

The Long Way Down

by Alley_B

In a dystopian AU where the Dark Lord triumphs and Severus Snape can claim any reward he wishes as one of the chosen 'Faithful,' all Severus longs for is a life of peaceful seclusion – and an heir. But it seems that he might have to sacrifice one for the other when he petitions the Ministry for a hand-witch to produce a child and is presented with one of his former students.

Be Careful What You Fight For

Chapter 1 of 16

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A.N.: This story was inspired by Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*; I take no credit for the premise or any other elements from that book you might recognize. I also owe a heartfelt thank you to my fabulous beta Moonrevel (from Perfect Imagination) for her insight, encouragement and unflinching determination when confronted with odd spelling and punctuation.

Severus sat in an overstuffed chair, glaring across an ornate desk at the appointed Minister of Magic.

"I must say, Severus, that I was rather surprised by what landed on my desk this morning," Lucius was saying. "Had I been expecting any missive at all from you, it would have been an announcement of your impending nuptials to some fine pure-blood witch. Not this." Lucius frowned in obvious consternation at the piece of parchment he held in his hand.

"I don't want a wife. I want an heir," Severus responded through gritted teeth.

"Yes, I gathered as much. Trouble is, your request is rather unorthodox."

Severus shrugged his shoulders. "I don't see how. I'm sure that you have seen your share of similar requests cross your desk since the Dark Lord took it upon himself to go into the business of renting out Muggle-born witches as breeding stock to pure-blood wizards. If I'm not mistaken, I believe that Eleanor Branstone is currently expecting your second child, is she not?"

Lucius shifted uncomfortably. "Yes, she is. And no, I don't usually handle these matters. As I'm sure you well know, the allotment of hand-witches falls under the jurisdiction of the Department of Social and Educational Reforms Yaxley's department. Don't try to con a conman, Severus. You're hoping that I use my influence as Minister to help you circumvent the Ministry's bylaws concerning the allocation of hand-witches."

A knowing sneer twisted Severus lips. "You owe me, Lucius."

"I do," Lucius acknowledged, "but you ask a lot of me. The program is controversial and thus tightly regulated. There are those who feel betrayed by our Lord's willingness to sacrifice the purity of our blood for the sake of strengthening the magical-line, even when he doesn't have a choice."

Severus could think of many other reasons for the Dark Lord's pure-blood subjects to feel betrayed. For instance, the new social strata, mandated by the Dark Lord himself, which assigned social privilege on the basis of service and loyalty rather than ancestry. Granted, Severus had greatly benefited from the unforeseen shift, but the fact that a feral beast like Fenrir was now sitting at the Dark Lord's table and taking tea with the rest of the social 'elite,' was a testament to the Dark Lord's madness in the eyes of many. Appointing someone like Lucius both a loyal servant and a pure-blood as Minister of Magic, had been a strategic public relations move on the part of the Dark Lord.

Severus realized that his friend was still talking.

"I don't see how we can manage this without infuriating a lot of people and bringing into question the validity of the program this given your special circumstances."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "You mean my Muggle father."

"Yes. That, and the fact that you have stubbornly refused to please our Lord by taking a pure-blood wife. With privilege comes responsibility, Severus that's something I learned very early from my father. All eyes are on us." A small smile curled Lucius' lips, and Severus thought he looked like a naughty boy about to rip the wings off a fly. "Now, if you were to take a pure-blood wife, and this wife should prove infertile, as many pure-blood witches have..."

"No!" Severus' voice cut across Lucius' carefully worded suggestion, reverberating off the office's walls and startling the portrait of an old wizard who had been snoozing placidly with his head against the frame. The smile left Lucius' handsome face.

"Be reasonable, Severus. These hand-witches are a necessity, one that most of us would prefer not to acknowledge and many would rather not exist at all. How am I supposed to justify that a Faithful in the service of our Lord, one who has no need for such an encumbrance, is willing, eager even, to take one into his home and his bed?"

The hypocrisy of the statement was too much for Severus. "I don't know, Lucius. Ask Yaxley how he justifies handing these helpless women over to his Ministry friends for the less-than-noble function of sating every deviant need that their gentile, pure-blood wives refuse to accommodate. By the way, Lucius, how does Narcissa feel about your little concubine?"

Severus knew Lucius too well not to know that his words would sting. If there was one thing in the world that Lucius loved more than money and power, it was his family.

"Your implication is unfounded. You know better than anyone what Narcissa and I went through trying to conceive Draco. The hand-witch program has been a true gift to us, and Narcissa is... reluctantly grateful."

Severus conceded the point with a slight nod of his head. "Still, you can't deny that for others, the program has been nothing more than a convenient excuse to keep a Ministry sanctioned Mudblood sex slave shackled to their beds figuratively speaking, of course."

There was a hint of disgust in Lucius' derisive snort. "Of course."

Severus knew that the high-ranking wizard would never admit to such a thing, not officially any way, not even if it was common knowledge that some of the Dark Lord's closest subordinates were doing just that. Lucius sighed, and for the first time Severus glimpsed the true weight of the burden his friend bore.

"These are worrisome times, Severus, and what you propose is at the very least questionable. Even though our Lord not yet cares to admit it, the flicker of dissension is swaying in the breeze. It would not bode well for any of us to add fuel to that flame. Our Lord does not suffer disloyalty passively, or have you forgotten what it was like the first couple of years?"

No. Severus had not forgotten what had come to be known as 'The Cleansing Time.' The Dark Lord's rampaging paranoia, the gruesome public displays of torture and slaughter he, along with others, had been forced to carry out under the Dark Lord's orders. The reign of terror visited upon loyal subjects and traitors, Mudbloods and pure-bloods alike, all in an ill-conceived effort by the Dark Lord to rid his budding empire of even the slightest hint of opposition.

The horror of the memory must have shown on Severus' face, for the other's tone softened. "I wouldn't be your friend if I didn't give you my advice: if it's a bed mate you want, visit one of the Ministry-sanctioned bordellos; no one would question that. If, on the other hand, it is a family you truly long for, then go find one of those pure-blood witches whose interest you have spurned in the past and marry her. In either case, forget about this... this nonsense." Lucius tossed the petition letter on the desk.

It made sense that Severus' predicament would seem so simple to Lucius. Lucius, with his good looks and arresting confidence. Lucius, who had never had to look into a witch's face and see the barely contained revulsion there.

"I don't need a whore. And I don't want a wife. I desire an heir," Severus said. It was as close to a plea as he was willing to go.

"I don't understand you, Severus. For as long as I've known you, I've never been able to understand. Just tell me why."

"I have my reasons," Severus stated simply.

Lucius sat back and threw his hands in the air in a gesture of defeat. For several moments he said nothing; he just studied Severus through narrowed eyes, as if carefully considering his options.

"Very well," he said finally, rummaging through the scrolls of parchment on his desk. "There is one possibility that might not raise too many flags, but might still be more trouble than it's worth. She has been placed three times, twice unsuccessfully. The third household returned her immediately after their child was born. A bona fide troublemaker, incorrigible from what I hear. Nonetheless, I have complete confidence in your ability to control her. Here she is," Lucius declared, unfurling a long piece of parchment and glancing over it. "Number 2-8-3. I'm supposed to sign her order of banishment today."

Lucius summoned a clean piece of parchment with his wand and dipped his fine, silver quill into a pot of black ink. With a dramatic toss of his sleeve, Lucius put quill to parchment and began to write while he spoke. "I will sign the allocation order myself and make sure that it finds its way directly to Wishington's desk he is a supportive clerk at the Department of Social and Educational Reforms who has done favors for me in the past."

More like one of the many minions Lucius had placed all over the Ministry to spy for him, Severus thought. But it mattered not, he concluded, just so long as the man could make certain that Severus was granted his petition with a minimum of interference and of fuss.

"Since she has been slated for banishment, no one will question her whereabouts for the time being. In the meantime, I will delay the order for the period of one year. By the time anyone becomes the wiser, she should have accomplished her task and be long gone. I trust this gives you enough time?" Lucius paused and looked up at Severus with a raised eyebrow.

Severus answered with a terse nod. Lucius signed his name with a flourish, folded the parchment, sealed it with the Ministry's crest, and handed it to Severus. "Wishington's office is on the first floor, out the lift, to the left, fourth door on your right. Get this to him without delay."

Severus took the piece of parchment gratefully. "Thank you, Lucius. I knew that I could count on you."

"Always," Lucius responded. "Now get out of my office, and let's just hope that this little stunt doesn't get us all killed." Lucius dismissed Severus with a wave of his hand and turned his attention to the mound of scrolls sitting on his desk, awaiting his signature.

Severus was not affronted by Lucius' cantankerous dismissal it was so like Lucius to grant favor with one hand and a slap with the other.

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Wishington was a little man with a balding head, thin mustache, and a nervous manner. His beady eyes scanned the letter Severus had handed him, occasionally leaving

the parchment to glance at Severus from behind gold-rimmed spectacles.

"I don't believe this should be a problem," he finally announced with a beaming smile that revealed small pointed teeth.

"Good. When can I expect delivery of my charge?"

"In a couple of days; I just need to dispense with a few formalities."

With a curt nod of his head, Severus bid Wishington good day and left the office. As he crossed the lobby on his way out of the Ministry building, Severus tried not to look at the Wall of Traitors, but like always, his eyes were drawn inexorably to it.

The monolithic monument, tarnished with the blood and waste of the unfortunates who had hung from it day and night during the first months of the Dark Lord's reign, loomed over the entrance hall – a macabre tribute to the Dark Lord's triumph over his enemies and a warning to future generations.

Severus quickly averted his eyes and hastened to the Apparition point.

Wishful Thinking

Chapter 2 of 16

In a dystopian AU where the Dark Lord triumphs and Severus Snape can claim any reward he wishes as one of the chosen 'Faithful,' all Severus longs for is a life of peaceful seclusion – and an heir. But it seems that he might have to sacrifice one for the other when he petitions the Ministry for a hand-witch to produce a child, and is presented with one of his former students.

Hermione stood with hands clasped before her, eyes trained on the brown and gold rug under her feet. They had traveled by Floo directly into a parlor that was spacious, but unassuming by Death Eater standards. She had been told nothing about the man who was to become her new master, except that he was one of the Faithful, the elite group of Death Eaters who had fought alongside Voldemort in the first war, and had rejoined him after his return. The so-called Faithful now controlled most of the Wizarding World – they were the voice and ears of the Dark Lord, not to be trifled with or crossed by anyone who wished to remain alive, or at least with all limbs attached.

Wishington stood next to her, nervously rifling through the stack of parchments he held. The man reminded Hermione of a house-elf, without any of the nobility that had endeared them to her. It took a monumental effort on her part not to raise her eyes when she heard footsteps approach, in order to catch a glimpse of the face of the man who would hold her fate in his hands for the duration of her placement. The names of a few of the Faithful pure-bloods she had met or heard about drifted through her mind: Nott and Dolohov, Carrow and McNair, Lucius Malfoy, Rodolfus Lestrange. She fervently prayed that it wasn't the last. Hermione didn't think she could survive long, sharing a household with Bellatrix.

"Miss Granger, dare I ask what you're doing here?"

The softly spoken inquiry stunned her like a slap on the face, and all the blood seemed to drain from her body, leaving her cold and faint. She was abruptly tossed back into a dungeon classroom; she was all of sixteen and carefully reciting the long list of ingredients in a Blood Replenishing Potion – both their Latin and common names – only to be called an insufferable know-it-all and be asked to, in the future, refrain from disrupting the class. Her throat constricted, and she fought the inexplicable urge to cry.

"Well?" Snape pressed on.

A seldom helpful Wishington came to her rescue. "Mr. Snape, sir. This is hand-witch number 2 8 3, who shall be referred to as 'Hand-Witch of Snape,' OfSnape for short, during the duration of her service."

"Like hell she is!" Snape's bellow reverberated in the room, and Hermione cringed a little in spite of herself.

Wishington suddenly seemed unsure, and she felt a twinge of empathy for the man. "I'm fairly certain that no mistake has been made. All the papers appear to be in order." He leaned closer to whisper in Hermione's ear. "You are 2 8 3, aren't you?"

Still not recovered from her shock, Hermione managed a weak nod.

"See, sir? Everything is in order," Wishington declared.

Everything except Hermione's world, which had exploded and was now raining down on her in a torrent of memories and conflicting emotions. On the one hand, Snape was someone she knew, had even reluctantly trusted on occasion, and she found a strange sort of comfort in that. The man could be a lout and a prick, but she could not remember him ever actually harming one of his students. On the other hand, Snape was a traitor of the worst kind – someone who might very well have cost them the war, and her friends their lives. She wasn't sure if she could stand being in the same room with him for any extended period of time, let alone be intimate with him, which he would surely expect of her. Hermione was vaguely aware that Snape and Wishington were still arguing.

"If this is Lucius' idea of a joke..."

"I beg your pardon, sir," Wishington interjected.

"It has to be a mistake, then."

Hermione thought Snape's voice sounded increasingly desperate.

"I don't think so, sir. You specifically requested a hand-witch, and the Minister has graciously complied."

"I did not specifically request this one!" Snape pointed an accusatory finger at Hermione.

"Sir, if the arrangement is unacceptable to you, it can be dissolved – it's simply a matter of reinstating 2 8 3's order of banishment. But I believe it is my duty to warn you that no replacement might be forthcoming; the Minister has already gone through a great deal of trouble to accommodate your request."

Something in Wishington's words gave Hermione pause. He had mentioned an order of banishment, one that could be easily reinstated. Ever since the Dark Lord had instituted the mandate that all 'undesirable elements' – those guilty of recurring but minor crimes – should be exiled from his territory, Hermione had hoped for such a fate.

She wasn't certain what banishment entailed, no one was, except that she would be sent away -- away from the Ministry, away from Death Eaters, away from her confining existence. While in a particularly optimistic mood, she had even conceived the notion that in exile, she might find other likeminded souls who were willing to rebel against the tyranny of the Dark Lord, perhaps even some of her old acquaintances from school. They could band together and fight, like they had done in the old days. It was only a fantasy, but it had been enough to sustain her, and now it was slipping away.

She impulsively raised her eyes and turned to Wishington. "Mr. Wishington, this arrangement is unacceptable -- to me," she said.

The silence in the room was more than deafening, it was suffocating. Wishington was staring at her, head tilted, mouth agape, as if she had unexpectedly transfigured into a creature so appallingly peculiar that no words would suffice to describe it. She did not have the nerve to glance in Snape's direction, too scared of what she would see there. A piece of parchment slipped from Wishington's fingers and landed on the floor, but no one moved to retrieve it.

"Wha-, wha-, what?" Wishington finally managed.

Wishington's nervous glances in Snape's direction made her think that maybe she was going about things the wrong way, but it was too late; she had acted rashly and now had no choice but to see her plan through. "I said, this placement is unacceptable to me. You can't possibly expect me to carry through with the arrangement. Even banishment would be a preferable fate to that of having to... suffer this man's attentions." Hermione hoped that she had infused enough haughtiness into her tone to earn her a one way ticket into exile, but not so much that Snape would decide to see her off with a round of Cruciatus.

"Miss Granger."

