped, “Harry may be required to give up far more than that before this is over.”

“Then who?” Snape barked.

“The only logical choice, as you would already have deduced if you truly considered all options,” Dumbledore said, staring at Snape intently, “is Miss Granger.”

“Granger?” Snape scoffed dismissively. “Granger’s a Muggle-born.”

“A not insurmountable technicality,” said Dumbledore quietly.

Snape turned to face him, his eyes wide, and stared in disbelief for a long moment. “You’re serious.”

“Quite.”

“You honestly—you expect me to marry one of my own students?” Snape’s eyes narrowed and his tone turned nasty. “And one of your precious Gryffindors, as well. Do you realize what I would have to do to her? I would be required to violate her, Albus. Not just once, but repeatedly, and within these walls.” He drew out his words, enunciating clearly. “Here, in the same place where I’ve taught her since eleven years old, I would do the most unforgivable thing a teacher can do to a student.”

“Sacrifices must be made,” Dumbledore said wearily.

“DAMN YOU, ALBUS!”

“To hell, yes,” Dumbledore said, still no trace of humor or irony in his tone. “I believe you’ve
“And you would have me there right beside you,” Snape bit out. “You won’t stop until I’m utterly and permanently beyond redemption, will you, Albus?”

“There are larger concerns than the state of your conscience,” Dumbledore said firmly. “Sometimes difficult things must be done, and you, Severus, are the one person I count on most of all to understand that.”

Snape was quiet for a long moment, staring into Dumbledore’s blue eyes. Then he said quietly, “You know Wentworth’s Brew is a death sentence. You would condemn not only me, but Miss Granger as well?”

Dumbledore let out another long breath. “You have proven yourself a more than capable potioneer, Severus. The fact that you stand here today attests to your skill. I choose to believe that you will find a cure before it’s too late.”

Another long moment passed, then Snape slumped into the chair in front of Dumbledore’s desk, resting his head in his hand. “What is my soul worth anymore, anyway?” he asked in a small voice. “Very well, Albus. For the sake of the woman I loved, I’ll do something she would have reviled me for.” Then he added halfheartedly, “But one day, old man . . .”

The image shifted. The location was the same, but the light had changed, and now Snape was standing well away from Dumbledore’s desk.

“I’ve had my letter,” he commented in a deceptively off-hand way. “I presume Miss Granger has had hers as well.”

“She has,” Dumbledore said evenly.

“How did she react?”

Dumbledore looked at one of his trinkets. “She screamed.” Snape gave him a sharp look, and Dumbledore added, “She will come around, Severus. Miss Granger is strong, and she knows what’s at stake. She’s up to the challenge presented to her. But it would help if you don’t make this any harder for her than it has to be.”

“Hard for her?” he asked, his lip curling. “How did you convince the Ministry to choose her? The Dark Lord has Scrimgeour and the officials in charge of this farce under a strong Imperius. They’d never make any choice he didn’t allow.”

“Let me only say, Severus, that you are no longer my only spy in Voldemort’s ranks.”

“What happened to your faith in my skill with potions?” Snape sneered.

“Still in place, but it’s possible that before you find the cure, your ability to block your mind to him will be compromised. You know that as well as I do. If and when that happens, I will need an alternate.”

“Let me guess: Slughorn.”

“Far from my first choice, but the natural one.”

“And what of the surrogates? I presume you have some way to ensure your own choices are assigned for those as well?”
“I have been exploring options, yes. I am fairly confident at this point that I will be able to convince the Ministry to choose the young women I suggest. Voldemort’s imperative was only that the girls be pure-blood. Evidently, he sees the surrogates as nothing more than temporary lodging. I will be well able to work within the restriction’s he’s placed.”

“Can I assume that they, too, will be my students?” Snape asked, standing with his hands behind his back, looking out Dumbledore’s windows.

“It’s critical that we keep your children at Hogwarts where they will be under our protection,” Dumbledore replied.

“I hate you,” Snape said calmly.

“I’m sorry for that.”

Snape ignored him. “I understand others will be prescribed marriages as well. Did you know this would affect more than me and Miss Granger?”

“I suspected Voldemort might use the opportunity to disrupt the lives of as many Order members as possible.”

“Nymphadora—”

“Will marry the man she’s been in love with for years. I’ve suggested to Mr. Haversham that it might be worth the experiment to see what a Metamorphmagus and a werewolf could produce.”

“And he bought that?” Snape sneered.

“I may have made it slightly more than a suggestion.”

“Still paving the road before Lupin’s feet, I see.”

“Severus, you have no concept of the difficulties Remus has faced in his life. He deserves this small measure of happiness.”

“Does he?” Snape’s voice dripped with contempt.

“So do you, Severus,” Dumbledore said evenly.

“Clearly that’s of great concern to you,” Snape bit out. Before Dumbledore could respond, he said, “You know Sybill has been trapped in this as well?”

Dumbledore heaved a weary breath. “I do. She’s beside herself, poor dear. I’ve done what I can for her. You know why Voldemort’s targeted her. It’s critical that she not be let out from under our protection either.”

“Could he really retrieve the full prophecy from her mind?”

“No. But he won’t believe that until he’s killed her trying,” Dumbledore paused, then said thoughtfully, “I’ve assigned Kingsley to protect her.”

Snape gaped at him. “Protect her how?”

Dumbledore gave him an impatient look. “By the only means feasible under the circumstances.”

“And he agreed to that?” Snape said, shocked.
“Kingsley understands that I would not have asked him if it were not absolutely necessary.”

Snape shook his head. “You’re enjoying playing matchmaker, aren’t you, old man?”

“I don’t enjoy any part of this, Severus.”

“And what of Potter?”

“Voldemort included him in this law to keep him distracted. Voldemort has a plan. I believe he doesn’t want Harry to have the time to find out about and disrupt it.”

Snape squinted. “This has to do with the task you gave him last year, doesn’t it?”

“Yes.”

Flames leapt in Snape’s eyes. “So this is all just a diversion?” he shouted. “All of this—everything—is just to keep the Dark Lord from finding out about Potter’s task before he’s completed it?”

Dumbledore was silent, staring into Snape’s eyes for long enough that Snape stopped raging and listened when he said, “Yes. We must indulge Voldemort’s plan for as long as possible to give Harry time to do what I’ve asked of him. I will help Harry personally for as long as I can, but I may not last long enough to see it through.”

“But why go along with the Dark Lord’s plan? Won’t that just bring him closer to whatever his goal is? What if Potter doesn’t succeed in time and the Dark Lord’s plan reaches fruition, whatever that may be?”

Dumbledore was thoughtful for a long moment. “I believe the events of this June have made Voldemort aware of certain weaknesses, which he is now attempting to correct. He believes he has the time to enact his preferred option. If we do not indulge him, we may not have another opportunity to buy Harry time. If Voldemort feels rushed, he might decide on a more immediate course, which we would not be prepared to counter, and all would be lost.”

Snape started pacing the small space. “So once again, the fate of all our lives—of the world as we know it—hangs on Potter. And what if the Dark Lord’s plan to distract him succeeds? Have you considered that, Albus? You didn’t make him a prefect because you thought he already had enough responsibility. And now, at seventeen, he’ll be married in a week and the Dark Lord’s Ministry will make sure he’s saddled with a child as soon as possible.”

“Voldemort gave Harry a family because he thought it a weakness. It is most fortunate for us that Tom has never understood the power of love or family. If Voldemort had even the tiniest notion of the power he’s given Harry, he would never have included him in this plot. Ginny Weasley is a formidable young woman, much like her mother. A more suitable partner and helper for Harry I couldn’t have imagined. And if they do have a child, it will give Harry more to fight for than he’s ever had before. It will fuel his determination to see Voldemort destroyed. This is a life Harry deserves, as well. I know of no young man more suited to being a husband and father than Harry Potter.”

Hermione reeled. Dumbledore had spoken as if he expected Harry to live long enough to actually be a husband and father. Yet according to what Snape had reported earlier, Dumbledore had also said that Harry had to die. She thought of the necklace he’d given Harry for his birthday, the family heirloom. People didn’t give gifts like that to people they expected to die soon. Did Dumbledore, even then, have something up his sleeve? Some way to destroy the Horcrux and save Harry? Could it have been a different way? It hurt too much to consider. As agonizing as Harry’s
loss was, at least it was something to know that it had to happen to kill Voldemort. But if that wasn’t true . . .

“You think you’re doing me a favor.” Snape’s voice was cold, quiet, and dangerous. He wasn’t moving anymore but looking at Dumbledore with cool dispassion.

“No,” Dumbledore replied carefully. “Though I do hope that you will give your marriage to Miss Granger a chance. If all goes well, you could be together for a very long time. And of all the women alive I’m familiar with, I do believe that she has the best chance of making you happy.”

Snape snorted with derision and didn’t dignify that with an answer, turning away to browse Dumbledore’s shelves.

“Won’t you at least try?”

Snape spun at him. “This marriage is a travesty and a gross misuse of both my loyalty and Miss Granger’s trust.” He stood straight as an idea seemed to come to him. “This is your doing, so you’re going to do it.”

“Pardon?”

“I know you have the authority to perform marriages. If you insist on having this done, Albus, you’re going to do it yourself.”

Dumbledore studied Snape, who stared right back at him. Finally, Dumbledore said, “Very well. If it will make you feel better.”

“It won’t,” Snape grumbled. “But you’re still going to do it.”

The room changed, and she was in the kitchen of Grimmauld Place. Snape stormed down the stairs and toward the fireplace, his robes disheveled, his face a hard mask of anger and hurt. With a twist in her gut, Hermione knew when this was.

Snape tossed a handful of Floo powder in, called out for Dumbledore’s office, and stuck his head in.

“It’s done,” she heard him say in a cold, cold tone, though she couldn’t see his face.

From the other side of the Floo, faintly, she heard Dumbledore’s, “Severus, my boy. Can it really have been so—”

“I’m not going to talk about it,” he snapped. “Just get over here now.”

He pulled his head out before Dumbledore could respond, and a few seconds later, the Headmaster walked through into the kitchen.

“I’m going out,” Snape said, his words dripping venom. “I need to report to my other master.”

Dumbledore looked in the direction of the stairs. “You left her, Severus? After what she—”

“I said I’m not going to talk about it. Stay here if you want to keep an eye on her, but I’m leaving. I have other duties to attend to.”

“At least leave her a note so she doesn’t think you—”

“Think I what? Regret what happened? Don’t care about her? Hate both of us for it? Let her believe
“Severus,”

“Fine.” He took out a scrap of parchment, scribbled some words on it, and slammed it onto the table.