When Snape did not continue, Hermione sent a tentative glance in his direction, and what she saw on his face frightened her his eyes were pure venom.

"Miss Granger," he repeated, "you appear to be labouring under the misapprehension that you have a say in this matter."

Snape's voice was calm, steady, soft -- deadly. There was anger there, and something else, perhaps a warning, because she felt Wishington move slightly away from her, but she refused to be dissuaded from her goal.

"I'm no longer a child, Professor; you can't intimidate me."

"We shall see about that."

Snape reached for his wand, and Hermione squared her shoulders and braced herself for what would happen next. She was surprised when Snape turned his attention toward Wishington.

"I believe you said all the paper work is in order?"

Wishington nodded. He was still clutching the stack of parchments to his chest, as if to protect them from an imminent onslaught of hexes.

"Very well. Let us dispense with the formalities then, so that you may be on your way, and Mis -- OfSnape and I can become better acquainted." The smile that twisted Snape's thin mouth didn't quite reach his eyes, which were still two smoldering coals.

Wishington didn't hesitate. "Yes, of course. I'm sure that's best. There are only a couple of documents that require your signature. The rest I will leave with you, for your reference."

Hermione watched with a sinking heart as the clerk held out the first piece of parchment and Snape pointed his wand at it. With a wave of the wand, Snape's name appeared at the bottom of the document in glowing blue letters that sank into the parchment, leaving behind an indelible and magically binding signature. Every nerve ending in her body was protesting the injustice of the act. Snape deeply disliked her, had made it obvious that he was displeased with her presence in his house. Under those circumstances, she had been certain that he would seize the opportunity to be rid of her. Instead, he was signing a document that would bind her to him for the duration of the contract, barring an amendment from the Minister himself. Did his hatred of her run so deeply that he was willing to endure her presence just to punish her? But perhaps that's not what he was doing at all maybe, in his mind, he was merely signing her death sentence.

Rules and Terms

Chapter 3 of 16

In a dystopian AU where the Dark Lord triumphs and Severus Snape can claim any reward he wishes as one of the chosen 'Faithful,' all Severus longs for is a life of peaceful seclusion -- and an heir. But it seems that he might have to sacrifice one for the other when he petitions the Ministry for a hand-witch to produce a child and is presented with one of his former students.

Hermione watched as Wishington tossed a handful of Floo powder into the fireplace and disappeared in a burst of green flames, leaving her to her fate. When Snape turned to look at her, the anger in his expression had dissipated, leaving in its stead an unreadable mask.

"You disappoint me, Miss Granger. I always considered you to be the sole brains behind the entire Gryffindor operation, as it was. Obviously, I was mistaken."

"Sir, I..." she bit her lip, uncertain what else to say. An apology would be advisable, but hypocritical she had meant what she said. Exile had been her only hope, and he had taken that away from her. Fortunately, Snape seemed to expect neither an apology nor an explanation.

"This way," he hissed at her. He turned on his heel and stalked out of the room, not waiting to see if she would follow.

After becoming lost in the first house where she had been placed, and being severely punished for keeping her hosts waiting for half an hour while she found her way to the dining room, Hermione had learned to pay close attention to the layout of every strange house she entered. Snape's home was a giant maze of dark corridors and winding stairwells. She concentrated on mapping her way, trying not to think about the man walking in front of her, his shoulders rigid, his footsteps silent against the hard stone.

They walked out of the parlor and into an adjacent dining hall. Turned left through a doorway and up a flight of stairs that opened into a circular landing. After about twenty paces down a narrow passage, they took the short flight of stairs on the left not the one on the right and came to a small sitting area with bookshelves piled with books all around. The long corridor to the right seemed to lead nowhere, but Snape walked confidently through the garden scene tapestry at the end, and Hermione followed. She found herself in another sitting area, this one surrounded by portraits of several vigilant wizards and witches. Not quite twelve paces from there, Snape came to a halt in

front of a massive wooden door.

"This, Miss Granger, will be your room."

The door opened to reveal a room bathed in late afternoon sunlight; it was startling after the relative gloominess of the rest of the house. Like the other rooms she had seen, it was spacious, but sparsely furnished and unassuming. There was a bed, a table and a lamp, a large window framed by white curtains and a bench underneath it, an armoire, an oval rug, a trunk at the foot of the bed, and nothing else—no mirrors or flower vases, no picture frames. The dark circle on the ceiling, from where a chandelier had obviously been removed, stared down at her like an empty eye socket. Hermione walked to the partially open window that she knew wouldn't budge if she tried to open it further. The room had been prepared according to regulation—nothing breakable, nothing sharp, nothing from which she could hang or jump. The Ministry had instituted the mandate after the rash of suicides during the first year of the program.

"It's a big house," she commented, because she didn't know what else to say.

"Actually, the house isn't as large as it might seem. It is enchanted to appear that way, in order to disorient intruders. We are no more than one flight and ten yards from where we started."

She turned toward Snape in surprise. "Very ingenious."

"Indeed. Your valise arrived earlier today and is in the armoire. I'll leave you to get settled."

Snape turned hastily away and had one foot out the door before Hermione could react.

"Wait, sir! May I ask a question?"

Snape turned to look at her with a raised eyebrow and a muted sigh. "If you must, Miss Granger," he hissed through clenched teeth.

"When will I be meeting her?"

Snape frowned. "Meeting whom?"

"Your wife, sir—Madam Snape."

Snape took a step back and his eyes flickered briefly to a spot above her head, before they returned to study her face.

"There is no Madam Snape. I am unmarried."

"You mean, you live here alone?"

"That is two questions, Miss Granger, but yes—you and I will be the only residents here. For now," he added.

Hermione knew what he meant—until their future child was born. She didn't ask any more questions. She felt suddenly very tired, and slightly ill.

"I think I would like to lie down for a while."

Snape nodded. "As you wish." He closed the door softly behind him as he left the room. Through the solid wood, Hermione heard the unmistakable faint crack of wards being raised.

As soon as she was alone, Hermione sank into the bench in front of the window and stared out at the quickly setting sun. She had no idea as to her location. She saw no buildings or villages anywhere, just a vast expanse of grassland, with a range of brown and purple mountains looming in the distance. By the landscape and the weather, she assumed she was somewhere in the Highlands of Scotland, but she couldn't even be certain of that. Not that she was entertaining any thoughts of escape; she had already explored that route and had the scars on the soles of her feet to prove it. With a resigned sigh, she pushed off the bench and walked to the bed. She removed her robes, folded them neatly, and placed them on top of the trunk, before kicking off her shoes and climbing into the bed.

The mattress was soft, and the silken sheets were lightly scented with a delicate perfume that reminded her of apple blossoms. It was nothing like her hard and coarse camp-bed that reeked of antiseptic, back at the Center. Those beds were meant for sleeping, or not. This bed, she knew, was meant for something else. Still, she sank into the softness and closed her eyes, enjoying the rare moment of peacefulness and privacy.

She awoke with a start to find Snape's face scowling down at her. "Breakfast is ready, if you care to follow me."

Hermione frowned and looked to the window. A sliver of bright sunshine filtered in through the gap in the closed curtains. She found it hard to believe she had slept the entire night.

"I didn't realize," she said sleepily.

"You sleep like the dead, Miss Granger. Twice I walked into this room without you being aware of my presence. Had someone managed to slip through my precautions, as unlikely as the prospect is—someone with intent to harm you—we wouldn't be having this conversation right now."

"With all due respect, sir, the last person I know of who even tried to slip through your precautions was Vincent Hawes, when I was in my third year at Hogwarts. Two years later, he still walked with a limp."

"Carelessness, Miss Granger, is a luxury few can afford, and most pay for with their lives. You'll do well to remember that," Snape stated defensively, but the smirk on his face told her that he remembered the Hawes incident fondly.

Hermione started to sit up before she recalled that she was clad in nothing more than a thin cotton shift and her knickers. "Sir, if you don't mind, I need to get dressed."

"Certainly. I shall be waiting outside your door."

Snape left the room with a little more haste than Hermione deemed necessary. It wasn't until he had closed the door that she realized she needed to use the facilities and had never asked Snape where they were located. She spotted a small door in the opposite side of the room and made her way to it, retrieving her valise on the way.

The bathroom was small, with no mirrors and no tub—just a toilet, a small sink, and a shower. She looked at the shower stall longingly; her skin was itchy from the rough, stiff fabric of her Ministry issued robes. But she was aware of Snape waiting for her, and she didn't suppose the dour wizard to be a patient man. She quickly used the loo, brushed her teeth, splashed some water on her face, and ran a brush through her short-cropped hair. Back in her room, she donned her hated robes. Not only did the fabric chafe her skin, but she thought the drab, mustard color made her skin look jaundiced. She quickly slipped on her shoes, Ministry issued and substandard, like everything else she owned, and went out into the hallway to meet Snape.

"This time, Miss Granger, you will lead the way," Snape informed her.

She had noted every turn they had taken, carefully counted her steps, and memorized a point of reference in every room. She was confident in her ability to find her way back to the main floor. Except that when she turned toward the direction from which they had come, she was confronted by a door she didn't remember been there. She quickly turned to look in the opposite direction, but all she saw was an unfamiliar, seemingly endless corridor, lined with closed doors. She glanced at Snape in confusion.

"That way," he instructed, pointing in the direction of the door.

She took a few steps before she paused. "This door wasn't here last night, was it?"

"No, it wasn't. Open it."

Hermione obeyed, expecting to walk into the sitting room with the portraits, but instead found herself in a strange room a sort of pantry, lined with shelves. Rows of mismatched dinnerware and pottery were stacked haphazardly floor to ceiling. There was no other way out of the room other than from which they had come. She once again turned to Snape for direction, but this time he just stared back at her.

"Breakfast is getting cold, Miss Granger."

"I'm sorry, sir; I don't know where I am."

He seemed to consider her statement for a moment. "Perhaps it would help if I told you that while the layout of the house changes, its infrastructure remains intact."

Hermione pondered the new information. She closed her eyes and visualized the route they had taken the night before, concentrating on direction and distances and ignoring all the visual cues. When she had reached her conclusion, she opened her eyes and pointed to the row of shelves on her right. "That's the wall we walked through last night, the one with the tapestry."

Snape nodded and Hermione walked toward it, effortlessly emerging on the other side. She was in another unfamiliar corridor, but this time she didn't hesitate. She followed the corridor, counting her steps, and then turned left. What had been a sitting room the previous night was now a narrow, winding passage. She walked twelve paces ahead, and was about to follow it around, when Snape stopped her with a hand on her shoulder.

"How many paces last night?"

"Twenty," Hermione answered confidently.

"Then why are you turning after twelve?"

"But I'm not turning, I'm just followi... Not walking straight ahead," she conceded.

She continued to walk straight ahead, through a false wall, and after eight more paces reached a flight of stairs, only this one looked to have many more steps than the one she had climbed the night before.

"Go ahead," Snape encouraged. "The staircases change appearance, but not location."

After that, she had all the information she needed and was soon back in the main parlor, which to her relief, still looked the same as she remembered it.

Flushed from the exertion and excitement, she whirled around to face Snape. "That was brilliant!" she exclaimed.

"Thank you, Miss Granger. Ten paces to your right and through that door is the kitchen." Snape's words were clipped, but Hermione detected no cynicism in his tone.

The kitchen was smaller than she expected, but quaint, with a round table and four chairs in the center, and a pot bubbling invitingly on an old-fashioned looking stove.

Snape pointed to one of the chairs and walked to stand in front of the stove, where he summoned two bowls from a cupboard and proceeded to fill them with porridge. Hermione took the proffered chair, but was still too curious about the house to remain still, or quiet. She had heard of enchanted houses Number 12 Grimmauld Place, and Hogwarts Castle with its shifting staircases and secret rooms, had not been without their share of surprises but she had never seen a house like this.

"But, sir, there's one thing I don't understand. If the rooms constantly change around, how do I know that even if I count my steps and follow the same direction, the room will still be there when I arrive?"

"It's simple, Miss Granger. Not all the rooms change locations, or appearance. The main parlor, this kitchen, your bedroom and mine are anchor rooms, never changing location or appearance. Other rooms, like my personal library, my laboratory, and a few others, change location, but not appearance, and there are clues to finding them, for those who know what to look for. The rest of the rooms serve no function other than as decoys, and those constantly change both location and appearance, but since they have no practical use..."

"There's never any need to find them, like the pantry room," she concluded.

Snape nodded. "Correct."

The teakettle whistled as if it had been awaiting their arrival, and two cups of tea soon joined the porridge on the table. They ate in silence, Snape keeping his eyes steadily on his bowl, Hermione looking around the kitchen and stealing surreptitious glances in Snape's direction. She studied him closely for the first time since her arrival. Almost seven years had passed since she had last seen him, but other than a slight deepening of the lines around his eyes and mouth, he was little changed. He had exchanged his official black and silver robes of the previous night for simple black linen ones, similar to the teaching robes he wore at Hogwarts. He gripped the spoon tightly, and his movements were methodical, but too elegant to be considered mechanical. It was like the man did everything smoothly, with an economy of movement.

"Something wrong with your breakfast, Miss Granger?" As far as Hermione could tell, Snape's eyes had never left his bowl, not even as he spoke.

She set the spoon down and shook her head, quickly averting her eyes. "No. I'm finished. Thank you."

"Good." Severus did likewise and sent both bowls to the sink with a wave of his wand. "We have a few things to discuss before I retire to my laboratory for the day."

He summoned a roll of official looking parchment from the kitchen counter, and Hermione shifted uncomfortably in her seat. This was the moment she had been dreading since her arrival, when they would discuss the terms of their arrangement, and his expectations of her.

Snape unfurled the parchment with a flick of his wrist. "It has come to my attention that your previous placements have been marred by a series of unfortunate incidents. I think it prudent that we go over the rules of this household, so that there are no regrettable misunderstandings."

Hermione had a feeling that she would be the only one regretting any misunderstandings.

Snape's eyes glanced over the parchment as he spoke. "I will tolerate no kicking, spitting, cussing, and especially crying. You will refrain from hurling any objects at, near, or around my person."

Hermione winced; she really wasn't proud of some of her past behaviours. She absently scratched her arm as she listened to the litany of trespasses that Snape was unwilling to tolerate.

"You will not damage any of my personal property... Miss Granger, is there something wrong with your arm?"

Hermione shook her head and began to scratch her other arm.

"Is the scratching a nervous condition, then? Because those can be inherited." Snape studied Hermione with more than a hint of concern on his face.

"No, sir. It's the robes. The fabric irritates my skin."

Snape set down the parchment and walked around the table to where Hermione sat. He reached for her wrist and pushed up the sleeve of her robes to inspect the red blotches on her arm, some of which had become raised welts after her careless scratching. His hands were surprisingly gentle on her skin, and warm. For some inexplicable reason, she had always presumed his skin would be cold, like a reptile's.

"And no one has addressed this?" he asked.

"The healer at the Center prescribed an ointment, but it smelled like disinfectant and scorched bones." Like my parents' office, she didn't add. "I threw it away."

Severus scuffed. "A martyr for vanity? How inspiring, that you would suffer rather than reek."

Hermione had not been suffering. During her previous placements she had been receiving a steady supply of the most wonderfully smelling, and effective, lotions from her masters, in exchange for special favors when the wives were not around but that didn't bear mentioning, or thinking about. There were a lot of things in Hermione's past that didn't bear thinking about. She had learned that too much thinking hurt one's chances of survival, and Hermione wanted to survive.

"Well, try to refrain from scratching so much. It is distracting."

Snape released her arm and returned to the other side of the table to once again look over the parchment. His eyebrow shot up in surprise and he tilted his head in Hermione's direction.

"You purposely poured boiling water over Oliver Crispus' lap?"

Hermione felt a blush rise from her chest to her cheeks. "He was taking unwelcome liberties with my person, and his wife wouldn't do anything to stop it," she explained meekly.

"I see."

Snape set down the parchment without further comment about the matter. "In addition, you will confine yourself to your room except for meals. I don't need you wandering around my home when I'm not present." Snape's eyes narrowed. "You could become lost *and it might take me days to find you* Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well, then. I have work to do. I'll trust you to find your way back to your room," Snape said as he rolled up the parchment and tucked it away in his robes.

Hermione hesitated. "Sir, we haven't gone over the other part of the arrangement."

"What is that, Miss Granger?"

"I assume I'm here because you hope that I will give you a child; my fertile period starts in a week," she explained.

"Yes, of course. You are familiar with the process, are you not?"

"Yes, but..."

"Then we have nothing further to discuss."

Snape's tone left no room for argument, so Hermione simply nodded and left the kitchen for her quarters.

The Valley of Lost Souls

Chapter 4 of 16

In a dystopian AU where the Dark Lord triumphs and Severus Snape can claim any reward he wishes as one of the chosen 'Faithful,' all Severus longs for is a life of peaceful seclusion – and an heir. But it seems that he might have to sacrifice one for the other when he petitions the Ministry for a hand-witch to produce a child and is presented with one of his former students.

Snape was not in the kitchen when Hermione came down for lunch, but a plate of sandwiches had been placed on the table, a kettle was on the stove, and a tea service sat on the counter next to it. She ate alone and returned to her room.

Dinner was a repeat of lunch she found the kitchen deserted, a pot of warm stew and the ever present teakettle on the stove. This time she lingered for as long as she dared, hoping that Snape would join her. She had spent the day alone in her room, with little to do but think of the shelves filled with books that she had seen the previous day. Most literature was forbidden to hand-witches, and Muggleborns in general, but she had hoped to ask Snape if he had something she could read a Herbology journal perhaps, or even a copy of Witch Weekly would have served to stave off the boredom at this point, although she doubted that Snape kept one of those around.

The company in her other placements had been less than congenial, but the isolation here was brutal. Most pure-bloods' homes were hives of social activity, and there she had been the main attraction an exotic pet to be displayed in their elegant salons. Here, the silence and solitude were like a giant abyss to be filled with all kinds of meandering thoughts, memories and longings. She wondered how Snape coped. But then, he wasn't confined to a couple of rooms, or even to the house itself. For all she knew, the man wasn't home at all.

The temptation to explore the forbidden corridors beckoned, but her rationality prevailed. There was no way of telling what sort of 'precautions' Snape had taken to protect his home, and without a wand, she would be at the mercy of the man's peculiar, if brilliant, ingenuity.

It was close to midnight when it became obvious that Snape would not make an appearance, and Hermione abandoned the kitchen for her room.

After a fitful night of tossing in her bed, she awoke earlier than usual and used the extra time to take a long shower. She had stepped out of the bathroom and was about to put on her robes, when she noticed a light green jar on the table next to the bed. Next to the jar was a small piece of parchment with a note scribbled on it.

For your arms, and anywhere else you might need it.

Don't throw it away!

Hermione unscrewed the lid on the jar and smelled the contents. She caught a faint whiff of Juniper, but the ointment was for the most part unscented. She applied it liberally over her arms and lower legs, since her undergarments protected the rest of her body. The relief was instantaneous. She dressed quickly and hurried for the kitchen, hoping to catch Snape before he disappeared to wherever he went during the day.

Voices from inside the parlor brought her to a sudden halt. One of the voices was Snape's; the other was unsettlingly familiar.

"I don't expect you to know this, Severus, given your past history of self-imposed celibacy, but witches are delicate creatures that require a great deal of care and attention if they are to be kept cooperative. Boiled dinners and the occasional Scourgify on the bed-sheets will not do."

"Oh, I understand perfectly," said Snape. "Take for instance your sister-in-law; she is practically a Magnolia."

"Bella is... special," said Malfoy with a chuckle.

Hermione tried to make sense of the conversation were they laughing at Bellatrix? Maybe if she could see the two wizards... The door to the parlor was ajar, and Hermione crept closer to lean against the wall and peer around the corner. She couldn't see Snape from her vantage point, but Malfoy Senior sat on a high-back chair close to the window, his pale fingers caressing a porcelain teacup.

"In any case, I must tell you that I find the way you live appalling," Malfoy commented, casting a contemptuous glance around the room. "Trust me, Severus, you will thank me later."

Hermione wasn't certain what brought on her sudden sense of indignation, other than perhaps Malfoy's superior manner, which reminded her too much of his son. Her meals had been simple and bland, but sufficient, and Snape's house was far from sumptuous, but it was clean for the most part.

Lucius set down his cup and rose from the chair. His elegant robes made a soft swishing sound as he moved around the room.

"But there are other, more pressing matters that bring me here this morning. You gave poor Wishington quite a scare the other day. The man looked in need of a sedative when he came into my office."

"I gave him no more, and no less, than he deserved, I'm sure."

All mirth had left Severus' voice, and Hermione sensed a distinct change in his mood, although she was not sure what had caused it. If Malfoy had noticed, he was unaffected.

"He did mention that you referred to your new hand-witch as 'Miss Granger.' I seem to recall someone by that name, an old schoolmate of my son's, if I'm not mistaken. We wouldn't happen to be talking about the same person, would we?"

Hermione tensed, and she crouched next to the door frame, trying to get a better view inside the parlor. Before Snape could answer, she was startled by a loud, high-pitch voice coming from behind her. "Miss be wanting her breakfast now?"

Hermione whirled around, index finger pressed firmly against her lips, but it was too late. The house-elf's large, hopeful eyes shifted to a point above her head, and Hermione caught a glimpse of swaying black robes by her side.

"Spying, Miss Granger? Some habits do die harder than others, I suppose."

Hermione straightened. "I wasn't... I didn't... I was hoping I may have a word with you this morning, sir."

Snape's eyes flitted to Malfoy, who stood back, watching the exchange with a strange mixture of amusement and surprise on his face.

"Proceed to the kitchen. I will join you shortly," Snape indicated to Hermione.

Hermione nodded and rushed past Snape, but could not resist a rebellious glare in Malfoy's direction just before she snuck into the kitchen. No sooner had the door closed behind her that the kitchen was shrouded in silence, and Hermione knew that a Silencing Charm had been cast on the adjacent room.

In contrast with the previous morning, the kitchen sparkled with early morning sunshine, and the table was set with a white linen cloth and a vase filled with flowers. The delicious aroma of bacon and jam filled the air, and the old teakettle had been replaced with a porcelain one. The crack of Apparition was surprising in the total silence, and Hermione jumped when the tiny elf appeared next to her.

"Miss be wanting her breakfast now?"

Hermione took a seat at the table and nodded to the house-elf. "I would like that very much, thank you." If she was going to endure a harsh and painful punishment at Snape's hands later that morning, there was no sense in doing it with an empty stomach.

Plates and utensils zoomed through the air, and a few minutes later Hermione was closing her lips around a forkful of some of the fluffiest, most delicious scrambled eggs she had ever tasted.

"Excuse me, I don't mean to be rude. What's your name?" she asked the elf after the third bite.

"I be Fritzlee, Miss," the elf answered as a tea service floated delicately onto the table.

Hermione reached for the teapot, but before she could grab it, it rose from the table and began to pour itself. "I didn't realize that Snape kept any house-elves," she commented, watching her cup fill with hot liquid.

"Master Snape keep no house-elves, Miss. I be Master Malfoy's elf. Master Malfoy say Miss need looking after."

Fritzlee's statement put part of the conversation she had overheard earlier into context, although she doubted that Snape was ever going to thank Malfoy for bringing a house-elf into his home.

The door banged open and Snape swept into the room, stopping short to look around the kitchen.

"Master Snape be wanting his breakfast now?" Fritzlee asked hopefully.

"I seem to have lost my appetite this morning," Snape ground out.

He swept around the table to face Hermione. "Never again while in my home will you pull a stunt like the one you did today!" he yelled.

"Then tea, perhaps?" Fritzlee interrupted.

Snape started to shake his head, but seemed to reconsider. "Tea will be fine," he snapped at the house-elf.

"You have no idea of the amount of aggravation you've caused me, Miss Granger..."

"Sugar?" said Fritzlee.

"No!" Snape slammed his hand down on the table. The dishes rattled, and hot tea sloshed over the tablecloth.

Hermione watched the stain spread across the pristine white surface. Her breakfast sat before her, all but forgotten. Fritzlee disappeared with a loud crack, and Hermione fought the overpowering feeling of abandonment she knew there was nothing the house-elf could do to protect her from Snape's wrath.

"I wasn't spying, sir. I came down early hoping to speak with you. When I heard Malfoy's voice in the parlor, I didn't know what I was supposed to do." It was mostly true.

"Do not lie to me! You're as ungrateful as the rest of them!" Snape hollered.

She was going to cry. She didn't want to, and she knew that it would only make him angrier, but the tears welled inexorably in her eyes.

"Sir, you don't want me here any more than I want to be; why don't you just let me go?" she offered feebly.

Snape glared down the beak of his nose at her, and his eyes glinted with malice. "Let you go, you say? Intriguing proposition. And where, pray tell, would you go?"

"Exile," she stated firmly. "I heard what Wishington said. If you return me to the Ministry, the order of banishment will be reinstated and I will be sent away, and you would be rid of me."

"Oh, you make it so tempting, Miss Granger. There's only one snag in your exceptional plan."

"What's that, sir?" Hermione asked in a small voice, not certain that she wanted to hear the answer.

"There is no exile, you stupid girl!"

Snape was lying; he had to be. She had read the news in the *Daily Prophet* when the mandate was first instated: *Exile from the Wizarding World for All Undesirables* the headline had read. Percy Weasley had been one of the first to be banished, along with Colin Creevey. She had known many over the years, including several hand-witches and even a few pure-bloods, who had been sent away. They all must have gone somewhere.

"I don't believe you," she challenged.

"Then I see only one way to disabuse you of your childish notions. Fritzlee!"

The house-elf appeared, wringing her long fingers nervously. "Master Snape be wanting...?"

"Miss Granger's cloak, now!"

"Yes, sir."

Hermione tried to speak, ask where they were going, but before she could formulate any words, Fritzlee was back carrying a brown, wool cloak. Hermione donned it with trembling fingers.

She followed Snape outside. The morning was bright and crisp. A brisk wind rustled the grass, but it wasn't cold enough for her heavy cloak. They walked a few meters away from the house to a line of trees near a stream. Without warning, Snape wrapped an arm around her.

"Stay close, and don't fidget," he instructed.

She felt her stomach drop, and her body was whisked away into the turbulence of side-along Apparition.

When they came to a stop, it looked like nightfall. At first she couldn't see anything. A frigid wind whipped her cloak about her, and a dense fog hovered round her feet. Snape stood close behind her, wand in hand. The wind abated, and the fog parted to reveal that they stood on the edge of a cliff. Below, a dark forest stretched as far as her eyes could see. It undulated and swayed, and a strange noise like moans filled her ears. The fog continued to retreat, and Hermione realized with a sinking horror that she was looking not at trees, but people—hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people—their tattered robes hanging like foliage from emaciated limbs, their diaphanous bodies swaying violently as in a futile effort to uproot themselves from the ground that held them captive.

Hermione took a step back and collided with Snape's solid shape.

"Where are we, what is this place?" she asked.

"This, Miss Granger, is your exile—the Valley of Lost Souls."

She shook her head, trying to make sense of the gruesome landscape. "I don't understand, are they...?"

"Dead? In a manner of speaking. For most, their bodies are long gone, rotted into the soil. Only their souls remain here, trapped for all eternity."

"All of them, all those people, sent away for petty crimes and misconduct...?" she whispered.

"Nothing is petty in the eyes of the Dark Lord, Miss Granger. The Wall of Traitors—that was just a demonstration, a spectacle for the masses. Here, in exile, is where the real punishment begins."

"You've known about this and have done nothing to stop it?"

Hermione felt Snape shrug behind her. "What do you suggest, a strongly worded letter of complaint to the Dark Lord? Although it is my understanding that petitions and badges are more your style."

She couldn't accept that there was nothing to be done for the condemned souls before her, but when she searched for a solution, she came up empty handed, and suddenly a more horrific thought occurred to her. She could have been one of them.

"Why did you do it? I insulted you and intentionally provoked you. Why did you save me?"

"I was under the impression that you wanted to live, Miss Granger, but perhaps I was mistaken."

A wail pierced the darkness, and Hermione fought the urge to weep. She ran a hand over her cheek to wipe away the wetness there.

"No. You were right, I do want to live."

Snape moved closer, until his chest was flush against her back and his breath ghosted over her ear. "Even if it means ~~suffering~~ *suffering my attentions*?"

Hermione almost laughed at how bitterly absurd her own words sounded coming from his lips, for she was certain that there was nothing Snape could do to her that would

compare to the torment inflicted on those souls in the valley below.

"Yes," she answered simply. "Please, let's go home."

That night, Hermione's dreams were plagued with images of her friends, their mouths agape in silent screams, their hands clawing desperately at the air while their bodies were swallowed by the earth, and she among them.

Quid Pro Quo?

Chapter 5 of 16

In a dystopian AU where the Dark Lord triumphs and Severus Snape can claim any reward he wishes as one of the chosen 'Faithful,' all Severus longs for is a life of peaceful seclusion – and an heir. But it seems that he might have to sacrifice one for the other when he petitions the Ministry for a hand-witch to produce a child and is presented with one of his former students.

If there is to be a bargain, the terms of the exchange must be set forth. This was certainly something Snape had not done.

A week had gone by since Hermione's arrival in Snape's home, and it was the first day of her fertile period. By now, Snape would have received a missive from the Ministry informing him of this fact and reminding him of his obligation to the future of Wizardkind. Yet, he still had not made his expectations clear to her.

She wasn't sure what to expect this first night, alone with him behind closed doors on the floor on all fours, up against the wall, whips and chains, wand-play, a little taste of Cruciatus to liven things up, perhaps? Or would it be something more prosaic but no less debasing, like a blowjob on her knees?

In her other placements, the wives had always been there ever present sentinels guarding the interests of the Ministry and the integrity of their homes. No illusions of romance or eroticism, only a perfunctory act to be performed quickly and efficiently, under harsh lights and resentful eyes. It had been embarrassing, humiliating even, and relatively safe.

But she had left all that behind when she had struck a different bargain with Snape, one in which terms were undefined and where previous conventions did not apply.

The knock on the door startled her.