“Severus, wait,” Dumbledore said gently. “You need to understand this isn’t her fault. Don’t take it out on her.”

“I know it’s not her fault,” Snape snapped back. “It’s yours. You knew what I was when you forced us on each other. If you want her coddled, you do it.”

The image dissolved and reformed as the dining room she’d seen earlier. As before, Snape and Voldemort were the only ones present. It was night, and Snape was standing in the corner, motionless but with an expression on his face that made it look like he wanted very dearly to snap Voldemort’s neck. Voldemort had his back to Snape, looking into the fireplace.

“I trust everything went as planned, Severus?”

“So far, my Lord.” Snape’s voice betrayed no emotion, and when Voldemort turned to look at him, he’d arranged his features to match. “The Granger girl and I are married.”

“You’ve consummated the union?”

Snape hesitated only a moment before saying, in a voice like a knife, “Yes.”

“And Wentworth’s Brew?”

“Administered as ordered.”

“Very good, Severus.” As he spoke, Voldemort absently rolled something around in his hand.

“If I may, my Lord,” Snape suggested, “it would be best if this marriage remained secret for as long as possible. If the girl’s friends found out, they might attempt to interfere with your plans before all four children are produced and secure.”

“I agree, Severus. That is why I have allowed only a few inside the Ministry to know the names of those chosen for my plans.”

“In the interest of keeping secret the nature of my interaction with the girl, would it not be better to allow her freedom and require her only to meet with me on occasion to . . . fulfill the requirements of the law?” This last was laced with irony.

“Really, Severus,” Voldemort said in a chiding tone. “I’m certain you can both spare a few minutes out of each day. How much can that possibly interfere with either of your schedules?”

Hermione could see Snape’s annoyance, but Voldemort appeared to either miss it or ignore it. “Even a few minutes would draw attention if it were every day, my Lord. Her friends are not idiots.”

“What are you asking?”

“Perhaps . . . once a month would be sufficient.”

Voldemort whirled on him. “Out of the question!”
Snape took a step back, ducking his head in submission. “But my Lord, the potion is only effective for three days after it’s taken. Depending on the timing, we could both ingest six doses or more before the girl becomes pregnant. If you wish us to live long enough to produce four offspring, a certain amount of discretion is necessary.”

Voldemort considered this, rolling the object around in his hands as he thought. “Very well, Severus. Once a week, then. I suggest you time it as closely as you can to avoid . . . superfluous doses.”

Snape’s shoulders relaxed slightly. “Thank you, my Lord . . .”

“What else, Severus?”

“The girl is staying with the Weasleys for the remainder of the summer. Unlike her schoolmates, the Order knows at least that she’s had to marry. It would be very difficult to get her alone even once a week without drawing undue suspicion.”

Voldemort let out a long-suffering sigh. “You wish a reprieve already, Severus? Are you truly not up to such a simple task?”

“Do as you like, my Lord. I only suggest that, in the interest of secrecy, it might be prudent to wait until she’s back at school and out from under the Order’s noses to continue with our . . . arrangement.”

Voldemort laughed, high and mocking. “Your request is granted. I’ll give you one month, but once you’re both at Hogwarts, I expect you to meet with the girl at least once a week. I want those children, Severus. Do you understand me?”

“Completely, my Lord,” Snape said, bowing his head again, but his expression was hard.

Smiling, Voldemort turned toward the fireplace and raised the object in his hand before his eyes and gazed at it. It was the monitoring crystal, the mate of the one Partridge had bound to her on her first appointment, which changed color when pregnancy was achieved. It had already turned pink.

“Am I not generous, Severus?”

“Imminently, my Lord.”

The scene shifted, and it was daytime. Snape and Voldemort were in a garden, strolling casually like a couple of friends, the faint buzz of a Distraction Charm surrounding them.

“The first child was transferred today,” Snape reported.

“Very good, Severus,” Voldemort said lightly. “And did everything go smoothly?”

“Yes.” Snape waited a few seconds before adding, “There was a note in the girl’s file claiming that the transfer was part of my arrangement with the Minister.”

“Interesting. You went along with it, of course?”

“Of course, my Lord. But now the girl believes it was my idea to have her child taken from her. It will make her exponentially more difficult to deal with if she continues to do so.” A glimmer of hope peeked through Snape’s impassive mask.

Voldemort turned cold, red eyes to him. “How unfortunate for you. Maybe next time you will obey my orders without question.”
The hope vanished, replaced by resignation. “I understand. I am sorry, my Lord. I should not have questioned you. Are you . . . withdrawing your concession?”

Voldemort waved a hand dismissively. “No, Severus. You were right that taking the potion every few days would likely kill you both before your task was fulfilled. My orders stand at once a week.”

Snape paused in his stroll just long enough for Voldemort to get a pace or two ahead of him. Before moving to catch up, Snape sent a glare at Voldemort’s back, his teeth and fists clenched. Hermione could see why. Snape’s criticism of Voldemort’s plan had been valid, but he’d still been punished for it. Such were the joys of serving an egomaniacal madman.

“As a matter of interest, my Lord,” Snape said with calm, careful deference. “The Healer assigned to Granger. Is he . . . one of us?”


“Ah,” Snape said, watching Voldemort closely. “One of the underlings, then. Or was it an Imperius?”

Voldemort smirked scornfully. “Ellery Partridge is ignorant and single-minded. I didn’t have to control him or make him aware of the true purpose for these pregnancies. He’s more than happy for the opportunity to further his career and work toward the betterment of wizarding society.”

“I see. So, he is involved only—”

“Because he believes in P.E.W.S.” Voldemort finished with a mocking smile.

Snape nodded. “How fortunate.”

Voldemort lazily ran his hand across his head as if smoothing hair he no longer had. “Sometimes I wonder if it’s all too easy, Severus.”

The memory faded to black, and when the scene reformed, it took Hermione a moment to realize it had happened. Looking around, she realized time had passed and it was now the middle of the night. She saw a dark figure—Snape—standing in front of a door with a number on it.

“Alohomora,” he whispered, waving a hand at the doorknob. There was a click, and Snape twisted the knob and went in.

He closed the door behind him and raised his wand, the tip lit. He was in a strange flat, modestly-sized but not cramped. There was a sense of order and friendliness to the place, with furniture that looked comfortably upscale and a few pieces of tasteful art on the walls. A large bookcase unobtrusively stood along one wall, its shelves filled with medical texts, wizarding journals, and an impressive stack of Tom Clancy paperbacks. Aside from the bookcase, Hermione could tell that it was a wizarding home not so much by the overt magicalness of it, but by the lack of the usual Muggle trappings such as kitchen appliances and a television. There were no photos, moving or otherwise, and the subtle, spartan masculinity about the place made Hermione think a single wizard lived here.

She watched as Snape took all of this in, then moved around the flat, looking into cupboards, pulling open drawers, shuffling through papers. She wondered what he was searching for, but he didn’t seem to find it, as after ensuring everything was as he’d found it, he took a seat on the brown leather sofa facing the door and waited.
There was a faint shimmer in the memory, which Hermione took to indicate the passage of some small amount of time, though everything looked exactly as it had a moment ago. Footsteps approached from outside, then the rattle of keys, and soon a man was coming in, a large sack of groceries in his arms.

“Lumos,” he said to the room at large, moving toward the kitchen as oil lamps sprang to life along the walls. He got two steps before his eyes landed on Snape sitting silently on the sofa, and he nearly dropped his bag in fright.

It was Partridge, and Hermione couldn’t help a small laugh at his expression. He recovered remarkably quickly, his fright shifting to indignation in a matter of seconds. “Mr. Snape. Is there something I can help you with?” he asked, his tone less than welcoming, as he set his grocery bag on the kitchen counter.

Never taking his eyes off of Partridge for an instant, Snape stood, moved across the room, and came to stand not a foot in front of Partridge, staring into the Healer’s eyes unblinkingly.

Partridge finally looked nervous. “Is, er, your wife doing well? The first twenty-four hours after the transfer can be—”

“She’s fine, as far as I know,” Snape said silkily. “Tell me. Partridge.” He spoke slowly, enunciating carefully as if wanting to make sure there could be no misunderstanding. “Is it your intention to do everything in your power to help my . . . wife and any children we might have?”

“Of c-course.” Partridge was of a height with Snape, but Snape’s glare made him seem much larger and scarier than he was. “As much as I can, at least.”

Snape narrowed his eyes and asked, “Can we trust you, Partridge?”

A look of confusion came over Partridge’s face. “I don’t see why not.”

Snape stared at him a moment longer, then his mouth tightened and he nodded.

Partridge’s eyes darted around uncomfortably. “Er, is that all, Mr. Snape?”

Without answering, Snape swept out of the flat.

Partridge’s flat disappeared, and then Hermione was in a makeshift throne room. The walls were covered in shelves which were in turn filled with old, expensive, dust-coated books. Voldemort sat in a large, ornate chair in the center of the room, Snape kneeling at his feet. On the fringes stood two figures cloaked in black: Wormtail and Slughorn.

“My Lord,” said Snape, his voice tight. “There is . . . a problem.”

Voldemort raised one pale, naked eyebrow. “I don’t like problems, Severus.”

“It’s Lucius’s wife, my Lord. She’s . . . taken the girl.”

Voldemort’s fingers clenched on the arms of his chair. Fury flashed in his red eyes. “You’ve allowed the girl to be taken?”

“I couldn’t prevent it, my Lord.” Snape’s voice grew desperate, fearful. “She ran off, and before I could catch her—”

“Crucio!”
Voldemort’s wand seemed to have leapt to his hand from nowhere; Hermione hadn’t seen it. Snape screamed and writhed on the ground. “No!” Hermione cried, but none of the men paid any heed. It was only a memory.

It only lasted a few seconds, then Voldemort released Snape to lie panting on the ground. “No excuses, Severus. How do you know who took her?”

“There was . . . a witness,” he gasped. “The gamekeeper saw her take the girl but was unable to stop them.”

“You’re certain of the half-breed’s information?”

“I believe him,” Snape said. “He’s competent enough to know what he saw, and he has no reason to lie.”

Voldemort stood and paced a few steps back and forth in front of his chair. “Where did she take her?” he asked softly.

“Lucius would know,” Snape offered warily.

“Yes,” Voldemort said, tapping his chin with a long fingernail. Then he strode to Snape, his wand raised. “Your arm, Severus.”

Without hesitation, Snape raised his left arm, pulling the sleeve up to his elbow with his other hand. Voldemort pressed the tip of his wand to Snape’s Mark.