"Come in," she called out.

Snape stepped into the room and closed the door softly behind him. He lingered there by the doorway, his expression unfathomable, his gleaming, dark eyes studying her. She felt naked, exposed. She still wore her threadbare, white shift, having earlier discarded her knickers and her robes. Maybe it had been the wrong thing to do she wasn't sure. She was floundering in the sea of unknowns.

"How do you want me?" she asked.

Snape's gaze did not waver. "On the bed. On your side, facing away from me."

Hermione did as instructed and fixed her eyes on the armoire in the corner. The lights dimmed a charm perhaps, or maybe he had manually turned down the flame on the oil-lamp that sat by her bed. After a moment and a rustle of fabric, the mattress dipped behind her.

His touch was gentle but persistent no groping or obscene panting but a thorough exploration of her flesh that left her breathless, and frightened.

She was self-conscious of her unshaved legs, armpits and other parts not much she could do about it with no wand and no razors of her still dry skin despite the ointment that he had given her. None of these things seemed to discourage him.

Dexterous fingers skimmed over every ridge and delved into every hollow of her body, until she moaned, and whimpered, and almost cried, and not once did she see his face, nor would he allow her to touch him, or turn toward him.

Her hands felt idle, her tongue thick in her dry mouth, the place between her thighs damp, sticky and empty.

His hand was firm on her thigh as he guided her leg back to wrap around his. He nestled his cock against the juncture of her thighs, and its head nudged her entrance.

Hermione tensed.

"Relax. I don't want to hurt you," he whispered into her ear.

The words were meant to sooth and reassure, but his voice, so deep and ragged, his tone, so devoid of its usual bitterness and sarcasm, only served to fan the desire already flaming in her belly.

His hand once again sought her breasts, kneading them through the flimsy barrier of her shift. She pulled and pushed at the offending garment until it was no more than a scrap of fabric tied around her waist.

"You like that?" There was no gloating in his tone, only interest, and maybe amazement?

"Ye- yes," she stammered and could not suppress a sharp hiss when his fingers squeezed her pebbled nipple.

"Yes!" she repeated, more sure this time.

She found herself on her back then, her legs splayed in invitation, and for the first time she felt no shame.

She dug her blunt nails into his shoulders and allowed him to take her mouth with his as he entered her slowly. And when he started to move inside her, she moved with him. It wasn't long then until he tensed, and his fingers dug painfully into her thigh as he emptied his seed inside her with a low groan.

He remained still for a moment, his arms supporting his weight above her, his sweat-damp cheek pressed against her face. Then he donned his robes and left her room without a word.

Hermione felt relieved. This she could do for him.

The following evening, when Hermione felt the mattress dip behind her, she reached back and wrapped her hand around Snape's flaccid cock.

"Miss Granger, I don't think you want..." The rest of his protest was swallowed by a moan as Hermione began to caress him.

His needs had yet to take the form of words, but much later, when Hermione rolled onto her back and spread her legs to receive him, he entered her swiftly, taking her mouth in a desperate kiss.

~*~

Hermione was just sitting down for breakfast when Snape entered the kitchen.

"Master Snape be wanting his breakfast now!" Fritzelee chirped.

"Yes, I do," Snape answered matter-of-factly as he took the seat across from Hermione.

"Good morning, Miss Granger," he said, carefully arranging a cloth napkin over his lap.

"Good morning, sir."

Fritzelee was practically dancing around the kitchen as she juggled an impressive assortment of ingredients in the air while tending three separate pans that sizzled and bubbled on the stove. Apparently, serving breakfast to Snape was as rare a treat for the elf as it was for Hermione to have him join her for a meal.

"I'm surprised to see you here," Hermione commented, not sure what to say to a man who obviously didn't indulge in small talk or casual conversation.

Snape's eyebrow shot up. "You are surprised to see me in my own kitchen?" he asked dryly.

Their nocturnal encounters had done little to improve the wizard's disposition.

"Well, no. It's just that you don't usually join me for meals."

"I'm hungry," he explained.

Snape's declaration must have sounded like a rally-to-arms to Fritzelee, who immediately sent plate after plate laden with food zooming to the table.

They ate in silence. Having finished her breakfast, Hermione was about to excuse herself from the table when Snape's voice stopped her.

"I have something for you, something I think you might enjoy."

Hermione was flabbergasted. Hand-witches were not allowed any personal possessions other than the few indispensables provided by the Ministry she wondered if Snape knew that.

"What is it?" she asked. She tried not to sound greedy, or too hopeful, but her interest was stirred.

"If you will permit me to accompany you, it's on the way to your room."

Snape stopped just before they reached her bedroom, in the reading-room she had seen her first day at the house.

Hermione tried not to get her hopes up. "What is it?"

"I thought you might enjoy having access to this room. I have temporarily anchored it to this location; feel free to read any book in here that appeals to you."

Hermione was speechless for a moment. Her eyes traveled over the many shelves crammed with books.

"Is this your personal library?" she finally asked.

Snape snorted. "Hardly, Miss Granger. Some of the books in here date back to my schooldays, but most belonged to my mother. They are old, but the information they contain is sound. I'm sure you'll find a few of them quite interesting."

Hermione could not pry her eyes away from the shelves, already planning a strategy to tackle the large amount of reading material she could categorize them by topic and start with her favorite subjects, History and Arithmacy, or she could start at the upper left hand corner and work her way down each row, which would undoubtedly give her greater variety and a broader base of information, or there was always the random approach, grab the first book she saw and start reading it... She had almost forgotten that Snape was still in the room.

"This is wonderful, sir! Really, I don't know how to thank you," she said.

"No need, Miss Granger."

Snape turned on his heel and disappeared through the wall that led back to the main hallway, leaving Hermione both ecstatic and dumbfounded.

But once alone in the room, Hermione's elation soon gave way to misgivings. It wasn't unheard of for wizards occasionally to present a hand-witch with a bauble it was an age-old form of allurements to which Hermione had never succumbed. But books? A cursory inspection of the shelves' contents exacerbated her apprehension even if Snape wasn't well versed in all the regulations concerning hand-witches, it was common knowledge that access to some of the titles on the shelves was forbidden to Muggleborns for Snape to provide someone in her position access to these books could be construed by the Ministry as treason!

Suspicious of Snape's motives, Hermione carefully studied her options. Her hand trembled as she reached for a tattered copy of *Advanced Numerology and Gramatica* it was one of the titles she had purchased for her Seventh Year at Hogwarts, the ones she never got to read. Despite the advanced nature of the book, she deemed the topic safe enough. The Ministry was more concerned with Muggleborns' access to practical magical knowledge, rather than the more theoretical subjects, which she preferred anyway.

Hermione spent most of the day sitting in an old Windsor chair, reading straight through lunch. Fritzelee popped in a couple of times to offer her food and tea, but Hermione just shook her head each time, unwilling to tear her gaze from the page.

The day had dawned gray and cold, and by mid-afternoon a light drizzle softly pelted the glass panes of the windows in the sitting room. Hermione closed the book and gazed through the drizzle at the distant mountains. Despite her best efforts, she'd had trouble concentrating, her thoughts persistently straying to Snape and their peculiar situation.

During her Sixth Year at Hogwarts, she had developed a grudging admiration for the Prince's ingenuity and keen intellect, despite what she had viewed at the time as a nasty sense of humor all that had been shattered in one chaotic night late in June of that same year. Any lingering doubts about Snape's true nature and alliance should have been dispelled by their current circumstance. Yet, so much of his behavior seemed incongruous with what she knew of the man: she could not help but wonder if she

knew him at all. That he was determined to have a child, and had decided that she would be the mother of that child, was clear; the rest of her future was still an open question.

She slowly reached into the pocket of her robe and withdrew the folded bit of parchment she always carried there and had gone to great lengths to preserve. After so many years, she could now admit to herself that she had been disappointed when she had received the small package the summer after Dumbledore's death. Her expectations had been high then – something left by Dumbledore in his will for her, and her eyes alone, surely would have been something wondrous. She unfolded the piece of parchment now, its surface cracked with the passage of time, the letters faded from the countless times she had run her fingers over the one word written there in Dumbledore's familiarly distinct hand-writing, trying to decipher its mystery. *Hope*.

She looked at her surroundings, the large room with the aged furniture and musty books – Snape's home; she thought of the tormented souls trapped in the Valley.

"Hope for what?" she muttered to herself.

A soft crack announced Fritzlee's appearance, and Hermione quickly returned the parchment to her pocket.

"Fritzlee wonder if Miss be hungry. Miss not come to lunch," the house-elf said, her wide eyes drooping with concern.

Hermione gave the elf a gentle smile. "I think I am a bit peckish; perhaps some tea and sandwiches? I don't want to impose, but would you mind bringing them here?"

Fritzlee's expression brightened. "Fritzlee don't mind; Fritzlee like to serve!"

She disappeared, only to return a minute later balancing a large tray that she deposited on a round table next to Hermione's chair. As the tea poured itself, Hermione reached for a sandwich and turned to look at the elf.

"Fritzlee, do you ever see Snape during the day?" Hermione asked between bites.

Fritzlee shook her head. "Master Snape always go in the laboratory; Fritzlee not be allowed there. Master Snape say Fritzlee cut out her tongue and dig out her eyes before she go in Master Snape's laboratory, and if not, Master Snape do it for her."

Hermione winced, a vivid image of Snape mutilating the house-elf flashing in her head.

"What do you suppose he does in there all day?" she pressed on.

"Fritzlee not know."

Hermione stared at the cover of the book on her lap, her brow furrowed in concentration. "It must be lonely; the only person I've seen come to this house is Malfoy, and that was only once," she muttered.

"Master Snape not be lonely!" the elf chimed in. "Fritzlee hear Master Snape talk to someone in Master Snape's laboratory..." Fritzlee paused, and Hermione turned to look at her.

The elf looked horrified by her own revelation.

"Who does he talk to in the laboratory?"

"Fritzlee not know, Miss. Fritzlee not be allowed in the laboratory, Master Snape say..."

"I know, cut out your tongue and dig out your eyes," Hermione said with a sigh.

The wall on the far side of the room shimmered as Snape entered.

Fritzlee's eyes widened for an instant before she disappeared with a deep bow, but Hermione was too concerned about the wizard's dark expression to take much notice of the elf's hasty departure. For a moment, she thought that Snape had overheard their conversation. She felt like a fool for not considering that the mistrustful wizard might have devised a way to monitor her interactions with the elf.

"What's wrong?" she asked, trying to conceal the quiver in her voice.

"It appears, Miss Granger, that someone at the Ministry has taken a personal interest in your wellbeing," Snape said softly.

Hermione frowned; she couldn't think of anyone at the Ministry who would be concerned about her welfare, considering they had been ready to banish her to the Valley of Lost Souls.

"Who?" she asked.

Snape's eyes narrowed, but he didn't answer her question. "Come with me," he said.

Hermione followed Snape out of the room, an uneasy feeling settling in her gut.

Something Wicked...

Chapter 6 of 16

In a dystopian AU where the Dark Lord triumphs and Severus Snape can claim any reward he wishes as one of the chosen 'Faithful,' all Severus longs for is a life of peaceful seclusion – and an heir. But it seems that he might have to sacrifice one for the other when he petitions the Ministry for a hand-witch to produce a child and is presented with one of his former students.

A shock of bright pink greeted Hermione when she entered Snape's parlor. Dolores Umbridge stood in the middle of the room, clipboard in hand and a ridiculous little bow perched on top of her head. Hermione automatically assumed the posture expected of a hand-witch when in the presence of her superiors: hands clasped in front of her,

eyes lowered.

After Minister Fudge's death, Dolores Umbridge had been appointed Senior Under-Secretary to the Head of the Department of Social and Educational Reforms, which oversaw both the Hand-witch Program and the Muggleborn Registry. Her presence could only mean a Ministry inquiry, although Hermione couldn't imagine why there would be one. After only a little more than a week in which she had barely seen Snape, there had been hardly any time for trouble to arise unless Snape was somehow dissatisfied with her.

"Here she is," Snape announced unnecessarily.

Umbridge's bulging eyes settled on Hermione, and her mouth spread into an ugly smile.

"Hello, dear. How are you?" The woman's sickeningly sweet voice made Hermione's stomach tighten and her skin crawl.

Hermione nodded politely. "I am well, thank you."

From beneath lower lashes, she glanced in Snape's direction. The man stood slightly away from her, eyes averted, his mouth a grim slash across his sallow face.

Hermione's apprehension grew. If Snape had changed his mind, if he no longer wanted her in his home... A week prior, Hermione would have given anything for such an eventuality; now she resisted the urge to throw herself at him and beg him to keep her, promise him anything if he didn't send her away into exile.

Umbridge glanced down at her clipboard. "And she's adjusting well, you say? No incidents of any kind?" she asked.

"Nothing that would merit a report," Snape stated.

Umbridge beamed an expression that made her toad-like face appear even wider and Hermione relaxed slightly.

"I'm so glad to hear that, Severus. Our girls are trained well, but some of them can still be... difficult."

"Some require more stern handling than others, I suppose."

"Yes, yes, that is so true. Pity that we've been forced to resort to such crude and cumbersome methods to ensure our future."

"We should be grateful for our Lord's foresight and resourcefulness," Snape pointed out.

Umbridge's smile faltered for an instant. "I am! I mean... And you've done so well."

"Have I?" Snape asked softly, his dark eyes boring into Umbridge, a tight little smile on his face.

"Well, yes! Look at her, so well behaved," Umbridged simpered.

Hermione could feel Umbridge's eyes on her, like cold muck sliding over her skin.

"Not like some of the others," Umbridge continued, her voice taking on the affected tone of a sulking girl. "Some of them, well, they aren't even clean, won't even answer when I speak to them. Macnair's just mopes in her room all day, unwashed, and the smell. Cleansing spells will only go so far; the house-elves practically have to hold her down in the shower to get her clean!"

"Shameful," said Snape.

Hermione's stomach clenched. She had met the girl once the Macnairs had brought her for a visit to the Crispus' home during her stay there. The girl's belly had been big with child, and they had paraded her in front of the other pure-blood couples gathered there, Macnair bragging about how it was his third child with her and how they intended to keep her for at least two more, while Madam Macnair complained to the other wives about what a burden the girl was. Hermione remembered how Lucius Malfoy had leaned forward to touch the girl's stomach, and how she had prayed that he wouldn't do the same to her own swollen belly he had not.

"Some of these girls just don't understand the honour that our Lord has bestowed on them," said Umbridge with a mournful sigh.

"Not all can be expected to appreciate the subtle benevolence of our Lord they are only Mudbloods."

The slur no longer had the effect on Hermione that it once had, but to hear it coming from the same lips that had just the previous night kissed hers so eagerly was somehow shocking, although she couldn't quite understand why maybe because she had never heard Snape use the epithet before.

"You're so right, Severus! How good of you to remind me of this duty we all share."

"Will there be anything else, Dolores?" Snape asked, a little too tightly.

Umbridge tapped the tip of her quill against the clipboard. "I only have a few itsy, bitsy questions for your hand-witch. As soon as she has answered them, I shall be on my way."