There was a ripple in the air, and then it was no longer Snape kneeling before Voldemort, but Lucius Malfoy. His long, pale hair was dirty and ragged, and he wore the filthy, bland, grey robes of a prisoner. But it was his face that startled Hermione the most: instead of haughty, haunted. Worn and beaten down. A shadow of the arrogant aristocrat he’d once been.

“My Lord.” His voice, harsh with disuse, slipped past a scraggly beard. “Thank you for my release.”

“It was not without purpose, Lucius.”

“Oh . . . course, my Lord. What do you wish of me?”

“Your wife,” Voldemort said, getting right to the point. “Where is she?”

Lucius’s eyebrows came together in confusion. “She is not here, my Lord?” Hermione had been thinking that this place, Voldemort’s new headquarters, must be Malfoy Manor, and this seemed to confirm it.

“She is not,” said Voldemort. “She has not been for some time. Not since before your son was killed.”

Lucius’s face filled with such shock that Hermione knew it couldn’t have been faked, and her stomach turned even before he said, “Draco . . . is dead?”

He hadn’t known. Trapped in prison, months had passed since that first battle at Hogwarts, and no one had even bothered to inform Lucius about what had happened to Draco. Hermione felt sick. She’d never liked either Draco or Lucius, both arrogant, bigoted bullies—but the despair and pain on Lucius’s face was nothing but that of a father who’d just lost his only son, and Hermione couldn’t help but be overwhelmed by guilt and pity. Especially now that she knew what it was like
to fear for her child’s life, she’d never wish it on any parent, no matter how evil they might otherwise be.

“Didn’t anyone tell you?” Voldemort asked, sounding more amused than anything. “No matter. Your wife, Lucius.”

Lucius blinked, visibly fighting to focus on Voldemort’s question. “We have . . . family . . . in France . . .”

“She went there and returned already,” Voldemort said. “Where else?”

Still dazed, Lucius blinked, and tears made trails in the dirt on his cheeks. “Draco . . .”

“Focus, Lucius,” Voldemort snapped. “Where would she go if she did not want to be found?”

Hermione could see Lucius trying to concentrate enough to answer Voldemort’s question, but he just couldn’t. The shock and pain were still too great.

With a sharp breath of annoyance, Voldemort strode forward, grabbed Lucius’s chin, and forced the pale man to look into his eyes. Half a minute later, Voldemort released him with a nod.

“Severus.” Voldemort looked to where Snape stood with Wormtail and Slughorn. Snape stepped forward. “I’ve found a likely location. Do you believe you can handle her alone?”

“Of course, my Lord.”

“Rescue your woman, Severus. And bring Lucius’s to me.”

Snape inclined his head. “Yes, my Lord.”

Again, the shift was barely a ripple, and the person before Voldemort’s seat changed again. Narcissa lay writhing on the ground. Snape, bleeding from a small cut on his face, stood impassively at the edge of the room. Morning light came through windows high in the walls.

When he was done torturing her, Voldemort circled Narcissa, casually tapping his wand against his leg. “I should kill you for interfering in my plans.”

“Please, my Lord.” She dragged herself to her knees. “I—I did not know you were behind Severus’s marriage to the Mudblood.”

“Not a Mudblood, as it turns out,” Voldemort informed her with a glance to Slughorn. “And of course you didn’t know. But that does not excuse it.”

“Forgive me,” she pleaded. “I thought only—”

“You thought only that Granger killed your son, and that Severus failed to protect him—as you demanded he do, also without consulting me. You’re making a habit of going behind my back, Narcissa.”

“No! My Lord, I would never—”

“I have no interest in your excuses,” Voldemort told her. “But I am not without mercy. Join your husband as one of my Death Eaters. Serve me, forget this pointless desire for personal vengeance, and I will spare you.”

Narcissa bowed her head. “As you say, my Lord. Thank you.” Her voice was confident, but she
hesitated when she held out her bare arm.

After Voldemort Marked her, she was led out by Wormtail and Slughorn, cradling her arm.

“She’s lying, my Lord,” Snape said once she was gone. “There was a letter from St. Mungo’s at the Malfoys’ holiday home. She knows the girl is pregnant. It may be that the only reason she didn’t kill Granger is because she decided to wait until the child is born and kill it. Perhaps she wants to make Granger experience what she did. I doubt she will hesitate to take her revenge if the opportunity presents itself in future.”

“Perhaps, Severus,” Voldemort agreed. “But killing her now would most likely set Lucius against me, and I do not believe he has yet outlived his usefulness.”

The memory swirled, and when it reformed, the room in Malfoy Manor had been replaced by the hospital wing at Hogwarts. It was night and mostly empty, but there was one thin, dark figure standing over a bed. She got closer and saw that it was Snape. He was staring down at her.

Hermione gasped at the sight of herself, bruised and battered from Narcissa’s curses, still twitching from the Cruciatus. There was no expression on Snape’s face.

Madam Pomfrey walked over to join him. “Poor girl,” she said. “I can hardly believe what that woman did to her.”

“You’ve seen worse,” he said simply.

“Yes,” she agreed. “But not to a schoolgirl. What could she have done to deserve it?”

“She killed the woman’s child.”

“An accident!” Pomfrey protested.

Snape’s shoulders bobbed in a shrug. “Nevertheless.”

Pomfrey shook her head. “If anyone’s to be blamed for what happened to Draco, it’s his parents. He wasn’t such a bad boy. Maybe if he’d had a better upbringing—”

“Draco wasn’t a boy. He was an adult, and he made his own choices. He could have chosen a different path than the one his parents set him on.” His voice grew softer. “Perhaps he would have in time. But sometimes our choices remove all other options.”

Pomfrey let out a long breath and laid her hand on Snape’s arm. He didn’t pull away. “Keep her safe, Severus. She needs you.” She looked from him to Hermione’s abused body. “I think you need each other.”

Snape turned his head, giving her a sharp, suspicious look.

“I read the paper, Severus. It isn’t that hard to figure out—for someone who knows you both.”

“That business is none of yours, Poppy,” Snape told her, stiffening. “The girl will recover?”

“She should, but it will take a while.”

He nodded tersely. “If you need any potions, you know where to find me.”

Hermione watched him walk away from her bed. So, Madam Pomfrey had known about her and Snape for a while. She wished she’d known.
Next, she was in Snape’s office. Snape was sorting through potion bottles distractedly. The door opened, and Dumbledore strode in, shutting the door firmly behind himself.

“This is unacceptable, Severus,” Dumbledore hissed, monopolizing Snape’s attention in an instant. There was raw, dangerous anger burbling just under the older wizard’s controlled demeanor.

Snape’s eyes narrowed. “She told you.”

“She didn’t have to,” Dumbledore snapped. “I saw the mark you left.”

A look of regret and self-loathing washed over Snape’s features. “It was . . . an accident. She said . . . It was a momentary loss of control. Perhaps the tumors are already . . .” His words slipped away as if he knew how lame the excuse sounded even as he gave it.

Dumbledore’s anger seemed to fade, disappointment taking its place. “I know you’ve done many things you regret, Severus, but I would never have thought you’d raise your hand against your own wife.”

Snape looked too ashamed and furious at himself to say anything.

“You,” Dumbledore pressed, “of all people. Maybe your fears of being like your father aren’t so poorly founded as I’d thought.”

Snape spun away from him, toward the back of his office, as far from Dumbledore as he could get in the small space. He paced, fuming, raging wordlessly at himself, but not denying what Dumbledore had said. Finally, he leaned heavily on his desk, hanging his head in defeat. “It will not happen again.” It sounded less like a promise to Dumbledore and more like an order to himself.

“And if it does?” Dumbledore asked quietly.

“It won’t.”

The scene shifted, settling itself once again into Snape’s office. He was at his desk, paused in marking scrolls; by this time, he must have been doing it by guesswork, having lost his ability to read. McGonagall stood on the other side of the desk, her expression stern.

“Dumbledore has explained everything to me, Severus,” she told him, “and I trust his judgment on this, just as I’ve trusted his judgment on your trustworthiness, but Miss Granger is still my student, and her parents aren’t around to watch out for her.”

Hermione expected to see Snape snap at her, but he only looked tired. “What are you getting at, Minerva?”

“She is young, innocent, ignorant of much—”

“And I’m not.”

“No. I’m worried for her. Far more has been asked of her than should even have been considered.”


McGonagall gave him a level look. “I’m worried for you, too, Severus. Much has been asked of you, as well, more than ever before.”

“I’m old and tough. I’ll manage.”
She raised an eyebrow. “Not that old, young man. And not so tough as you think. Circumstances being what they are, Hermione can’t be the support to you that she could be. Your own wife (as ridiculous as it is, the fact remains she is your wife, and both of us have to deal with that fact) is set against you. And there’s the other matter. I know you never saw yourself as a father, Severus, but it can’t leave you unmoved to have them taken—”

“I would be an abysmal father. I hate children; everyone knows that. If the Dark Lord is defeated and the children are free to live their lives, my inevitable death can only be a mercy to them.”

McGonagall was silent, her expression growing impatient. “I don’t believe that. And I don’t think Hermione believes that either. Or she wouldn’t, if you’d let her get to know you.”

She was right, Hermione thought.

It took longer for the next memory to form, and when it did, she found herself in the hospital wing. Snape was lying on a bed, bruised and broken. It hurt Hermione’s heart to see him like that again, but she noted that at least he looked a shade better than he had when last she’d seen him after he’d taken that terrible beating. She guessed this might have been a day or two later.

Dumbledore was sitting by his bedside, half of his face black and withered. The two of them were alone.

“What happened, Severus?” Dumbledore’s words were slightly slurred, only one half of his mouth moving.

“What does it look like?” Snape croaked. He was still very weak, but his venom was unmissable. “He tortured me.”

“Yes,” Dumbledore said, his voice inflectionless. “But why, exactly?”

Snape glared hatefully at him for a second. It seemed to exhaust him, because he went back to staring at the ceiling and said, “He didn’t see my true loyalties. Your spy is still intact.”

Dumbledore let out a faint sigh. “Then what made him so angry?”

Snape turned his face away from Dumbledore. “My Occlumency did slip momentarily. He saw when I . . . hurt Miss Granger.”

“When you choked her, you mean.”

Snape grimaced. “He was not pleased that I put her in danger before he was finished with her.”

Dumbledore released another breath. “I’m sorry, Severus. You didn’t deserve that.”

“Yes. I did.”

Silence stretched, then Dumbledore said, “She came to you, didn’t she?”

Snape’s face pinked, and he nodded.

“Severus, you could have—”

“Postponement would have meant at least one extra dose of Wentworth’s for each of us. Do you wish us to race you to the grave, Albus?”

Seconds passed, and Dumbledore didn’t respond, so Snape said, “He ordered me to bring her with
me the next time I’m summoned.”