She circled around Hermione, her bulging eyes scouring the young woman's body as if she were assessing a cut of meat one of dubious quality. "I can see you're clean, well-fed and unharmed..." Umbridge made a note on the parchment attached to her clipboard. "Tell me, dear, have there been any attempts at conception?"

Hermione's mouth had gone dry, and she could feel Snape's eyes carefully studying her. She swallowed thickly before she answered, "Yes two."

"Hum, too soon to know if they were successful, I suppose..."

The unnaturally loud scratching of Umbridge's quill against the parchment grated on Hermione's ears.

"And how was that?"

Hermione's eyes shot to Snape's face. His expression was inscrutable, but Hermione thought she detected a slight twitching of the muscle just beneath his right eye.

"It was fine," she said.

The scratching of quill against parchment stopped.

"Fine?" Umbridge asked.

Hermione didn't know what the woman wanted her to say that it had been awful: painful and humiliating? It had not. That it had been wonderful that her body had shattered and her spirit soared with pleasure? She couldn't say that either.

"It was fine," she repeated.

Umbridge made a little puffing noise and another quick notation on the board before she said, "That will be all. You may return to your room, dear."

Hermione made it as far as the main staircase before she broke into a run; she didn't stop until she reached the sitting-room, winded and flushed.

Snape had not sent her away. Her eyes took in the bookshelves around her. If the wizard's intention had been to accuse her of snooping through his books, he had just wasted the perfect opportunity. It occurred to her that Snape was showing-off, asserting his mastery by defying the Ministry's regulations right under their noses. It was both perverse and admirable and if he was doing it, so could she.

She approached the shelves with a determined stride and pulled out a copy of *Gallo's Encyclopedia of Defensive Spells*, a copy of *Dark Arts Revealed*, and an ancient-looking tome with the promising title of *The Kitchen Cauldron: Powerful Witches Through the Ages*. It wasn't the Hogwarts Library, but Snape had given her free access to these books, and she had seven years of study for which to make up!

~*~

The green cloud of smoke had barely settled in the fireplace before Severus barreled through the corridors of Malfoy Manor. At this hour Lucius was most likely in the dining-room, and that's where Severus headed. Five pairs of surprised eyes turned to him as the massive double doors banged open, and he charged into the room.

Lucius sat at the head of the table, silver fork halfway to his lips, a piece of chocolate gateau teetering precariously at the end. He was flanked by Narcissa on the left and Draco on the right. Next to Draco sat his young wife, Astoria. From the other end of the table, a plain, young woman with a ruddy face, blond ringlets and a swollen belly stared at Severus, her mouth agape.

Lucius was the first to recover. "Good evening, Severus. We're just finishing dinner, but if you care to join us I'm sure..."

"A word with you, if I may," Severus stated dryly, wanting nothing more at that moment than to hex the composed look of contentment right off Lucius' face.

Narcissa's eyes flickered nervously to her husband, and Draco remained uncharacteristically mute.

"Very well," Lucius answered after a moment, returning the fork to his plate and dabbing at his lips with a napkin.

"In private," Severus emphasized, barely able to contain the ire that boiled in his chest.

They retired to the study, where Lucius cast a casual Muffliato Charm before walking to the liquor cabinet.

"I'm sure you have an explanation for your uncouth behavior," said Lucius.

"It is you, Lucius, who owes me an explanation."

Lucius raised a perfectly arched eyebrow. "I assure you I have no idea to what you refer, but I'm listening if you care to enlighten me."

Lucius turned his back to Severus as he reached for a bottle of amber-colored liquid the movement was too deliberate not to be intentional, and Severus got the message that Lucius was not intimidated by him.

Purely on principle, he started to refuse the tumbler of scotch that the other wizard offered him, but quickly reconsidered. Severus was going to need all the help he could get in order to make it through this conversation without an outburst that would surely land Lucius in St. Mungo's, and he in Azkaban.

Severus downed half the contents of his glass in one gulp and waited for Lucius to be comfortably settled in one of the plush chairs before he spoke.

"I'm talking about Dolores Umbridge visiting my home this afternoon, at the behest of the Ministry of Magic."

The sudden look of dismay on Lucius' face served to dispel some of Severus' anger it was obvious by Lucius' discomfited expression that he had been ignorant of the event.

"I had nothing to do with that," Lucius confirmed. He leaned forward in his chair, pinning Severus with an icy glare. "I warned you about this," he hissed.

"You said you could arrange things," Severus reminded him.

"That was before I knew the identity of the party involved! The girl is not exactly low-profile; did you honestly think that I could make her disappear without anyone noticing?"

"My question is: what happens now?"

Lucius bound from his chair and stalked back to the liquor cabinet where he poured himself a drink. "What should have happened in the first place; you will bring her to the Ministry building first thing tomorrow morning, where I'll be waiting for you with a signed order of banishment."

"I can't do that," Severus stated.

Lucius lowered the tumbler slowly, a look of incredulity on his face. "Why not?" he asked.

Severus' eyes flickered to the portrait of a matronly woman with blond hair and gray eyes that hung on the wall no doubt one of Lucius' ancestors. "She might already be carrying my child," he offered as an explanation.

Lucius' expression grew somber but no less determined. "That is unfortunate, but it changes nothing."

As far as Severus was concerned it did, but he saw no point in arguing about it when he had more pressing matters on his mind.

"If you didn't send Umbridge to my home, then who do you suppose did?"

Lucius shrugged. "Most likely she took the initiative upon herself. Knowing how she feels about the girl, I'm not surprised she would take a personal interest in the matter of her banishment. When the expected order didn't come through, she probably went searching for it."

"Which led her to the allocation order," Severus concluded grimly.

"And to you," Lucius added.

"Does she really hate Gra... her that much?" Severus caught the slip just in time, but not before Lucius could have noticed maybe he had grown a little too comfortable around Lucius over the years.

Lucius returned to his chair, carrying the tumbler and bottle with him. He refilled both glasses before he fixed a steady gaze on Severus.

"Loathes her surely you remember she lobbied vigorously to have the girl hang on the Wall of Traitors next to Weasely and Potter."

Severus nodded. "I also recall you didn't oppose her."

"And you did," Lucius quickly retorted, a trace of suspicion in his tone.

Severus' words were carefully chosen. "She was a child five days short of her seventeenth birthday and a good student clearly led astray by Potter and Weasley."

The argument didn't sound any more convincing to his own ears now than it had seven years earlier. It didn't matter in the end it had been Granger's superior magical skills and her potential to pass those on to her offspring that had decided her fate, not her age. Not to mention that after three years in a Rehabilitation Camp, Potter's friend willingly spreading her legs for pure-blood wizards under orders from the Ministry would have made a fine testament to the success of the Dark Lord's indoctrination practices if they had worked.

"It doesn't matter now, Severus. You're losing your edge if you think that it's just the hand-witch that Umbridge is after."

Severus' eyes narrowed, and his attention was yanked back to the conversation.

"You have done little to ingratiate yourself to the woman," Lucius explained, "and Umbridge never believed that ridiculous story about you just happening to run out of Veritaserum as she was interrogating Potter..."

"That was..." Severus interrupted.

Lucius raised his hand. "None of my business. If I had to make a guess," Lucius continued, "I would say that she sees your present circumstances as her opportunity to undo you. She will present the incident with the Veritaserum, your protection of this girl, and now the fact that this same girl is living in your home and sharing your bed, as evidence of your ties to Potter. Of course she doesn't have direct access to the Dark Lord she would have to use Yaxley for that but I don't see Yaxley offering any resistance."

"It's a stretch; do you really think she can accomplish it?"

"I don't know. The Dark Lord has always favored you above all others to the extent of indulging your little eccentricities, and killing the old man was a coup none of us can hope to surpass. Still, don't make the mistake of underestimating this woman."

Self-loathing was rapidly becoming an uncomfortably familiar emotion for Severus. When he had received the owl from Umbridge shortly after breakfast, all he had been able to think about was the possibility of Umbridge demanding that Hermione be returned to the Ministry, and the thought had unnerved him more than he cared to admit. He should have been able to see the further implications instead, it had taken Lucius *fucking* Malfoy to point those out to him.

"Is there anything you can do to upset her plans?" Severus asked.

"Not without implicating myself into the matter more than I already have."

"What about Wishington?"

"He is loyal and discreet, but he is just a paper-pusher. He can jumble a few documents, misplace some missives, overlook a memo or two... but Umbridge is too clever for that. It would only be a matter of time."

"Time is all I need," answered Severus.

Lucius swirled his glass slowly, his cold eyes studying the undulations of the dark liquid inside.

"I'll see what Wishington can do," he finally said without raising his eyes.

Severus nodded curtly and rose to leave.

"Severus."

Severus paused with his hand on the doorknob.

"After this we are even, and you are on your own," Lucius warned.

Severus understood; Lucius' small concession to talk to Wishington was more than he had anticipated anything more than that would have been too risky, and self-sacrifice was not something Severus was stupid enough to expect from Lucius Malfoy.

"You're on treacherous ground, Severus tread lightly."

Lucius' ominous words echoed behind him as Severus stormed out of the study.

Granger was not in the kitchen or the parlor when Severus returned; he concluded she was most likely in her bedroom or the reading room. He marched up the stairs and headed in the opposite direction, toward his own chambers.

Once he closed the door, he allowed his body to sink into his favorite, soft chair a luxury he rarely allowed himself. Every instinct told him to let the girl go, to allow her voice to join the chorus of screams that haunted his nightly nightmares and be done with it. A single word from him was all it would take: an owl, not even, a Floo-call to the Ministry and it would all end. It was the sensible thing to do a man who harbored the kind of ideas he was contemplating became a liability to himself as well as his friends.

But when he closed his eyes, all he could see was her face looking up at him: her pale cheeks flushed with pleasure, her lips quivering as small gasps escaped from them, her brow furrowed in concentration as she strained under him, taking him in.

Her body had been soft, not like the perfumed-oil saturated skin of other women he had bedded, but yielding and lush. He had not been able to resist the temptation to touch it, to explore the promise of pleasure of her female flesh, hoping that she wouldn't cringe away from him, or worse, start to weep and beg him to stop. She had done neither; she had responded to his touch, and for a little while he had felt wanted.

The memory of Hermione's words helped put his thoughts into perspective.

It was fine.

"Fuck!" The expletive left his lips as he bound from the chair and stormed out of his room, heading for the laboratory.

Photograph

In a dystopian AU where the Dark Lord triumphs and Severus Snape can claim any reward he wishes as one of the chosen 'Faithful,' all Severus longs for is a life of peaceful seclusion – and an heir. But it seems that he might have to sacrifice one for the other when he petitions the Ministry for a hand-witch to produce a child and is presented with one of his former students.

Ministry bylaws compelled wizards to visit a hand-witch's bed for four consecutive nights during her fertile period, barring illness or unavoidable absence from the home; Snape did not return to Hermione's bed the night after Umbridge's visit, or the following night.

Hermione's feelings were a strange mixture of perplexity and relief, but the books in the reading-room provided a suitable distraction from her jumbled emotions. As she methodically read each book, her fingers itched for a quill and she longed for a bit of parchment on which to take notes. To wish for a wand with which to practice the new spells was futile, but on occasion she wished she had one just the same.

After three days of reading interrupted only by lonely meals, Hermione began to wonder where Snape was and what he was doing.

"Fritzee, where is Snape?" she asked one early afternoon between bites of roasted beef and mashed potatoes.

"Fritzee not know, miss. Master Snape not be home for two whole days."

Hermione thought she detected a note of concern in the elf's voice.

"Not even at night, to sleep?"

The elf shook her head.

"I take it that's unusual for him," she said.

The elf nodded, her large eyes searching Hermione's face for an answer she didn't have.

After lunch, Hermione climbed the main-stairs and was about to follow the corridor back to the reading-room when she paused. She had been in Snape's home for nearly three weeks, and she still knew little of her purpose there. Her assumption that Snape merely wanted her to produce a child for him was contradicted by the fact that he had missed two visits to her bed during her fertile period unless he'd had more pressing matters to attend. When she thought about it, she realized that she knew next to nothing about Snape's life. The other wizards in whose homes she had been placed had families, jobs and friends; by all appearances, Snape had none of these. His isolation and distrustful behavior had made sense years earlier at Hogwarts the wizard had been a spy then but why now?

Answers were not going to come to her, she realized; she would have to go in search of them. She was standing next to two corridors she had never used, one to her left and the other straight ahead. She took five tentative steps down the corridor in front of her and stopped. The route to and from the few rooms that Snape had shown her had quickly become second nature to her. Maybe she could map the rest of the house in a similar manner, maybe even find Snape's laboratory where Fritzee thought she had heard voices on previous occasions.

She continued down the corridor, carefully counting her steps until she came to a wall. She turned right and counted another ten steps before turning around and retracing her path back to the front of the stairs. She was confident that if she paid careful attention to where she was going and didn't stray too far, she would not become lost. By the next day, she had explored three new corridors and discovered two new rooms. Her excursions through the house, however, came to a sudden halt that evening, when she walked into the kitchen to find Snape sitting at the dinner table.

His eyes turned to her when she entered, but he didn't otherwise acknowledge her.

"Good evening, sir."

Hermione took her seat across from him. It was the first time she felt awkward in his presence, and she attributed it to guilt over wandering around the house behind his back. Even Fritzee seemed uncharacteristically subdued as she made ready to serve their meal.

"How are your studies coming along?"

The question surprised Hermione; she thought of her daily reading as studying, but had not anticipated that he viewed it in the same light.

"Very well, sir, although I do have some questions."

Snape seemed amused by her statement.

"Perhaps after dinner I could go over the material with you and answer some of those questions."

It was a strange offer coming from Snape, but not one Hermione was about to refuse. Whatever else he was, the man was a brilliant wizard and not too reprehensible a teacher for a student who could apply himself while ignoring Snape's insults and constant pessimism. Hermione knew she could do both.

Her resolve wavered four days later during a particularly taxing study session. Her days had settled into an easy and surprisingly rewarding routine in which she spent most of the day reading. In the evenings, Snape would join her for dinner, during which time they would discuss her reading. Afterwards, they would both retire to the reading-room for a series of grueling lessons. After the first day, Snape had begun to assign Hermione specific readings, which to her surprise consisted mostly of material on defensive spells.

While Hermione struggled to master the nuances of spell-casting without the assistance of a wand, Snape's mood had grown gradually dourer, his verbal attacks increasingly vicious.

On the fourth night, he snatched a book out of her hand and slammed it against a chair. Hermione winced but refused to cower before him.

They were working on a particularly complicated spell used to erect a sustainable, invisible ward. Hermione suspected it was the same type of barrier she had heard the Death Eaters used during their attack on Hogwarts. She had done her best to duplicate the complex series of movements required to cast the spell while carefully enunciating the incantation, but without verifiable results, which were impossible to obtain without the use of a wand, it was difficult to discern if she was doing it right. A mirror would have been helpful, but Snape had not offered one, and she didn't want to ask for too much, unwilling to jeopardize their tenuous relationship.

"This is pointless!" Snape bellowed.

"Knowledge is never pointless," Hermione stated firmly.

"It is, Miss Granger, when it is not applied. As elegant as your movements are, they are still imprecise. I'm not certain that they would produce a barrier of sufficient strength."