Dumbledore pondered this. “When?”

“I don’t know. But she’s untrained, Albus, as well as her mind being compromised. If he looks into
her—and he will—she’ll likely get us both killed.”

“That will not do.”

“I’m open to suggestions.”

Dumbledore stood. “I’m afraid I’m late for a meeting with Harry. I trust you to find a solution to
this problem, Severus.”

He left, and Snape muttered under his breath, “Of course you do.”

The hospital wing faded away and reformed as the Entrance Hall of Hogwarts. Snape stood in an
alcove, all but invisible, watching Hermione and Ron run up the stairs. It was an instant too late for
her to see Harry, but she knew he was there, and that knowledge was sharp as a knife. No one else
was around, and they left a trail of melting snow in their wake.

After they were out of sight, Snape’s curious gaze lingered, and Hermione could tell he was trying
to decide whether or not to follow them. Evidently deciding against it, he swept off down the
corridor leading to the Head’s office.

When he reached the gargoyle statue, he barked out the password and got on the spiral staircase.
To Hermione’s surprise, it didn’t begin moving up, but down. She watched Snape on the stairs as
they spiraled lower and lower, finally coming to a stop in front of a door much like the one
between the stairs and the Head’s office. Snape opened it and went in.

The room he entered was not too dissimilar from the main living room in Snape’s quarters, but
bigger and warmer-looking. There was a large window, but Hermione didn’t think they’d
descended far enough to be under the lake. The curtains were drawn firmly shut, so she couldn’t
see precisely what it did look out onto. There were nearly as many bookshelves here as were in
Snape’s quarters, but many of the shelves held trinkets and small, ancient-looking artifacts instead
of books. The sofa and chairs were all big and squashy, the type that looked like it would take an
effort of will to get out of, and most of the floor was covered by a thick, plush rug with a purple,
black, and silver pattern of moons and stars on it.

It took Hermione less than a second to realize that this was Dumbledore’s residence at Hogwarts.
Or, at least, it must have been the Head’s quarters, which had been his when he was alive.

Snape didn’t give the décor so much as a glance. He strode through the room with purpose, into a
short hallway, past a few closed doors, and into the last room.

Dumbledore’s bedroom was lit by bottled flames floating along the walls. They seemed to be a
temporary measure, as if the room was used to being lit instead by sunlight from the large window
that, like the one in the main room, was currently shut up tight. Hermione didn’t get as good a look
around this room; for one thing, it seemed uncomfortably intimate to be in Dumbledore’s bedroom,
even in memory form, and for another, her attention was immediately grabbed by what lay in the
large, elaborately-draped four-poster in the middle of the room.

Snape strode to one side of the bed, looking pitilessly down at the withered, raisiny form of the
Headmaster. Hermione’s guts twisted. The curse had spread over his entire body. Every inch of
Dumbledore’s exposed skin, save the tip of his left pinky finger and a small patch on the left side
of his hairless jaw line, was black and shriveled. He was breathing in shallow, ragged gasps, but somehow, still, there was a sense of dignity about him. He wasn’t simply giving in to death, but he wasn’t desperately fighting a hopeless fight against it either. His eyes, both blank and milky now, showed a sort of calm acceptance and, if anything, a twinge of annoyance. Hermione imagined that perhaps he found the timing inconvenient.

“Your favorite trio is here,” Snape told him, and Dumbledore gave a small start, his blind eyes moving toward the sound of Snape’s voice. “Apparently it has something to do with the task you’ve set Potter.”

Dumbledore’s eyes went a bit wide, and in a weak, hoarse voice, he said, “Here? All this time?”

“He’s weak, Severus,” said McGonagall, sitting in a chair at the other side of Dumbledore’s bed. She was trying to be strong, but Hermione could see the tear streaks on her face, and her eyes were red behind her spectacles. “What do you need?”

“Answers,” Snape growled, not taking his eyes from Dumbledore. “What are they after, Headmaster? You know they may need my help soon. You know you won’t be there to give yours. You know the Dark Lord will discover the truth eventually, one way or the other.” Dumbledore made no indication of answering him, and Snape’s face twisted into a snarl. “For years, I’ve followed your orders, even the mad ones. I’ve sacrificed everything for your cause because you said—” His eyes snapped to McGonagall, and he caught himself. “Everything, Albus, on your word that it would matter, that it would make up for what I did, but in the end it means nothing if what you said about Potter is true. I can’t believe that after everything, there is no other fate, Albus. Tell me what he’s doing. Let me help him.” His voice had grown desperate, pleading.

“Too dangerous,” Dumbledore wheezed.

“Damn you,” Snape hissed.

“Severus!” McGonagall snapped in outrage.

He ignored her, leaning down closer to Dumbledore. “If Potter dies,” Snape said in a harsh, threatening whisper, “my life will be wasted. And you, old man, will be nothing but a manipulative liar. No better than the Dark Lord.”

Pain flickered in Dumbledore’s blackened face, and with a startling burst of energy, his hand reached up to grip Snape’s. Snape looked in shock at the hand that seemed to be made of charred, gnarled bark rather than flesh, held it, and leaned closer to hear Dumbledore’s words.

“Don’t hate me,” the old man pleaded in a raspy breath, eyes searching pointlessly for Snape’s face.


Dumbledore closed his eyes, and his hand, still grasped in Snape’s, fell to the bed beside him. For a moment, Hermione thought he’d died, but then he opened his eyes, looked in the direction of McGonagall as if trying to meaningfully meet her eyes, then back to Snape. He gathered as deep a breath as he could manage, and as he let it out, his flimsy, faint whisper formed one word. “Hor . . . cru . . . xes.”

And then he was still. Completely, utterly still.

Snape’s eyes widened as realization dawned. He looked at McGonagall in shock. “Of course,” he muttered, his eyes roving wildly as he worked through it. “He’s just mad enough . . . Wait.
Horcruxes? Plural? How many?” he asked Dumbledore, but the Headmaster didn’t answer. Snape shook him by the shoulder. “How many? How many are left?”

“Severus,” McGonagall said in a broken voice. Tears were running down her face. “Severus, stop. He’s gone.”

As if her words had been a Stinging Hex, Snape stopped, jerking back from Dumbledore’s body. His breathing slowed as he realized the enormity of that simple fact. Dragging his gaze from Dumbledore back to McGonagall, he stared at her in stunned confusion.

McGonagall reached over and closed Dumbledore’s eyes, then stood, wiping her tears on a handkerchief. “Most of the Order is at the Burrow. I need to tell them. We’ll need to make plans.” She walked to where Snape stood and put a hand on his arm. It seemed to ground him somehow, and the childlike horror in his expression gave way to the grim resolve of a war-weary adult. “When I get back, I’ll explain everything.”

“Did he tell you everything?”

“I think so.” She looked down at Dumbledore’s body and blinked back more tears. “But who can know for sure? He was a man who kept his own council. Will you . . . see to his body? Until I return, at least.”

Snape nodded mutely.

McGonagall looked for a moment like she wanted to offer some word of comfort to Snape, but in the end, she simply squeezed his arm and left, leaving Snape staring down at the body in silence.

It was a long time before the next memory appeared. It seemed as if he were shifting through them, flipping back through the catalogue to the one he wanted. When it took shape, Hermione found herself in the Hogwarts library. There was something not quite right about it, though, something unfamiliar. The haircuts of the students studying in clusters at the tables were strange, and when Madam Pince walked by, she looked far younger than Hermione had ever seen her.

Trying to find Snape among the students, her eyes landed first on a teenage boy in slightly worn-looking robes who was carrying a stack of books. His hair was entirely brown, and there were no lines on his face, but Lupin still looked more tired than a boy that age should have. Overloaded with books, he bumped into a pretty red-haired girl, and they all tumbled from his hands.

“Oh, sorry,” she said and hurried to help him pick them up.

He smiled at her, and Hermione thought he might have been blushing a little. “Thanks, Lily.”

Shocked, Hermione took a better look at the girl. Yes, of course. Her eyes were exactly like Harry’s. She had a simple, carefree beauty of the sort that Hermione had always envied. Hermione could see why she’d had so many admirers.

“No problem, Remus,” Lily said, giving him a lovely smile that pulled an echoing one from him like the moon pulls the tide. She glanced around. “Are you here by yourself?”

“Yes . . .”

“Good. You should find better friends, Remus. I don’t understand why nice guys always want to hang around with jerks.”

“James and Sirius aren’t as bad as they seem, really.”
Lily didn’t look convinced. “Would you like to study with us? Severus and I—”

Lupin chuckled weakly. “And that’s my cue to leave. See you ’round, Lily.”

He walked away with his books, and Hermione moved with Lily as she headed back toward the stacks. She sat at a small table in a corner, next to a gloomy, glaring boy.

Hermione stared. Snape was an awkward, gangly-looking boy, with bad skin and lank, stringy black hair. It wasn’t that he was ugly so much as plain, but sitting next to Lily, his imperfections stood out all the more. They simply didn’t match; it was like a robin sitting with a rat. But still, Hermione could see the smoother, less distinct foundation of the face she’d grown to appreciate more than she’d expected to.

“Watch out for him, Lily,” Snape warned, still glaring at a spot near the door where Hermione presumed Lupin to be.

Lily rolled her eyes. “Why, Sev? What could you possibly have against Remus, other than his friends?”

Snape looked at her, a spark of something vindictive and slightly manic in his eyes. “Something’s off about him,” he said, hedging his words. “Look, I . . . Oh, where did it go?” He shuffled through the books and papers in front of him, then spotted what he was looking for on the bench on the other side of Lily. “I’ll show you,” he said, reaching across Lily for what Hermione could see was a lunar calendar. Except Lily wasn’t prepared for his movement, and she jerked back, which threw him off-balance, and somehow they both ended up on the floor. He was leaning over her, braced with his hands on the floor and bench, trapping Lily where she lay.

The suspicion and malice in his eyes were gone, and he looked down at her with concern. “I’m sorry! Are you okay?”

She winced and touched her head with her hand. “Just a bump. I’m fine, Sev.”

Snape didn’t get up. He looked down at Lily, and Hermione could read his emotions easily as they passed over his face: considering, wary, hopeful . . . bold.

He leaned down to bridge the space between them, but before he got close enough to kiss her, Lily blurted, “Are you going to help me up or what?”

Turning red with humiliation, Snape pulled back, aborting his attempt, and helped her to her feet. He sat back down and she returned to her spot beside him. They were both embarrassed, but Hermione didn’t miss the faint disgust and relief in Lily’s expression or the way she didn’t sit quite as close to him as before.