He stopped short of saying what she was thinking that she needed a wand so that he could verify the strength of her barrier. At least he hadn't said that her efforts were so

pathetic that he was certain they wouldn't produce a barrier at all.

"Then show me again," she demanded.

He walked around her. His left arm snaked around her waist, while his right hand gripped her wrist firmly. His closeness struck her as inappropriate at first; she didn't recall him ever touching one of his students in this manner while at Hogwarts, not even to illustrate correct wand movements. She reminded herself that she was no longer a child or his student; she was a witch rented out to him by the Ministry to bed and impregnate. She found the reminder even more unsettling.

"Widen your stance. The recoil from the wand as it discharges would upset your balance with your feet so close together."

She complied with his simple instruction; it was something that any Second Year student would have considered, but it had been too many years since she had actually felt the recoil of a wand, and she was grateful when he didn't chastise her for the oversight.

He brought her hand first up straight ahead, back down and up again in a wide arc, above her head with a slight turn, and straight forward with a half-flick at the end. His hold tightened around her midriff, pulling her back against his chest, and a puff of warm air ghosted over her hair. She told herself it was nothing, just Snape instinctively bracing against the recoil that would have resulted if he had indeed been casting the spell, but Hermione could not ignore the flutter of pleasure that fled over her lower abdomen at the unexpected contact.

Snape's hands remained even after the moment had passed, supporting her wrist and holding her against him. Time itself seemed to stand still for Hermione as his hand slowly slipped from her waist and settled over her abdomen, his splayed fingers gentle against her skin through the coarse fabric of her robe.

It was a perverse longing, to want to be touched with tenderness and desire if not with love. To want to be touched by him.

"It's not my fertile period... It's against regulation," she whispered, not sure if she was talking to Snape or to herself.

He abruptly released her, and Hermione took a faltering step to steady herself. When she turned to look at him, Snape was already returning the books to their shelf.

"That will be enough for tonight; I suggest you get some rest."

Hermione nodded. "Good night, sir."

"Good night, Miss Granger," Snape said over his shoulder as he marched out of the room.

The following morning, Hermione learned from Fritzlee that Snape had left the house during the night and had not returned.

He was still gone after dinner that evening, and Hermione decided to explore more of the house, still determined to find out as much about Snape and his activities as she possibly could.

She traveled down a long corridor and came to an unfamiliar-looking room. Every room she had been in before beginning her exploration of the house had been stationary. She had quickly discovered that finding rooms that were not was a little more complicated than counting and retracing her steps. Snape had said that there were clues, and Hermione had set about finding those. No easy task since she had no idea what exactly she was looking for.

She was about to begin retracing her steps when she noticed a slight shift in the temperature of the room. It started with a cool, gentle breeze that rustled her hair. Soon the room shimmered and began to change, until a few seconds later she was standing in a completely different room without having taken a step. The room with the portraits she had seen on her first day at the house.

Taking notice of the new development while aware that the rooms shifted, she had never actually seen it happen. Hermione turned around and left the room the same way she had come. A few steps down a short corridor, she encountered a door unlike any other she had previously seen in the house. All the other doors were plain, ordinary wooden doors; this one was massive and decorated with an intricate carving of a forest densely populated by trees so tall that they seemed to disappear straight into the ceiling. A dozen wooden snakes slithered through the branches of the trees, hissing softly. Hermione knew she had to continue forward if she was to retrace her steps back to the main staircase, but each time she attempted to move, the hissing of the snakes increased in intensity.

Hermione stepped away from the door, concerned that she would activate any protective wards that Snape might have set up. She would just have to find another way back to her room.

A half-hour and several failed attempts later, Hermione was forced to admit that she was utterly lost. She tried not to let panic overtake her, even if her options were limited. She could continue to wander around the house and hope to find her bedroom before Snape returned and found her, or...

"Fritzlee!" she called out tentatively.

The elf appeared in front of Hermione with a loud pop. "Miss be calling? Miss be wanting..." The elf gasped and her eyes grew wide. "Miss not supposed to be here!"

"I know, Fritzlee. I'm lost. I was wondering if you could show me the way back to..."

Hermione followed Fritzlee's wide gaze to the massive wooden door at the end of the hall. If the door had been there a moment earlier, Hermione had failed to notice it, but she recognized the carving of the forest and the snakes. She thought back to what Snape had said: *Some rooms change location but not appearance, and there are clues to finding those*. The distinct door was likely a clue, which meant it led to a functional room, one that Snape would have need to find.

"Fritzlee, where does that door lead?" Hermione asked.

The elf grew agitated. "That be Master Snape's laboratory, miss! Miss not supposed to be here!" the elf practically screeched.

Hermione was elated even though she had no idea how to find the room again. At least she knew how to recognize it when she did, and that was progress.

"It's alright, Fritzlee, it's alright," she tried to assure the elf. "We can leave; just show me the way back to my room."

Before Hermione knew what was happening, the elf grabbed her hand and Apparated them both to Hermione's bedroom.

Still reeling from the sudden change in location, Hermione whirled around to face the elf. "You can perform Side-Along Apparition inside the house!" she exclaimed.

The elf nodded, visibly confused by Hermione's excitement.

Hermione had long been aware that house-elves could Disapparate and Apparate through magical wards. How else would they get around heavily warded places like Hogwarts Castle and the homes of rich pure-bloods? That they possessed the ability to perform Side-Along Apparation under the same circumstances was a revelation to her.

It took some fast talking on Hermione's part to convince Fritzlee that she wouldn't be doing anything wrong by finding Hermione every time she called and Apparating her to her bedroom, or by not telling Snape about her Miss' wanderings. Unless the wizard specifically asked, in which case she was to tell the truth.

It felt dishonest to use the elf in such a manner, and Hermione had never been one to believe that the end justified the means. She consoled herself with the idea that, if discovered, she would take full responsibility for her actions and do everything she could to protect the elf.

Snape did not return for two more days, and by then Hermione had made considerable progress in her mapping of the house, although the knowledge of how to reliably find her way to Snape's laboratory still eluded her.

Snape seemed in a particularly foul mood when he joined her in the kitchen for lunch. He dropped a package in front of her. "You have post," he ground out before taking his seat.

Hermione stared at the parcel with her name carefully written on it in blue ink.

"It's... I don't understand."

No one except Snape had used her name in seven years – only those who had known her before the end of the war even knew her name. Hand-witches were by law stripped of their identities, both literally and figuratively. Each was assigned a number to replace her name, and the title 'Of' followed by the last name of the wizard to which they were assigned was a practicality that made more sense when one added the word 'Property' in front of the 'Of.'

"It's a parcel, Miss Granger. Have you gone daft? Open it!" Snape ordered.

Hermione tore into the package, and her fingers slid over a smooth surface that felt like glass. When she had removed all the paper, Hermione was left holding a framed photograph of a little girl about a year old, dressed in pink, ruffled robes and with a pink bow perched on top of a head-full of brown curls. The toddler sat on a mauve velvet chair, bouncing and gurgling, her chubby arms reaching toward the camera.

Hermione couldn't speak. Her hands trembled and she clutched the photograph more firmly, afraid she would drop it. She glanced across the table at Snape, whose attention seemed riveted on the plate of food in front of him.

"Do you know what this is?" she finally managed to whisper.

He had to know; he had never even bothered to glance in her direction as she opened the package.

Snape's eyes shot up to meet hers. "It's a gift to you from Madam Crispus," he stated dryly.

Tears filled Hermione's eyes, and she didn't know how much longer she could sustain a rational conversation before she dissolved into sobs.

"Madam Crispus doesn't know my name, and even if she did, she wouldn't use it," Hermione stated, not sure why it mattered who had sent her a photograph of her daughter, only that it did.

"You would be surprised, Miss Granger, what people will do when provided with proper incentive."

Hermione fleetingly wondered with what kind of incentive Snape had provided Madam Crispus in order to convince her to send the photograph. Not money – the Crispuses had plenty of that – coercion was more likely.

"Why would you do something like this?" she asked Snape.

The wizard seemed genuinely taken aback by her question. "Lucius mentioned you had a child; I thought you would like to know she is well and see what she looks like. Was I wrong in this assumption?"

Hermione pressed the photograph to her chest and shook her head. No, he had not been wrong – he just hadn't realized how much it would hurt her to look at a photograph of a child she could never hold, and neither had she.

"Contrary to appearances, Miss Granger, I am not a monster," Snape muttered as he turned his attention back to his food.

Hermione had never thought he was. Evil yes, but not a monster.

"Yet you hold me here and force me to bear your child." Hermione wasn't sure what made her say it; perhaps grief had made her bold.

Snape's reaction was immediate and violent. He shoved away from the table and jumped to his feet, his chair screeching loudly against the floor. His hands hit the table with a resounding slap as he leaned forward, towering over her.

"Make no mistake, Miss Granger – I *do not* hold you here, the Ministry does! And I haven't forced you to do anything! I saved your life! I've done everything in my power to make your time here bearable, including enduring the presence of Lucius' infernal house-elf! You have no idea the lengths to which I have gone to ensure your safety. And yet you begrudge me the one thing that I have requested of you, the thing to which you agreed – a child."

Snape's hand snaked out and snatched the framed photograph out of Hermione's fingers. She tried to grab it, but he held it in front of her, just out of reach.

"Look at it! Look at it!" he yelled.

Through her tears, Hermione looked at the picture of the laughing, bouncing baby.

"Please don't," she begged, afraid that he would take it from her, or worse – destroy it.

"Look at her and answer me one thing – what did Oliver Crispus ever do for you?" he screamed.

Hermione lunged for the photograph, and this time Snape released it into her hands. She didn't wait for him to dismiss her – she ran blindly through the house until she reached her bedroom and slammed the door closed behind her. She flung herself on the bed and gave in to her urge to weep.

She wasn't sure for how long she cried; Fritzlee appeared shortly after sundown, carrying a tray of sandwiches and tea that Hermione never touched. Snape never called her to the reading-room for lessons, and the next morning when Hermione awoke, she still wore the same robes.

The Flame of Dissension

Chapter 8 of 16

In a dystopian AU where the Dark Lord triumphs and Severus Snape can claim any reward he wishes as one of the chosen 'Faithful,' all Severus longs for is a life of peaceful seclusion – and an heir. But it seems that he might have to

sacrifice one for the other when he petitions the Ministry for a hand-witch to produce a child and is presented with one of his former students.

Hermione realized she couldn't avoid Snape forever. Besides, two days of hiding in her bedroom like a simpering ninny was all she could take.

"Fritzee," she called out.

The elf appeared and took a bow. "Yes, miss?"

"Do you know where Snape is?" Hermione asked while she slipped her feet into her shoes and smoothed out her robes.

"Master Snape be in the kitchen taking his breakfast; miss be wanting Fritzee to bring up a tray?"

Hermione shook her head. "That will not be necessary, Fritzee. Please tell Snape that I need to speak to him and will be joining him shortly."

The elf disappeared with a deep bow and Hermione walked to the small table next to the bed where she kept the picture of her daughter. She traced the contours of the girl's face with an index finger, and a sad smile crept across her face. Despite the pain it had caused her, she was grateful for the small memento of her child, and she intended to let Snape know that.

She went over in her mind what she planned to say to him. She would be concise, fair but honest, kind but uncompromising, and hopefully he would come to understand her position. There was no point in delaying any longer; she straightened her shoulders and marched out of her room.

She found Snape sitting at the kitchen table, his nose buried in a newspaper.

"Good morning, sir."

Snape didn't look up as he answered her. "Good morning, Miss Granger. Fritzee has informed me that you wish to speak to me; to what do I owe the unexpected pleasure?"

Hermione sighed deeply the man couldn't make anything easy. She considered taking a seat but opted to stand.

"I want you to know that I don't hold you personally responsible for all the evils that have befallen the wizarding world as of late."

Snape's eyes grew wide in what Hermione knew was mock surprise.

"Well, that's a relief," Snape exclaimed as he set down the paper and looked up at her.

Good, I have his attention, Hermione thought.

"And that no kindness that you have shown me has gone unnoticed or unappreciated," Hermione continued. "I, however, can neither ignore nor condone your role in the events that led to my current circumstances."

"I don't expect you to, Miss Granger. I would actually find it rather astonishing if you did," Snape stated calmly.

Hermione nodded. "Then neither should you expect my unresisting compliance with the rules of the system whose beliefs you share."

Snape remained quiet for a moment, his eyes carefully scrutinizing her face. Hermione tried not to squirm under his intense gaze.

"And tell me, Miss Granger, since you seem to be in such a candid mood this morning: exactly what do you know about my beliefs?"

Hermione was relieved to notice he didn't sound angry.

"I know that you believe pure-bloods are superior to Muggleborns."

Snape tilted his head, and his eyes narrowed as he continued to study her. "And what makes you think I believe that?"

"With all due respect, sir, your association with *him* speaks for itself."

Snape seemed to consider her words for a moment. "There was a time, Miss Granger, when I believed all Muggles to be as innately deficient as my father, and Muggleborns too inherently weak and obtuse to be proper wizards. I have long since reconsidered."

"What made you change your mind?" she asked out of genuine curiosity.

Snape motioned for her to take a seat, and Hermione did, noticing for the first time that there was no food on the table, and that Fritzee was conspicuously absent from the kitchen.

"A Muggleborn witch much like yourself."

"Who was she?" Hermione asked before she could stop herself; Snape seemed unfazed by the question.

"A friend," he answered simply.

Hermione found Snape's confession intriguing and had to remind herself that the purpose of their conversation was to come to a mutual understanding of their respective positions, not to dig up titillating tidbits of Snape's past.

She took a deep breath to steel herself. "Very well, then. What about torture, slavery and murder?"

To her surprise, Snape remained impassive.

"They are effective paths to power, but that doesn't make them right, or even acceptable."

Hermione frowned. Her carefully designed conversation with Snape was going nothing as planned.

"Is that really what you believe?" she asked hopefully.

"It's what I've believed for a long time."

Hermione grappled for a reason why Snape would be lying to her and came up empty-handed.

"Then I don't understand how you can participate in things you think are wrong."

"You wouldn't, Miss Granger; you're too noble. Now if you'll excuse me, I have pressing matters to attend to this morning. May I assume that you're interested in continuing your lessons?" Snape said, rising from his chair.

Hermione nodded.

"Then I will see you this evening."

She wanted to continue their discussion, wanted him to elaborate about what he thought she wouldn't understand, but Snape was already on his way out the door.

Hermione noticed the newspaper he had been reading still open on the table. She picked it up and glanced at a picture of two men and a woman; all three looked bloody and battered as they stared vacantly into the camera. The headline read: **Three Insurgents Captured, Charged With Treason!**

Hermione chewed on her bottom lip while she continued to read:

Ministry officials announced this morning the capture of three individuals who were attempting to gain access into the main building of the Harbor Educational Center late last night.

It is believed that the attempted break-in was to be the latest in a series of senseless burglaries targeting government buildings and the homes of government officials during the last few weeks.

Two of the individuals remain to be identified, but the third (who is believed to be their leader) was discovered to be no other than Rufus Ainsworth of Little Norton, a notorious agitator who was slated for banishment when he mysteriously disappeared from Ministry custody three months ago, at the time raising speculation about the possibility of a traitor inside the Ministry.