A couple of girls sitting nearby were tittering and looking at the pair of them. “Gross,” one said to the other, whispering loudly enough that Snape and Lily could hear them clearly. “I can’t believe he just tried to kiss her.”

“I know,” said the other girl. “How delusional can you be? Like anyone would want to touch him.”

Rage shot through Hermione, and she wanted to punch those girls in the face. But it was just a memory, so she couldn’t. She kept watching, hoping Lily would do it for her.

Snape’s fists and teeth clenched and he hunched lower in his seat. Lily said nothing to reassure him or negate what the girls had said or tell the girls off. She just asked him something about one of their classes in an obvious attempt to move past what had happened and forget about it entirely.
The memory faded, and the next one flickered into view like the tentative sputtering of an old Muggle film projector coming to life. Hermione saw a dimly-lit office lined with jars. A dark-robed man had a young woman bent over the desk. It was eerie, watching herself have sex with Snape from this outside perspective. She could see the concentration and abandon on his face—and then the disgust and self-hate after he finished and stepped back from her.

Snape fixed his robes, looked at the Hermione still bent over the desk, then averted his eyes again until she’d stood straight and smoothed out her skirt and robes. She watched herself timidly admit that it had been “not so bad.” And then she saw, once again, Snape’s expression. He honestly hadn’t believed her. She saw him try to perform Legilimency on her memory self, then stare in disbelief as she broke away and fled.

Another memory flickered in, covering over that one. She recognized this, too. The master bedroom in her holiday home. Herself, kneeling topless on the bed, tenderly lifting Snape’s hand to her breast. That same disbelief in his eyes, joined by awe and hope. Herself, reacting to his touch with not a glimmer of disgust. Pressing her body into his hands. Asking him to kiss her and moving to meet his lips before the crash downstairs drove them apart.

The next memory came with surety, forming around her in an instant. They were in Snape’s rooms at Hogwarts. She was kissing him passionately, and he was responding. Her hands were roaming over his body in such a wanton display that she felt uncomfortable watching, even knowing she was only watching herself. She watched herself undo his trousers, saw him squirming under her touch, saw herself reach for the prize beneath his clothes.

The memory ended before she had to watch him throw her to the floor. There was blackness for a few seconds, and then another scene took shape.

They were outside Hogwarts, and students were streaming out, looking like they’d just got done with a difficult exam. She saw Snape, young but a bit older than last time. And then she was distracted by a face that looked so familiar that sorrow welled up in her. He looked just like Harry, but the eyes were wrong, and his glasses were a different shape. James walked beside Lupin, a good-looking young man that Hermione only barely recognized as Sirius, and a small, mousey boy that Hermione would have been inclined to pity had she not known what Peter Pettigrew would become. Her curiosity got the better of her, and she watched Harry’s dad and his friends as they talked and joked. And then James did something she could never have imagined Harry doing. He went to where Snape was standing, minding his own business, and proceeded to prove himself the bully Snape had always claimed he was.

Lily ran to Snape’s rescue, as any good friend would do. But Snape, in his anger and wounded pride, called her a word that Hermione had never heard pass his lips. Lily ran off, and Snape stared after her, horrified.

The next memory was brief. Snape standing outside the Gryffindor common room. Lily in a dressing gown. He was begging, nearly on his knees, apologizing over and over, and Lily hotly rejecting him every time.

And then Hermione, the skin of her neck red, looking at Snape as he hunched over his desk, scribbling nonsense. “I forgive you.”

Lily, Snape clutching at her robe in desperation: “You’ve made your choice, Severus. It’s too late.”

Hermione lying across a desk, Snape standing behind her: “I forgive you.”

Another swirl of memory, and she found herself in the dimly-lit passageway to the Hufflepuff
common room. A man was walking in front of her—Snape, black hair stringy with sweat and coming loose from the tie holding the top part out of his face. The back of his black t-shirt was torn where the tree shard pieced him, the fabric’s edges pushed into his skin by the wood.

He moved fast despite his injury, and she followed him into the room. He looked around, his eyes frantic, searching, taking it all in. The room looked much as it had when she’d entered: two injured werewolves on the floor, Tonks and Lupin with her parents, the babies crying in their cribs.

“Merlin’s beard, Severus!” Madam Pomfrey swore, hurrying over to him. “What happened to you?”

He batted her away with his good arm and went to the crib where Cubby and Cedric lay, reaching in to touch them, roll them over, and inspect them for injury. After satisfying himself that they were unhurt, he went to where Evelyn lay on the hospital bed with Antoinette beside her. Their newest baby was in her arms. Snape stared at the child, looking lost. “All right?” he asked, his voice rough.

“The children are all fine,” Pomfrey answered, coming to his side. She began to explain that Precious had been injured and Kreacher killed, but Snape didn’t care. He reached for the baby, and Evelyn tried to hand her over, but Snape couldn’t hold her with only one hand, so he stroked her head with his fingers.

“She was born just after the attack,” Antoinette told him.

“What’s her name?” he asked.

“Evelyn hasn’t given her one. She said she wanted to wait for you. She wants you to tell her what to name her.”

“Lily,” Snape said automatically, his words a dart to Hermione’s heart. Then he blinked and shook his head. “No, I mean . . . Eileen. Name her Eileen.”

Looking tired and annoyed, Evelyn nodded. “Eileen Lily Snape.” Snape’s eyes bulged, but it was too late to take it back. Evelyn let out a huge breath. “Whew. All right, now that that’s done, can I get some sleep?”

Hermione felt a tightness in her heart ease. Snape had only said Lily out of a decades-old reflex, then thought better of it. He hadn’t really intended to name Hermione’s child after his old love. And then Evelyn had been tired and impatient, so she’d misunderstood and named the baby before Snape could clarify. It had only been an accident.

“Later, Miss Rosier,” Pomfrey said disapprovingly. “A battle just ended. There are other needs to be seen to. Like your injury, Severus. Sit down while I see what I can do about that shoulder.”

With only the barest of token protests, he sat in the chair she indicated, swallowed the painkilling potion she handed him, and allowed her to cut his shirt away and Banish the shard of wood. “I want to hold her,” he said as Pomfrey began cleaning the wound and stopping the blood. Pomfrey nodded permission, and Antoinette took the baby from Evelyn and settled her into the crook of Snape’s uninjured arm.

As Pomfrey worked on him, he gazed down at the child nestled against his bare chest. “Hello, Eileen,” he murmured. “I suppose I’ll be your father for the duration.”

The common room faded, and then she saw young Snape in a corridor, maybe a seventh-year now, walking with his head down. There was a gloom of lonely bitterness that seemed to radiate from
A couple turned the corner in front of him, and he stopped in his tracks. James pulled Lily toward him so that she wouldn’t bump into Snape, then draped his arm around her shoulders and smiled nastily at Snape. “Watch it, Snivellus. You almost ran over my girlfriend.”

Snape shot him a glare and reached for his wand. But his eyes slid to Lily. There was no hope in them. They were flat, barren. He’d learned not to hope anymore.

Lily gave Snape a look of deep disappointment. “Come on, James. He’s not worth it.”

The scene changed, and Hermione was standing in front of the Whomping Willow. Its limbs were swinging wildly, but they passed right through her as if she were a ghost. The day was bright and sunny, but there was a drizzle of rain coming from somewhere. Odd weather, just like it had been yesterday. Looking around, she saw two men approach the tree.

Lupin was in front, wearing simple Muggle clothes: faded jeans and a short-sleeved, button-up shirt. Snape trudged behind him in slightly nicer jeans and a turtleneck that made him look even leaner than he was. She supposed they didn’t want to risk getting their clothing snagged on the branches as they flailed around.

“Why did you insist I accompany you out here, Lupin?” Snape asked grumpily as Lupin searched for a fallen branch. The tree must have been hit during the battle, because there were a few around to choose from. “If this is your idea of some sick joke, I’m not laughing.”

“No, Severus, no joke,” Lupin replied. He found a branch to use and Levitated it toward the knob on the tree. “Though if you ever did laugh at one of my jokes, I think I might have a heart attack, so maybe it’s for the best.” He touched the branch to the trunk, and the tree’s limbs froze in place.

“Then what?” Snape asked, losing patience.

Lupin went to the tree, opened the passageway, and began casting the counter-spell to dissipate the hard substance he’d filled the tunnel to the Shrieking Shack with. Snape stood watching him impatiently, his eyes flickering periodically to the unmoving branches, until Lupin finished and came back to him. “I wanted to talk to you, and you seem to be avoiding just about everyone lately.”

Snape huffed but couldn’t come up with any further argument to this statement.

“Believe me,” Lupin continued, “to a certain extent, I understand. We all suffered great losses in the battle. Losing Harry especially . . . We all need some time to ourselves. I understand you avoiding me and Minerva and the rest of us, but what I can’t understand, Severus, is why you’re avoiding Hermione.”

Snape grimaced and turned away, but Lupin moved so that he was standing right in front of Snape again.

“She just lost her best friend, Severus. And other friends as well. She needs you to be there for her. To comfort her.”

“Molly and Arthur seem to be handling that job just fine,” Snape muttered.

“It’s not the same.”

“We’ve covered this before: I don’t do comforting.”
“Try.”

“And do what? Hold her? Tell her everything’s going to be all right? It’s not.”

“What’s the real reason you’re avoiding her? Don’t tell me this is still about Lily.”

Snape looked away from him, his expression slowly softening from annoyance to depression. “It’s not . . . just about Lily. Neither of us chose this, Lupin. And now it’s all over, she’ll want to divorce me and marry Weasley. Why should I bother getting any closer to her now?”

“She’ll want to—” Lupin repeated, amazed, then shook his head. “Oh, Severus, you are some special kind of fool.”

Snape’s eyes flashed at him.

“Ron woke up yesterday, you know,” Lupin said, heedless of the warning in Snape’s glare. Snape grunted affirmation. “From what I hear, Hermione pulled him out of his coma, broke his heart, then stomped it into the ground. Told him flat out that it was over, that there’d never be anything more than friendship between them, and that she’d rather stay with you even if you don’t love her.”

Snape’s jaw dropped, Lupin gave him a knowing look. The tree quivered, and a branch swung lazily down at them. Lupin ducked it easily, but it clipped Snape on the shoulder. Other than the troubled frown that was descending on his brow, he didn’t seem to notice.

Lupin started back toward the castle. “Talk to her, Severus,” he called over his shoulder as he left.

The scene shifted once more. It was tonight. Snape looked just as she’d seen him when he’d left her at Harry’s grave. This time, she went with him into the forest. He ran through the trees, looking around, finding a place to be alone. Not twenty feet in, he stopped and fumbled the Stone in his hand, nearly dropping it. He turned it around, looking at it, growing frustrated as he tried to figure out how to make it work.

“Hello, Sev.”

Snape’s head jerked up, and he stared in amazement at the faded figure of a woman before him. She was beautiful, even in this form, and she only looked a few years older than she had in Snape’s last memory.

“Lily.” He could barely form the word. It came out in a hoarse whisper. “Is it . . . really you?”

She shrugged. “How would I know?” She walked to him, her feet not quite touching the ground, and looked up into his face. “I know why you’ve called me here.”

“You—you do?”

Lily nodded. “It wasn’t your fault. You did your best. You protected him for far longer than I ever could have asked you to. But he’s home now. He’s with James and me and the others, and we’re happy.”

Harry. If Hermione could have felt her body, she was sure she’d have fallen to her knees by now. Was this real? Was it really a message from the other side, or just an illusion created by the Stone with images from Snape’s mind? She chose to believe it was real.

In the memory, Snape did fall to his knees. Tears streamed from his eyes, and he stared at the
phantom’s feet. Lily laid a hand on his head as he knelt before her.

“I’m sorry, Lily. I’m so sorry. For everything. For so much.”

“Shh,” she said softly. “I know. But you don’t need to be sorry anymore. You’re free. Go. Live your life.” He raised his eyes to her, and she smiled. “You’re a good man, Sev. I always knew you could be.”

Then Lily looked over Snape, back through the trees. “She’s waiting for you.”

Snape blinked in surprise and uncertainty.

Lily laughed like a sad little bell. “It’s okay. You were never betraying me, Sev, because you were never mine, nor I yours. Don’t feel guilty about finding what I couldn’t give you.”

Hermione didn’t know if the phantom could really touch him, but Lily put her hands on his shoulders, and he got up. He stopped crying and stared at Lily’s feet. “I . . . never thought it could happen, but . . .”

“You love her.”

He nodded. Then he wiped the tears from his face and smiled at her sadly. “She’s like you, you know. Strong. Brave. Intelligent. She cares. About everything. I always thought I was observant, but I missed that. For so long.”

Lily smiled knowingly. “It’s easy to see the bad in people. It’s harder to see the good. Especially for you.”

His eyes unfocused, drifting to the space between them. “But could she even . . .”

“I think she could,” Lily said. “I think she does.”

He looked at her with surprise which gradually melted into a distracted wistfulness. “I miss you, Lily.”

“I know, Sev. Now go on.”

The Resurrection Stone slipped from Snape’s hand and fell to the forest floor. Lily faded from sight, but not before Snape had turned and started sprinting back through the forest.

There was a slipping sensation, and then Hermione was back in her own mind. Her cheeks were wet with tears. Snape’s eyes, black as the endless vastness of space, were still locked with hers. Asking her if she understood now.

Yes, she did.

Why? she’d asked. He’d told her with his memories more convincingly and more fully than if he’d only said the words:

You want me.

You forgave me.

You chose me.

There was still one thing missing.
She stroked his cheek and felt dampness that she hadn’t noticed at first. “I love you,” she told him.

He didn’t say it back.

He didn’t say it.

His lips pulled back in another smile, his breath hitched, and he stroked her face with his hands, staring at her like he was trying to memorize every inch of it. Then he kissed her, so softly, like an inexperienced boy who had no idea what to do with a woman and was afraid at any moment she’d pull away from him.

He pressed soft, reverential kisses to her lips, her cheeks, her eyes, her nose. And then he claimed her mouth more passionately, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her against his body. She clung to him just as tightly, her heart soaring.

He did love her. He’d finally let go of Lily. Could this be the start of the future Hermione had never believed was even possible with him?

She felt his hardness pressing against her, and her own arousal grew in response. Yes. This was it. This was what it should have been like from the beginning.

Her hands moved to his shoulders, and she tried to push his robes off. She fumbled with them for a few seconds, unable to reach the clasps while she was still kissing him, then he pulled back, undid them himself, and tossed the robes to the grass. He was still fully-clothed underneath, but it was suddenly very clear where this was going. For a long moment, they stood apart, within arms’ reach but not touching, looking into each other’s eyes—each giving the other the chance to stop this from happening.

After several more seconds, Hermione’s patience gave out, and she reached to undo the buttons of Snape’s shirt. He stood patiently, watching her as her trembling hands moved down his torso, unbuttoning him. When she reached the end, she untucked the shirt and slid her hands over his chest and shoulders, pushing the shirt off.

His body was thin and so pale that it gleamed a little in the moonlight, and she could see scars marring his skin. She traced one of them with her finger. The muscles underneath twitched at her touch, and she looked into his face.

His hands moved unsteadily, took hold of the bottom of her shirt, and slid it up over her head. He stared at her for so long that his gaze began to feel like fire on her exposed skin. She wondered if he’d take her bra off as well, or if he even knew how to. Perhaps he didn’t want to risk making a fumbling fool of himself. She reached back and unhooked the clasp of her bra, then let it drop to the ground with her shirt.

His eyes widened, and then he put a hand on her waist. If she’d thought his gaze was hot, his touch was a blaze—but a warm, comfortable fire that only made her want more. He stroked her skin with his thumb, moved his hand slowly up her torso. Then he pulled her toward him, crushing their naked chests together as he kissed her.

When she could no longer breathe, she pulled away from him. Growing impatient, she unzipped her skirt and let it fall, kicked off her shoes, and finally reached down and pulled off her knickers.

Snape’s eyes were wide as saucers as he saw her naked body for the first time. His gaze roamed over her, head to toe and back again. Then, with the boyish eagerness of a much younger man, he stripped off the rest of his own clothes. She caught a glimpse of his body—pale and lean and lithe
—before he lunged at her, kissing her again as he all but forced her to the ground, lying over her on
the patch of clover she’d made while she waited for him.

She laughed with joy. Was this what was hidden under all those robes and sneers? No one would
ever believe it—not that she had any intention of sharing this information. This man, this part of
him, was hers and hers alone.

As she lay there, Snape pressed kisses over her body as he’d done her face. Soft, light, exploratory
kisses that lit her body on fire one part at a time. His hair tickled against her skin as he kissed and
carressed. Her need for him was raging. Her hands moved down to his waist, and she opened her
legs. He was so distracted by her breasts that it took him a moment to realize what she was doing,
but when he did, he moved between her thighs, still kissing her breasts and neck.

He didn’t pause or look up to meet her eyes. He simply joined with her, pressing his body into hers
as if it was the most natural thing in the world. As if it was where he belonged.

And oh, it was.

Hermione moaned with satisfaction. He was in her, on her, surrounding her, and she still wanted
more. She wrapped her legs around him. “Yesss,” she hissed.

He stopped kissing her and raised himself on his elbows to look into her eyes. Slowly,
languorously, he rocked. They moved together, fluid and lazy as two snakes in the grass, and her
heart nearly burst with the pleasure of it. He was here. He was hers. Her hands stroked his back,
and she reveled in the feel of his wiry muscles shifting and sliding under his skin as he moved in
and over her.

“How can this be real?” he murmured.

A pleasant shiver went through her. “I don’t know,” she answered. “But it is. And I’m so glad.”

He smiled, that light, joyous smile that she’d never seen before tonight and didn’t know how she’d
ever lived without. And then he crushed his lips to hers, and his pace quickened.

It didn’t take either of them long after that. Pleasure built up inside of her until every nerve was
sizzling with energy and sensation, and then it kept building. Finally, though she wanted to stay
like this forever, she couldn’t hold off any longer. She fell over the edge, her entire body clutching
her husband to her as if to never let go.

His groan was a sound more animal than man, and he kept going. When his moment came, he
locked eyes with her again. “Hermione.” Her name came out like a breath of relief from his lips.
He collapsed, grabbed her around the waist, and rolled so that he was on his back with her lying on
top of him.

They lay like that for a long time, catching their breaths. She didn’t ever want to leave. His body
felt so solid and real beneath her skin, his breath a sweet sound in her ear. This had really
happened.

Eventually, she shifted over to get more comfortable. She clung to his firm torso, her head on his
chest, and wondered if they could just sleep here like this all night, alone in the grass with the
moon and stars above them.

His hand stroked her back, content to rub lightly up and down her skin, while his other hand rested
on the arm she had flung over him.
“Hermione.”

She roused herself from the sleep she’d begun drifting into and raised herself on her elbows to look at his face.

He cupped her cheek, grinning at her sleepily, and murmured, “Marry me.”

She laughed. “We’re already married, Severus.”

His eyebrows lowered in a familiar expression of impatience, but the effect was mitigated by a wry smile. “I meant marry me again. Properly. Out in the open.”

“It’s fine, Severus. Everyone already knows now anyway.”

“That’s not the point,” he persisted. “You should have a real wedding. With . . . a dress, and your parents there, and garish numbers of flowers . . .”

“I didn’t know you liked flowers so much,” she teased.

He frowned for real this time, and his hands moved away from her. “Never mind.” He sat up, pushing her gently off of him.

Panic flooded her as she saw him closing himself off again. She grabbed his hand, preventing him from getting up. “I was kidding, Severus! Of course I want a proper wedding! Why wouldn’t I?” His frown went away, but he didn’t answer. She could see the shades of doubt in his eyes. It kind of annoyed her. “Severus Snape, you’re the most aggravating man . . . I’m only going to say this once, so listen up. You’re my husband, and I want to keep it that way. Moreover, I want everyone to know how happy and proud I am to be your wife. So you’d better give me the biggest, most ridiculously ostentatious wedding imaginable. And we’re going to invite all of our friends and anyone else who wants to come. And then you’re going to snog me in front of them so thoroughly that no one will have any doubt why we’re together. Got it?”

She’d watched his doubting and closed expression morph into shock as he listened to her, but now it shifted again, turning into a smug smirk. “Bossy little chit, aren’t you, Miss Granger?”

She grinned back at him and said with the same mock-admonishing tone, “You’ve known that for years, Professor. It’s no use complaining about it.” He settled back beside her and kissed her again. “And I think from now on,” she murmured, sliding her hand down his naked body, “it’ll be Mrs. Snape.”

He looked at her with surprise and satisfaction, and then pulled her into his lap.
A small smile drifted onto Hermione’s face as she watched the first-years being led across the grass from the stone harbor by the new Caretaker. Escorting them was usually something the Grounds Keeper did, but when Filch had finally died a couple years ago, his replacement had asked to be given this task. A Squib not long out of Muggle university, the young man had wavy black hair, a strikingly handsome face, cool blue eyes, and a smile that helped to put even these skittish, eager children at ease.

He flashed her that smile as he came up the steps. “First years,” he said to the kids, “this is the Deputy Headmistress and Arithmancy teacher, Professor Hermione. She’ll be taking you from here.”