Ainsworth vanished from his cell deep inside the Ministry building. The Dark Lord's first-lieutenant, Faithful Severus Snape, confirmed that the prisoner had indeed been safely locked in his cell an hour prior to the discovery of his disappearance when the lieutenant visited him for questioning. Two guards were interrogated and later dismissed from their posts as a result of the incident.

The Department of Law Enforcement is looking into the possibility that these three may also be linked to the kidnapping of a pregnant hand-witch from the home of a pure-blood family earlier this week.

Hermione stared wide-eyed at the photograph of the three suspects, excitement building inside her this was the first she had heard about any real action against the government since the end of the war! Two of the culprits appeared to be in their teens too young to have participated in the Second War. The other one however, whom she assumed to be Rufus Ainsworth, seemed to be about her age and looked vaguely familiar, although she couldn't readily place him. She had probably just seen his photograph before in an old newspaper.

She remembered that rumors of Ainsworth's escape had started a flurry of speculation at the Center, each theory more bizarre than the last. The young man had been arrested for openly speaking against government practices *maligning our noble Lord* the matrons at the Center had called it.

She wondered what they had been hoping to take as far as she knew, there was nothing in the main building of the Center except records of the Muggleborns and hand-witches housed there. Hermione tried not to let her imagination run wild, but it was hard to reign in her thoughts when she considered the possibilities. She had been previously unaware of Snape's visit to Ainsworth just before he vanished she couldn't help but wonder if Snape was somehow connected to the man's escape. She added the possibility to the list of things she was determined to find out about Snape.

Hermione carefully ripped the article from the page and placed it in her pocket. She crumpled the rest of the newspaper and threw it in the trash.

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Snape had not assigned her any reading, and Fritzlee confirmed that he had left the house shortly after speaking with her. Hermione decided against breakfast; she gulped down a cup of tea instead and set out to explore the house with a renewed sense of purpose. She glanced at the wall-clock in the parlor; it read five minutes to nine. She had to hurry or it would be hours, maybe days before she would get another chance to test a theory she had been working on the prior week before Snape had unexpectedly returned.

Hermione hurried to the stairs and quickly bound up the steps. She turned right at the top and headed down a long corridor. She turned twice more, counting her steps and ignoring the unfamiliar rooms. When she was certain she had arrived at the right spot, she stopped. All she had left to do was wait. A minute later the room began to change until she was once again standing in the room with the portraits.

Her lips spread into a self-satisfied smile she was now convinced that this particular room traveled in a pattern, appearing twice a day in the same spot: at nine in the morning and six in the evening. She also suspected that the location pattern of the room was somehow connected to the location of the laboratory, since two of the three times she had found the door to the laboratory, she had been standing in this room immediately prior. She glanced around; there wasn't much in the room except for a few rickety chairs, a couple of lamps and the paintings on the wall.

As she studied the mostly empty portraits, she noticed something peculiar about the portrait of a middle aged woman who sat on a rocking chair, a ball of knitting yarn on her lap. Directly behind the woman was a wall-clock similar to the one in the parlor, but with only one hand. The single hand on the clock was pointing toward the number three, not the nine as it should have. She was almost certain that the morning before Snape's return, the hand had been pointing to the number nine, the actual time, otherwise she would have noticed the discrepancy then. It was odd that if the time of day were the same, this particular clock would read a different time.

"Excuse me. Excuse me," she called out to the woman in the portrait, who shot her an annoyed glare. "I was wondering if the clock right behind you is supposed to mark the correct time."

"What is it to you?" the sour-looking woman snapped.

Hermione managed a weak smile. "Nothing, I was just wondering. Sorry to have bothered you."

She looked to her right, in the direction the hand on the clock pointed, and saw nothing but a painting of a small country cottage next to a lake. She wondered during her first day in the house, Hermione had initially made the mistake of assuming that all the walls in the reading-room were solid, and that there was only one way out of the room.

She slowly walked up to the painting of the cottage and placed her hand against it, elated when it passed straight through the landscape scene. Hermione walked through the wall and into a familiar short hallway not twelve steps ahead of her was the door to Snape's laboratory. It would take a few more tries to verify that it was not a coincidence, but she felt confident that she had found another clue, and a reliable route to Snape's lab. After that, she would have to figure out a way to get inside a defeating thought.

~*~

Snape didn't join her for dinner that evening, but he met her in the reading-room afterwards. He marched up to her and thrust a copy of the evening edition of the *Daily Prophet* into her hands.

"If you wanted to read the newspaper, all you had to do was inform me there was no need to mutilate my copy," he announced.

"Sorry, sir," Hermione mumbled sheepishly as she accepted the folded newspaper.

Snape turned on his heel and moved to stand a few feet away from her, arms crossed over his chest. "Let me see you cast the barrier spell."

Hermione immediately dropped the newspaper into a chair, widened her stance and pointed her arm straight ahead. When she had concluded the series of movements to cast the barrier spell, precisely as he had demonstrated in the last lesson, Snape nodded his approval.

"Now show me the *Repello Circuitum* spell."

Repello Circuitum was the first spell they had worked on; it was simple in comparison to the barrier spell, but highly useful during a confrontation with multiple attackers, according to Snape. Unlike most spells that traveled in a single direction, this particular repelling spell spread out from its source in a circular trajectory, driving back attackers in all directions simultaneously. Its effects were momentary and harmless, but enough to give the caster an advantage when surrounded. Hermione mimicked the motions of the spell with no problem.

"Good." Snape withdrew his wand from the sleeve of his robe. "Tonight we will work on a Key Charm."

"Portkeys, you mean?" Hermione asked.

Creating Port Keys was very advanced magic; she wouldn't mind learning how it was done. She was almost disappointed when she heard Snape's initial answer.

"Not Portkeys, Key Charms. Each barrier carries a signature particular to the caster, and there's an accompanying spell to create a key that corresponds with that particular signature. I'll show you."

Snape raised his wand, and Hermione watched attentively as he cast the barrier spell.

"Walk in the direction of the barrier," he told her.

Hermione did as instructed and winced when her nose collided with a solid, invisible wall.

Snape walked to the nearest bookshelf and retrieved a book. Hermione frowned when she looked over his shoulder and noticed that the book was a compendium of recipes for household cleaners.

"The content of the book is irrelevant in this case, Miss Granger," Snape informed her.

He performed a series of quick, jerky movements over the book with his wand, after which he handed it to her. "Now walk toward the barrier."

Hermione slowly approached the spot where she had previously encountered the barrier, expecting her progress to be stopped at any moment; instead, she walked to the end of the room and back without any interference.

She shot Snape an inquisitive glance.

Snape took another book from the shelf and flung it in the direction of the barrier. The book traveled only a few feet before it bounced back and zoomed past Hermione's shoulder to land on the floor behind her.

"I have charmed the book you're holding to act as a key, allowing you passage through the barrier while it continues to block the progress of anyone without a key who tries to follow you. If you manage to create a strong enough barrier, it will even deflect hexes lunged at you from the other side," Snape explained.

Hermione nodded, conveniently ignoring the fact that odds were slim she would ever get to cast a barrier of any strength.

"Theoretically, any inanimate object can be turned into a key," Snape continued, "but the charm seems to act more effectively on substances that have a liquid consistency in their natural state in this case, the ink on the pages of the book."

Or the magical ink of the tattoo on the Death Eaters' arms Hermione thought.

After clearing the barrier from the room and the charm from the book, Snape set about showing Hermione how to cast a proper Key Charm.

The charm lacked all the flourish and style of the other two spells, and Hermione soon grew bored repeating the same mechanical motions without any results. She glanced at Snape out of the corner of her eye; the wizard stood next to her, looking as bored and discontent as she felt maybe it was a good time to engage him in conversation.

"Sir, may I ask a question?"

"Certainly."

"Those three people in the newspaper, the ones charged with treason, what's going to happen to them?"

Snape tensed almost imperceptibly.

"They will most likely be tortured before they are put to death," he answered coldly.

"Do you know any of them?"

"I try to avoid commingling with traitors, Miss Granger."

Hermione completed one final swipe of her imaginary wand and began to repeat the motions of the charm. She kept her eyes averted from Snape, pretending to concentrate on the movements of her hand.

"The papers said you talked to one of them," she mentioned in what she hoped was a casual tone deceit had never been Hermione's strong suit.

"I was sent to interrogate Mr. Ainsworth shortly before his disappearance. You just moved your hand in the wrong direction."

"Sorry," Hermione said, correcting the movement. "And you had never met him before?" she asked.

Snape hesitated for so long that Hermione stopped what she was doing and turned to look at him.

"He is one of my former students. He attended Hogwarts two years ahead of you, but I doubt you ever associated with him he was in Slytherin House."

Hermione often had trouble controlling her expressions, so she turned her head quickly and continued working on her hand movements, hoping that Snape had not guessed her thoughts. The fact that Snape knew the young man made it more likely that he had been involved in his escape.

"Is it hard to interrogate people you know, watch them be sentenced to death?" she asked softly.

Snape's hand shot out and grabbed hers in mid-motion.

"What you're doing is very dangerous, Miss Granger."

It served no purpose to pretend she didn't know what he was talking about he was on to her.

"I just want to know," she whispered, aware of the firm pressure of his hand on hers.

"There are many things about me that you're safer not knowing, Miss Granger."

She didn't ask any more questions, and their session ended soon after. But Hermione was still irritated that night when she climbed into bed, convinced that it was precisely the things she didn't know about him that could harm her the most.

The Joys of Motherhood

Chapter 9 of 16

In a dystopian AU where the Dark Lord triumphs and Severus Snape can claim any reward he wishes as one of the chosen 'Faithful,' all Severus longs for is a life of peaceful seclusion – and an heir. But it seems that he might have to sacrifice one for the other when he petitions the Ministry for a hand-witch to produce a child and is presented with one of his former students.

Hermione had fervently hoped not to be pregnant. She had convinced herself that the odds were slim given that Snape had only visited her bed twice since her arrival in his home. Even when she had awoken the previous week feeling ill and with still no sign of her menses, she had attributed the symptoms to stress and the rich foods that the house-elf delighted in serving at dinner time. But as she leaned over the toilet bowl for the third time that morning, she could no longer ignore her condition.

She stood up slowly and waited for a wave of dizziness to pass before proceeding to the armoire to retrieve her robes. She wasn't certain how much longer she could keep her pregnancy hidden from Snape or if there was any reason to, save the news would likely make the wizard more vigilant of her activities. Any day, a Ministry mediwitch would show up for Hermione's monthly exam, and then her secret would be discovered.

"Fritzee," Hermione called out.

The elf appeared, excitedly jumping from one foot to the other. "Miss be wanting her breakfast now?" she asked.

Her stomach rebelled against the suggestion, but Hermione tried to impart some cheer into her voice. "Not right now, Fritzee; I'm not very hungry. Is Snape home today?"

The house-elf shook her head. "Master Snape not be home for two whole days."

"Good," Hermione murmured, slipping on her robes.

After dismissing the elf, Hermione made her way to the portraits-room. The hand of the clock on the painting pointed to the number six. If Hermione were to remove the portrait from the wall and lay it flat on the floor, like a compass, the needle would be pointing in the direction from which she had come. Hermione ignored the old woman who sat on the rocking chair scowling at her and walked in the direction the needle indicated.

There waiting for her, like every other time, was the door to Snape's laboratory. Hermione had no idea how to open it, and the elf had steadfastly refused to Apparate Hermione inside every time she had asked. Hermione knew that this time she had to at least try to figure out a way to get inside.

She took a hesitant step closer, and several of the snakes on the door began to hiss softly. Another step and the others joined in. Hermione continued to walk until she was standing directly in front of the door, closer than she had ever been before the hissing continued, but it didn't change in volume or pitch. Hermione waited, but she could detect no change on the door or any of her surroundings. Perhaps her thinking was too complicated. Maybe Snape's wards were something more subtle and benign, like a door that simply would not budge without the appropriate password except that the snakes had not asked her for a password.

"Do I need a password?" she asked the snakes.

The hissing didn't change, and the snakes even seemed unaware of her presence as they slowly slithered through the tree branches.

Hermione reached a trembling hand toward the doorknob, expecting at any moment to be attacked by the snakes or dismembered by a flash of light. Her fingers curled around the cool, metal knob, and nothing happened. She applied a little pressure, and the knob turned slightly; she kept turning it slowly until she finally heard a soft click, and the door gave. She carefully pushed the door open with her foot the one limb she felt she could afford to lose until the door was ajar. As Hermione stepped into the room, all she could think was that it had been too easy.

The room was unremarkable in every aspect except its dimensions. There were three cauldrons in the room all cold but the laboratory could have easily accommodated a double Potions class. The ceiling was two stories high, and Hermione was surprised to discover that the entrance door continued past the second floor's ceiling on to another identical door directly above a stone ledge and a narrow flight of stairs. There had to be a third floor to the house, one of which she had been previously unaware, Hermione concluded. Hermione also noticed a massive brick fireplace, its ashes white and cold.

Everything looked like one would expect a well-stocked Potions laboratory to look. Hermione wasn't sure what she had expected to find: body parts dangling from the ceiling, a giant sign that read *Dark Arts Be Here?* Or maybe evidence that Snape was not the traitor they all thought. She strolled slowly around the room, still cautious but more relaxed. She studied the contents of the many jars that filled the shelves, read the spines of the books neatly stacked on a work bench all practical potions' books, some with titles of which Hermione had never even heard. She wondered if Snape would notice if she took one to her room to read and quickly decided that he would.

She was about to leave the room, disappointed but a tad relieved, when a single vial standing on a low shelf caught her eye. It was a small, round bottle with a black stopper, its bright red surface almost iridescent. The bottle was familiar, but the contents couldn't be what Hermione thought. She carefully removed the stopper, and the distinct smell of Bloodroot assailed her nostrils. She tipped the bottle slightly and frowned at the drop of clear, viscous fluid that splashed on the floor. Hermione could feel her heartbeat accelerate until it was pounding against her ribcage.

She remembered well the first time she had encountered this particular potion. It had been the summer before her fifth year at Hogwarts, and she had traveled to Diagon Alley with her parents to purchase her school supplies. She had wandered on her own until she found a small, out-of-the-way Apothecary. An old woman that Hermione had been convinced at the time was at least part Hag sat behind the front counter, and judging by the shady appearance of the few clients in the store, the place was most likely just this side of legal, but Hermione had been fascinated by the large array of never before seen potions. One in particular had caught her attention a small, red,

ornate vial just like the one she held in her hand.

Hermione had barely had a chance to read the label *Emmenagogue Potion* when the woman rushed from behind the counter and snatched the vial out of her hand. The Hag had unceremoniously jostled Hermione out of the store while muttering the entire while about '*snot-nosed girls meddling in women's business*' Hermione had been forced to wait until a month after the start of the school year, when she had finally managed to sneak into the Forbidden Section of the library without either Harry or Ron in tow, to find out the prescribed use of the potion.