More than a few of the girls made sounds of protest, and he laughed. “Don’t worry, she’s not as mean as she looks.”

Hermione chuckled. She knew perfectly well that she didn’t look mean, but he never acknowledged the obvious appeal he held for the female students. It was part of his charm, and she knew it only made them like him that much more. “In here please, children,” she said, standing aside so they could go through the doors into the Entrance Hall. Before going with them, she gave the young man another smile. “Thank you, Albus. Will you be joining us for the feast?”

“I don’t think so. Wendy’s complaining that she feels like a big fat cow, so I think I’ll just go back to our rooms and remind her that she’s a beautiful, dainty flower that happens to be carrying another flower around inside her. Might have the elves bring something later, though. I’m sure we’ll need it.”

“I don’t need details, Albus.”

He laughed. “I meant because of her pregnancy appetite. Honestly, Mum, where did you get such a dirty mind?”

“Blame your father.”

Albus flushed. “I don’t need details either.”

She chuckled. “Don’t ask questions to which you do not want to know the answers.”

They went inside, and Albus headed for his rooms while Hermione caught the attention of the first years.

“This way now,” she said to them but was interrupted when one girl gave a screech of fright.
Hermione whirled, looking for the threat, as more gasps and yelps went up around her. Her gaze followed the pointing to the staircase. A huge tawny lion padded casually down the steps, its tail swishing lazily as it walked. An eleven-year-old girl was perched on its back, hands buried in its mane for balance, laughing at the reaction from the other kids.

“It’s all right, children,” Hermione said, watching in annoyance as the lion made its way toward them. When it got close enough that the kids started running back from it, the lion stopped, and the girl hopped down.

“Honestly, Cubby,” Hermione huffed.

The lion transformed. The man who’d replaced it gave her a hurt look. “Aw, Mum.”

She knew he knew what she’d meant. He hadn’t been Cubby since he was six. “Well, you’re acting like a child, Harry, coming in here and scaring the kids like that.”

The black hair and eyes that Harry had had as an infant had faded to brown over the years, and his skin was a bit tanner and healthier-looking, but his resemblance to Severus had grown in other ways. Coloring aside, he looked the spitting image of Severus when Hermione had first seen him, back when she’d been a first-year herself: the same lean build, thin lips, hooked nose, and a face full of angles (but Harry had better teeth; she’d seen to that). His personality and mannerisms, though, were entirely different. Harry carried himself with a carefree energy that was the polar opposite of Severus, and she’d never seen Severus wink and grin so much in his life as Harry could do in a single conversation. And Harry almost never wore black. His current robes were dark red with gold lining, most of his hair pulled up in a long queue with a gold ribbon.

“I just wanted to make sure Alice wouldn’t be late,” he said and winked at the girl in question. “And help her make an entrance.”

“Not to mention make one yourself.”

It had worked. The kids had gone from being terrified of him to idolizing him in a matter of seconds. They peppered him with questions: “Who are you?” “How’d you do that?” and the like.

He gave the children an elaborate bow. “Hello, little ones. I’m Harry Snape, Transfiguration teacher and head of Gryffindor House.”

“Wow, I hope I’m in Gryffindor,” one boy said, and Hermione rolled her eyes.

“Transfiguration teacher?” said a girl with pigtails. “Will you teach us how to do that, Professor Snape?”

Harry laughed. “Please. My father’s Professor Snape. Call me Professor Harry.”

A pinched-looking blonde girl asked, “By your first name? Isn’t that inappropriate?”

Harry shrugged. “If you called us all Professor Snape, it would get real confusing real quick, kid. And if you want to get picky, Harry’s my middle name.”

“But will you teach us that?” persisted the pigtailed girl.

“Oh, that’s very complex and dangerous magic. Not really something that gets taught in school.”

“Then how did you learn?”
He grinned. “Blackmail.” The kids laughed, but Hermione knew he wasn’t joking. “I’ll teach you plenty of other cool things, though, and maybe, if you’re very good and study hard, you can find a way to learn this trick too.”

“Will you give us rides?” asked a chubby little boy who looked so eager he was practically bouncing in place.

“Ah, sorry. I only give rides to very special kids and ones I’m related to.” He ruffled Alice’s hair. “And only when I’m not their teacher, so no more for ten months, right?”

“I remember, Uncle Harry,” Alice said, trying to smooth her hair back into place. “Er, I mean Professor Harry.”

“Right.” He crossed his arms and leaned against the stone wall. “After all, how are you lot supposed to respect me as your teacher if I go around letting you ride on my back?”

Hermione sighed. “Come on, children. You’ll have plenty of chances to watch Professor Harry show off later. This way now.” She led them toward a room off to the side as they chattered excitedly, at least half of them convinced they wanted to be in Gryffindor. She shot Harry a look over her shoulder, and he grinned and winked, then hurried to the Great Hall to take his seat.

She gave the kids the usual introduction to Hogwarts and the four Houses. She could see the boredom on some of their faces, but she knew from experience how critical this information was to those who hadn’t had the benefit of growing up in wizarding homes.

Once she was finished, she said, “Now, is everyone ready?” Her eyes lingered a moment on Alice, who looked more excited than almost any of the others. It wasn’t that Alice had never been to Hogwarts. She’d grown up here, as had her mother. But they were always very careful never to allow the children to see a Sorting until it was their turn, nor to participate in the Welcome or Leaving Feasts. After all, they had to find a way to leave some of the mystery for their first day of school. (Albus had been an exception to this rule. As everyone knew he’d never have a Sorting of his own, he’d been allowed to watch them from the time he was old enough to sit still and not interrupt the Hat.)

Alice and the other children nodded, and Hermione opened the door. She led the kids into the Great Hall, where all of the other students and teachers were gathered, every eye on the procession. Walking toward the High Table, she couldn’t help grinning at Severus as he sat in the middle chair. She did love this part of her job. She lined the little firsties up at the front, then set the Sorting Hat on the four-legged stool.

She listened to the Hat’s song—something about unity and coming full circle—and glanced back at the High Table. Severus was watching with a regal aloofness that she knew would look quite intimidating to the students, especially those who had only heard rumors of the school’s strict new Headmaster. He was aging well. His body was still fit and fairly lean (he’d put on a few pounds over the years, but so had she), his black hair streaked with grey at the temples. He had a few more wrinkles than he’d had before, but didn’t they all?

His eyes met hers, and for a moment, his expression softened. Then the Hat’s song ended, and Hermione pulled a roll of parchment out of her robes and stepped forward. She called out names, some of which she recognized, and they were duly Sorted.

When she reached the middle of the list, she paused briefly to savor the moment, then called out, “Longbottom, Alice!” Shy and eager, her brown curls bouncing, Hermione’s oldest grandchild ascended the steps, stumbled once, caught herself, and made it to the stool. The Hat thought for ten
seconds or so, then shouted, “GRYFFINDOR!”

Unable to help herself or the pleased smile that crept up (she knew she really oughtn’t show any preference to one House over the other, especially during the Sorting), she glanced back at the table behind her to see Neville clapping and cheering louder than anyone. Beside him, Luna cheered more politely, hiding well any disappointment she may have felt.

Alice was greeted at the Gryffindor table with claps and hugs, and Hermione continued down the list. Finally, she reached, “Weasley, Rose,” and a girl with red hair and blue eyes hopped up to the stool, beaming giddily as Hermione set the Hat on her head.

Ron had taken his time in getting ’round to having a family (waiting until James had been nearly grown). So had Neville, but at least Neville had the excuse of having to wait for his wife to grow up. Not that Neville had thought of it that way at the time, of course. Hermione was certain he’d never felt anything but perfectly chaste affection for her daughter until Luna had become his co-worker, but she was fairly certain that Luna’d set her sights on him from the start. So, it may have taken Neville a while to finally have kids, but he’d made up for it quickly. He and Luna had given Hermione six of her current ten (soon to be eleven) grandchildren.

Which was weird. But it wasn’t like she or Severus had any room to criticize.

The Hat shouted, “GRYFFINDOR!” once more, and Rose hopped down to join her older brother, Malcolm, at their table, taking a seat between him and Alice.

Hermione took the stool and Hat and set them to the side, then made her way around the table, sitting to Severus’s right.

As soon as she sat, he stood, and the room quieted very quickly. He waited calmly while the older students shushed the first-years, and then said in a low, steady voice just quiet enough that the students had to be paying attention to hear him clearly, “Welcome to Hogwarts. While you are here, my word is law. Do nothing to incur the wrath of myself or any of your teachers, and you will find your stay far more pleasant than otherwise. Your parents and guardians have sent you here so that we might shape you into productive members of wizarding society. I suggest you do not make that process more difficult on yourselves than necessary.”

At least Hermione knew where Harry had got his amusement at scaring people. She felt a bit bad for the first-years, many of whom were looking like they might have accidentally got sent to prison instead of school.

Severus continued with less ominous glare. “There are two new additions to the staff this year. As you may or may not be aware, Professor Flitwick and Madam Pomfrey retired at the end of last year. Their positions have been taken by Professor Cedric Snape and his wife, Madam Sophie Snape.”

This announcement was met with a smattering of applause, though there were a few sniggers from the Slytherin table and whispers of, “More Snapes. We could have guessed.” Severus didn’t quell these whispers. He didn’t have to. Sitting on Hermione’s other side, Eileen, whose black hair, sharp features, and withering pitch-dark glare were every bit as frightening as Severus’s, shot a look at the students in her House which quelled them quickly.

“Professor Cedric,” Severus continued, “will also act as head of Hufflepuff House from now on, taking over for Professor Sinistra, who will remain Astronomy teacher.”

Cedric, a pleasant-faced man who heavily favored Hermione, and Sophie, a curvy, slightly plump
witch with brilliant red hair, waved and smiled in their polite Hufflepuff way, ignoring the
blandness of their welcome. Severus gave the usual start-of-term announcements and warnings,
and then the feast began.

“That didn’t go so bad,” Hermione commented to Severus as they ate. “Think it’ll make
the paper?”

Severus snorted. “As if those scribblers at the Prophet have anything else to write about.”

“It’ll blow over, and people will get used to it, just like they always do,” said Remus from
Severus’s other side. Professor Lupin had retaken his old post as D.A.D.A. teacher after Mad-Eye
retired (again) eighteen years ago. He’d left his job on Minister Shacklebolt’s Magical Persons
Committee to Spears and the job of being the public face of British werewolves mostly to Scratch,
who did roguish charm remarkably well—once they’d got him cleaned up. Remus was still
technically Alpha and would step in when absolutely necessary, but it was mostly an honorary
position at this point. He hadn’t aged too badly either, especially considering how he’d always
looked so much older than he was when he was younger. But he’d been living much better these
past few decades, getting enough to eat and proper rest and medical attention. He hadn’t even got
that many more wrinkles than he’d already had back then, though his hair had gone entirely white.
He wore it in the same medium, slightly shaggy length he’d always had it but had added a neat
goatee to add a distinguished flare in deference to his advancing age.

“Remember the things they printed about Harry and me when McGonagall hired us?” Cass asked
from Remus’s other side. She took quite a bit after Tonks both in looks and temperament, but she’d
inherited Remus’s brown hair, golden-brown eyes, and lycanthropy. It was why he hadn’t wanted
to have any more kids after her, but it also gave her a unique perspective on teaching Care of
Magical Creatures. “They thought we were some kind of stunt hire.” She laughed. “And now no
one gives a flip about it. Cedric and Sophie are going to be way easier for them to accept.”

“It’s not about them specifically,” Hermione said. “But the Prophet was already starting to call
Hogwarts Snape School.”

“It’s an affectionate nickname,” Cass assured her.

“Besides,” said Remus, “It’s not as if you set out to take over the school. Severus didn’t even make
most of the hires in question.”

“That’s true.” Hermione had certainly never intended to become the de facto matriarch of
Hogwarts. It had just sort of happened.

Luna had been hired when Lavender decided to quit teaching Divination in order to devote herself
to her pet Fashion and Glamour line at Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes. It had been right after Luna’s
graduation, so she was the youngest teacher in some time, but there were only three legitimate
Seers in Britain, after all, and no one even knew for sure where the hermit Tiresias was.

And then Harry and Cass had thought teaching would be a lark, and McGonagall had taken a
chance on them, and they’d actually turned out to be very good teachers despite their less-than-rule-
abiding youth.

And then Eileen had invented the Everlasting Wolfsbane Potion, which had caused quite a stir
even from across the pond, and then she’d decided to move back from the States with a Muggle
professor husband in tow just as McGonagall retired, Severus got named Headmaster, and
Hogwarts found itself in need of both a Potions mistress and Muggle Studies teacher.
And then in July, Flitwick and Pomfrey had both finally got ’round to retiring, and here Cedric was, disillusioned with his job as an Obliviator (a career which required the use of difficult charm work on a daily basis and at which he’d excelled for over a decade), and a trained mediwitch for a wife.

Really, it had all just happened.

Regardless, with each hire, there had been cries of nepotism at Hogwarts—but all of the teachers hired had been qualified; the students’ test scores spoke for themselves.

There were also those who quietly wondered if the Snapes had somehow cheated in the genetic lottery, because surely it wasn’t natural that all four of their magical children would become so intelligent and talented that they would be worthy of teaching the next generation of Britain’s wizards and witches. Hermione knew that they had, of course, cheated, even if hadn’t been by their choice. But the Wentworth’s Brew part of the story had never got out farther than their immediate friends and family, and Hermione certainly didn’t care to share it. Maybe their children had been given an advantage, but Wentworth’s had caused its share of problems as well, so Hermione figured it evened out.

“It’s the hypocrisy that really gets me,” Hermione complained. “When the Ministry forced Severus and I to marry, the Prophet couldn’t stop raving about the P.E.W.S. program.”

“I distinctly recall the term Wonder Children being bandied about,” Severus agreed, causing Harry and Cass to bark with laughter. If Hermione hadn’t been looking at her husband in that moment, she might have missed the tightness around his eyes at the reminder of the Prophet articles—and his reaction to one in particular.

“Exactly,” she said. “This is nothing more than the Prophet predicted—no, promised. The Daily Prophet was practically giddy, telling everyone how our children were going to change the world and save wizard-kind.”

“For real?” Cedric asked, not appearing to like the sound of that at all. “But I thought all that was . . .” He glanced around, saw he was too far down the table from Hermione to whisper to her, and just shrugged meaningfully.

She leaned across Severus a little to say as quietly as she could, “It was, but not many of us know that. As far as the public’s concerned, P.E.W.S. was all Scrimgeour’s idea.” Which was really too bad, seeing as how Scrimgeour had been incensed at existence of the program, once he’d broken free of the Imperius. But he’d died before he could bother telling that to anyone other than his killer, so it remained part of his legacy.

“Sounds like you need to get ahead of this, Mum,” Harry said around a mouthful of chicken. “Like Cass and I did when Rita Skeeter threatened to rat us out.”

That was the thing about blackmail—it always came back around to bite you.

“I think Harry’s got the right idea,” said Remus. “One thing I’ve learned as Alpha: spin is important.”

It was still very strange to hear Remus Lupin talk about things like spin, but spin and getting ahead of the story were a big part of the reason Fenrir Greyback’s own grandson was currently sitting at the Slytherin table, the first werewolf ever to be openly admitted to Hogwarts.

“All right,” said Hermione. “Harry, do you think Jessica Creevey would like another exclusive?”
“I’ll owl her,” Cass said, already pulling out a folded piece of parchment.

Still, Hermione mused, it is strange how things worked out.

The conversation moved on to other topics, but Hermione kept turning around in her mind just how unlikely this series of events was—and yet, how, in a way, it seemed inevitable, too. Why was she thinking that? She looked down the table at her children and their spouses and the few other teachers that weren’t actually related to them, sitting alongside herself and her husband . . .

A memory from so long ago she’d nearly forgotten it crawled out of the recesses of her mind. Startled, she thought about it, and—yes—it fit. It all fit.

Merlin’s skimpy pink knickers. It all fit.

Overcome with the absurdity of it all, she snorted, spilling her pumpkin juice. Severus looked askance at her, his eyebrow raised. Laughter bubbled up—hysterical, crazy sort of giggles that didn’t stop even when Severus asked her what was so funny, or when the loud chattering in the Great Hall died to a murmur, or when Eileen elbowed her and told her that everyone was staring. Finally, she got it together. “I’m sorry,” she said, wiping tears from her eyes. “I was just . . . talking of something.” The students were all staring at her with shock and amusement. She might not have been especially scary, but she didn’t make a habit of having giggle fits in front of them. She cleared her throat and tried to regain her composed authority.

Harry pulled the attention away from her by standing and yelling, “All right, everyone, you’ll be following your prefects to your Houses soon, but first, let’s all sing the school song.” The students followed him dutifully in a discordant mash-up of tunes.

Soon, the plates were cleared, the students led off to their dorms, and the teachers began seeing to their nightly duties. But even as she climbed into bed with her husband hours later, she was still tossing it all around in her mind. She lay on her back, ruminating on the strangeness of life.

“You’re distracted,” Severus murmured in her ear, and she realized that he’d been nuzzling her neck for nearly a minute while his hand slipped up under her nightgown.

“Oh,” she said. “Sorry.”

Lying beside her, he turned her face to him and kissed her, slow and deep. His hand went back under her nightgown and drifted up.

Her mind still half on her own thoughts, she heard him say, “Roll over,” his hands guiding her onto her side, and complied without thinking. He spooned up against her back, kissing her neck as he adjusted his nightshirt and found his position.

He let out a soft breath like a sigh, and she moaned softly in response.

Kissing her neck as he moved gently against her, he murmured, “Care to share with the rest of the class?”

“Well—ah—I was . . . thinking . . .” She melted into her husband’s touch, grateful for the outlet. He’d understand. He’d appreciate the absurdity of it all. “You remember that prophecy?”

“Oh?”

“Lavender’s. About . . . the kids.”
“Mmm.”

She gasped, her hips moving to his rhythm. “I think . . . it came true. Tonight.”

Severus’s movements stopped, and he raised up on his elbow to look down at her. “That prophecy was a lot of nonsense about Voldemort succeeding in his plan to make them Horcruxes.”

“That’s just it. I don’t think it was. I think we had it wrong.”

He raised his eyebrows, curious. “Do tell.”

She thought through it line by line. “We were right about it being about the kids. *Four Princes*. We figured that out quickly. The *two of fiery heart* are Harry and Cedric, and the *two of sharpest wit* are Eileen and Luna.”

He nodded, following her. Cedric may not have been as outspoken as Harry, but he had the same fierce loyalty and tendency to make decisions with his heart rather than his head. Luna and Eileen, the Ravenclaw and Slytherin, tended to be more intellectual and considering than their brothers.

“*Bred in lies*. *Bred* implies intentionality, which is certainly true, and there were more lies flying around than I could count. *Conceived in fear*. Voldemort conceived his idea to make more resilient Horcruxes because of his fear of death. *Borne from hate*. The surrogates agreed to carry them because they hated Voldemort—or at least hated what Voldemort was doing.” She had a hard time imagining Luna Lovegood actually hating any person, even an evil monster like Voldemort.

“The *two to whom they owe themselves* were Voldemort and Dumbledore, yes,” Severus offered, sounding slightly impatient. “They both died before Eileen was born. We knew that.”

“So it was just that last line that didn’t get fulfilled,” Hermione explained. “We thought it was thwarted, that because Voldemort died, they wouldn’t become his lieutenants and serve him. But that never really made sense if Voldemort was supposed to have died before they were all born.”

“Am I to take it that the last line of the prophecy is what caused you to make such a scene at the feast?”

“Well, it’s quite funny, really. *Then they shall sit alongside their dark master, and mould the future according to his will*. It didn’t mean Dark as in Dark Lord. It just meant dark.” She smiled, amused that he still wasn’t getting what seemed so simple now. “Can you think of anyone who might be described that way for any reason?”

His eyebrows shot up. “You’re kidding.”

“Silly, isn’t it?” Absently, she ran her finger along the inside of Severus’s left forearm, over the white, barely visible scar in the shape of a Dark Mark. “All four of the kids have come to work here—working for you, sitting alongside you at the High Table—to teach kids—the future, shaping them, as you said in your speech tonight. So, did it happen because it was prophesied, or was it prophesied because it happened?”

Severus blinked, looking slightly dazed as he thought this through. Then he let out a sharp laugh, lay against her once more, and resumed his languid rocking. “Prophecies are completely useless, troublesome things, not worth the effort expended on thinking about them.”

Hermione laughed, deciding he was right. Then Severus’s dexterous fingers chased away all desire to laugh.
“Severus,” she said after a while.

“Mmm,” he said, his mouth on her neck.

“I like our life.”

She felt his lips curl into a smirk against her skin. “Mistress of understatement,” he teased, his breath tickling nicely.

She had a job she loved, kids and grandkids she saw every day, and a husband who didn’t know how to love with anything less than his whole being.

Hermione sighed, losing herself in Severus as he kissed her, caressed her, loved her.

Yes. Life was good.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!