The bottle in Snape's lab was unlabeled, but Hermione was certain it was the same potion. Hermione wondered why Snape would have something as risky as a potion used to induce abortion in his laboratory. She discovered several other identical bottles, all stacked inside a small wooden box which also contained several familiar blue vials of a common contraceptive.

There was no reasonable explanation for Snape to be in possession of these potions. The potions had been illegal ever since Voldemort had taken control of the wizarding world the manufacture of a single vial was punishable by death, and this batch was clearly intended for distribution. Hermione wasn't sure what her discovery could mean. Was Snape trafficking in illegal potions, and if so, why? Certainly not because he needed the money. Whatever his motives, Snape was doing something something illegal and dangerous and she held the proof in her hand. She wasn't supposed to be snooping in his laboratory, but he wasn't supposed to be brewing these potions either they were both illegal, so neither could tell on the other. There was a strange feeling of delight in the knowledge.

There was another box on the shelf, and Hermione reached towards it with trembling fingers, already anticipating what she would find inside. The contents of this box were less interesting an assortment of common and legal potions used to treat a variety of medical ailments except for the ten clearly marked bottles of Wolfsbane. Hermione quickly did the calculation in her head it was exactly five days before the full moon.

A soft noise startled her, and Hermione whirled around; her robes brushed against a stirring rod that sat on one of the shelves and sent it crashing to the floor with a loud clatter. The fireplace was rattling, and a sprinkle of green, shimmering soot fell from inside the chimney. Hermione swore softly under her breath the fireplace was connected to the Floo! It explained why Fritzlee heard voices coming from the laboratory but had never seen anyone come or go from the house!

With no more time to think, Hermione quickly shoved the red vial into the pocket of her robes and bent down to retrieve the fallen rod, the vial almost tumbling out of her pocket in the haste. She managed to secure the vial, return the rod to the shelf, and run out of the room, closing the door behind her just as the fireplace began to fill with green smoke.

"Fritzlee!" she whispered urgently just outside the door.

The elf appeared immediately, large, questioning eyes staring up at her.

"Fritzlee, Snape is here! Take me to my room!"

Fritzlee tilted her head. "Master Snape not be home, miss."

"Fritzlee, my room now!"

Fritzlee took Hermione's arm and whisked her away to the safety of Hermione's bedroom.

Hermione felt her stomach protest the fast traveling, and she sat on the edge of her bed. Fritzlee was studying her with questioning eyes.

"What's the matter?" Hermione asked her.

"Fritzlee not know why miss be so upset; Master Snape not be home."

"He is now. There's a fireplace connected to the Floo in the laboratory; he was coming back when I ran out."

Fritzlee shook her head adamantly. "Fritzlee would know if Master Snape be home Master Snape not be home," the elf insisted.

Hermione conceded that it was possible Snape had returned briefly and left again the same way he came. The only other possibility was that someone else had entered the laboratory using the fireplace, and Hermione couldn't venture a guess as to whom.

"That will be all, Fritzlee," she said to the elf.

As soon as the elf vanished, Hermione searched her pockets. She retrieved the red vial and reached inside again. Panic seized her. She searched the pockets frantically until she was convinced they were empty the bit of parchment with the word *Hope* written on it, the one that Dumbledore had given her, was gone!

~*~

Hermione's legs trembled as she once again stood in front of the door to Snape's laboratory. She was certain she had put the note in her pocket that morning, like she did everyday, and had searched everywhere else for it. The only conclusion left was that she had dropped it while in the lab, most likely when she was shoving the vial of potion into her pocket.

She listened carefully for any noises that would alert her to someone else's presence. All was silent except for the low hissing of the snakes, but when she tried to approach the door something stopped her. She tried again and winced as she walked into an invisible barrier. The snakes' hissing increased in intensity the more Hermione pushed against the barrier. It didn't make sense; the barrier had not been there that morning. But it was there now, barring access to the door. Her agitation grew, and after several minutes, she slammed her fists against the barrier in frustration.

The blast that resulted sent Hermione careening through the air. She landed on her back in the middle of the portraits-room.

"What did you do that for?" a cackling voice exclaimed.

Hermione looked in the direction of the voice, her vision blurred. The old woman in the rocking chair was looking down at her, her small, dark eyes wide with alarm.

"I need to get back into that room," Hermione explained as she climbed to her feet, one arm cradling her sore ribs.

"You can't!" the portrait answered. "Not unless he allows you."

"But you don't understand, I *have* to!"

Hermione felt tired, sick and scared. Tears began to well in her eyes as she looked imploringly at the woman on the portrait. Maybe she could tell her how.

As she studied the woman in the portrait, Hermione noticed for the first time the woman's dark eyes, angular features and beaked nose.

"Who are you?" Hermione asked softly.

The woman squared her shoulders, and her eyes narrowed into an all-too-familiar glare.

"My name is Eileen Prince."

Hermione recognized her then, even though the woman's hair was streaked with gray and her face lined with deep furrows. Hermione threw caution to the wind; if she couldn't get back into the room and retrieve the piece of parchment before Snape found it, then it wouldn't matter what his mother's portrait told him.

"I was in there before, this morning. I just need to go back in for a moment."

Eileen shrugged and relaxed into her rocking chair. "I already told you, you can't unless he lets you. You can keep trying, but all you'll succeed in doing is break your stupid little neck."

A gentle breeze swept into the room and the portrait began to fade.

"No, wait!" Hermione was left standing in a broom-closet, surrounded by empty buckets and tattered mops.

~*~

Snape exploded into her bedroom two days later. Hermione was sitting on the bed, clipping a news article from the latest issue of the *Daily Prophet*, when the door slammed open, and she looked up to see Snape standing just inside the doorway, his face a mask of rage.

"How dare you?" he hissed through gritted teeth.

Hermione instinctively jumped to her feet and assumed a defensive stance. "I was curious. I thought..."

Snape was advancing threateningly towards her, and Hermione found herself backed against a wall. She raised her hands in a placating gesture. "Please listen. I was just trying to find out..."

Snape wasn't listening. He lunged at her, and Hermione jumped on the bed, scrambling to get away from him as he grabbed her by the ankles and dragged her towards him. He flung Hermione onto her back, pinning her legs against the side of the bed with his weight and holding both her wrists against her chest with one hand. His face hovered above hers, frozen in an almost feral expression, and Hermione smelled alcohol on his breath. For the first time since her arrival at Snape's house, Hermione was truly afraid of what he was going to do to her.

"I can explain," she tried again.

Snape reached into his pocket with his free hand for what Hermione assumed was his wand. Instead, he pressed something small between her fingers it was the bit of parchment with the word *Hope* written on in, now crumpled into a small ball.

"Explain, Miss Granger, why you would betray my trust? Lie to me? Use one of my own potions against me? That would be a feat worthy of my praise," Snape said softly.

Hermione couldn't understand what he was saying; Snape had never truly trusted her, had he? And she had never actually lied to him

"What... what potion?" she asked.

Snape squeezed her wrists until Hermione thought they would snap.

"Don't mock me, Miss Granger. I know what you took from my laboratory."

Understanding dawned on Hermione Snape wasn't angry because she had been in his laboratory (although that was undoubtedly a part of it), but because he thought she had taken the abortive potion for her own use. Hermione shook her head violently.

"I didn't. I didn't take it to use it," she hastily explained.

Snape's eyes narrowed suspiciously, but he lessened the pressure on her wrists. "Where is it?" he asked softly.

Hermione motioned with her head toward the armoire. "In there. I swear I didn't use any of it."

"Then why did you take it?" he asked, seemingly still not convinced.

"I wanted proof," Hermione answered honestly.

"Proof of what?" he ground out.

"Proof that you were doing something illegal, something against Voldemort."

"You were going to turn me in to the Ministry?" Snape asked with a tone of incredulity.

"No! I was only going to threaten to do it, if I had to, if you... if you were going to send me away," Hermione offered feebly.

Snape released her wrists and straightened. "Go get it," he ordered, pointing at the armoire.

Hermione placed the note inside her pocket and walked around the bed, massaging the circulation back into her hands. "Prick," she mumbled under her breath.

"Language, Miss Granger," Snape warned.

"Sorry, sir," Hermione apologized as she handed him the vial.

Snape held the vial up to the light and tilted it from side to side as he examined it. "The seal is broken," he commented.

"I had to make sure what it was."

Snape nodded and placed the vial in his pocket. "Now you will explain to me how you found your way to my laboratory."

Hermione elaborated on how she had used his time away from home to map most of the house by counting her steps, the way he had taught her, and how she had discovered clues along the way.

Snape raised an eyebrow when she had finished. "Very cunning and impressive. And you didn't become lost, not even once?"

Hermione didn't want to lie, but neither did she want to give away Fritzlee's involvement.

"A few times, but I managed to find my way back," she said.

"I see; with help from the elf, you forgot to add."

Hermione's eyes grew wide. "I take full responsibility for that. I convinced her to do it and ordered her not to tell you. Please don't punish her; she didn't have a choice!" Hermione's tone became frantic she would never forgive herself if Snape hurt the elf because of her.

"I have already dealt with the elf, Miss Granger."

"What did you do to her?" Hermione asked in a tremulous voice.

"I gouged out her eyes, cut out her tongue and strung her by her little toes," Snape stated matter-of-factly.

Hermione's horror must have shown on her face.

Snape rolled his eyes in an exasperated gesture. "I did not hurt the creature. It was an oversight on my part not to make it clear to the elf that she was not to obey any orders from you that were contrary to my wishes, and that she was supposed to keep me informed of all your activities. I have now remedied that situation," Snape stated.

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you for not hurting her."

"Like you pointed out, the elf had no choice but to follow your orders. You, on the other hand, Miss Granger, have proven to be unworthy of my trust, disobedient and deceitful. Your willful behavior cannot go ignored. From now on you will be confined to this room, even for your meals. If you need anything, you may call on the elf, but I should warn you, she will report to me any request you make, however trivial it may seem."

Hermione's eyes grew wide. "But you can't!" she blurted out.

Snape tilted his head and his eyes narrowed. "I can't? Enlighten me, Miss Granger, because I can't think of a single reason why not."

"It's hypocrisy! What you're doing in your laboratory is illegal, more so than anything I have done. It's not fair that I should be punished for discovering your treachery," Hermione explained as calmly as she could. The truth was she was panicking she feared she would go mad if she had to spend the next nine months confined within the four walls of her Spartan bedroom.

"Life is not fair, Miss Granger. If it were, neither one of us would be in this position."

Hermione didn't bother trying to open the door after Snape left the room she knew that it would be locked and warded. She flopped down on the bed and stared at the ceiling, pondering Snape's cryptic parting words.

The Snake Pit

Chapter 10 of 16

In a dystopian AU where the Dark Lord triumphs and Severus Snape can claim any reward he wishes as one of the chosen 'Faithful,' all Severus longs for is a life of peaceful seclusion – and an heir. But it seems that he might have to sacrifice one for the other when he petitions the Ministry for a hand-witch to produce a child and is presented with one of his former students.

Two days after being confined to her bedroom, Hermione was awakened out of a sound sleep by an insistent hand on her shoulder.

"Miss, wake up, miss, wake up!"

"Wha- What is it?" asked Hermione, rubbing the remnants of sleep out of her eyes.

Hermione noticed Snape's foreboding figure standing behind the elf.

"What's going on?" Hermione asked with a little more trepidation this time.

"We've been summoned to appear before the Dark Lord," Snape announced somberly.

She was dreaming; it was the only explanation Hermione's sleep addled brain could find. She glanced toward the window.

"But it's the middle of the night," she protested.

"Indeed. It is."

She shoved the covers aside and swung her legs over the side of the bed. "Why would Voldemort want to see me?"

"He doesn't," Severus explained. "Not you specifically, anyway. It's a hand-witch's trial."

Hermione paled, and a shiver that had nothing to do with the coldness of the room ran up her spine. She had never attended one but had heard the whispered rumors that circulated around the Center.

"Only hand-witches at the center are required to attend the trials, not the ones placed in homes." Hermione was certain of this; it was how she had managed to avoid having to attend one of them she had never been at the Center when one took place.

"Things are changing, Miss Granger, not for the better. And this is not an invitation to tea that you can accept or decline at your whim. All hand-witches are required to attend as well as each of the Faithful."

Hermione noticed that Snape wore his official black and silver robes. She stood from the bed and reached for her robes on the trunk at the foot of her bed.

"You will wear these," Severus indicated, taking a folded piece of red cloth from the elf and handing it to her.

Hermione took the garment and shook the folds out of it. She stared wide-eyed at the long, flowing scarlet robes the uniform of a pregnant hand-witch.

"How? How did you know?" she asked.

"Know what, Miss Granger?" Snape ground out, obviously growing impatient with her.

Hermione glanced down at the elf as if searching for reassurance, but the elf just stared back at her with wide, curious eyes.

"That I'm... That I'm pregnant," she finally said.

Snape looked stunned for a moment, an expression so uncommon that it didn't suit his face. Just as swiftly his features relaxed into their usual unreadable mask.

"I didn't know. Pregnant hand-witches are not expected to participate in the trial, only to observe. That's why I wanted you to wear the robes," Snape explained. "You must get dressed now; we'll discuss this later," he added in a clipped tone.

Hermione nodded.

"Who is she?" Hermione asked when they reached the fireplace in the main parlor.

"I don't know her name. She is Macnair's hand-witch," Snape responded coldly.

"Roselyn," whispered Hermione. "Her name is Roselyn."

Hermione was startled when Snape suddenly grabbed her forearms and turned her to look at him.

"Miss Granger, have you ever attended a hand-witch's trial?" he asked.

Hermione shook her head. "I've heard about them," she said.

Snape seemed concerned, and there was an undercurrent of urgency in his voice. "Miss Granger, this is very important. Whatever happens, whatever you see, you must not react don't move, don't scream, don't make a sound. Whatever else you do, don't call attention to yourself. Do you understand?"

Hermione nodded, not sure what she was agreeing to, but concerned by the firmness of his tone.

Snape tossed a handful of Floo powder into the fireplace. "Ministry of Magic," he said in a clear, steady voice.

They stepped into the fireplace side-by-side, and Hermione closed her eyes as the world began to whirl around her. Seconds later, they stepped out into the Main Hall of the Ministry of Magic.

The hall was mostly deserted except for a few wizards in black, hooded robes who seemed to be on patrol. They all came to attention and bowed stiffly when they saw Snape approach.

"Good evening, sir. The others are waiting for you in the pit. If you'll follow me..." said one of the men.

"I know the way," Snape spat as he brushed past him heading for the lifts, Hermione close on his heels, nearly running in an effort to keep up with his long strides.

"Of course, sir," the robed figure responded with another deep bow.

They took the lift to the lowest level of the Ministry building. When the doors opened, Hermione was greeted by the light of dozens of torches and the buzz of a hundred excited voices. They followed a long corridor that opened into a large, circular room. At the front of the room, high on a platform, was a large, empty throne, and on each side six ornate, high-backed chairs where the Faithful sat all the chairs were occupied except for one.

Hermione's eyes traveled over the tiers of benches crammed with wizards and witches almost to the ceiling and finally settled on the circular, empty clearing in the center of the room. She felt Snape's hand on her shoulder, and she glanced up at him. He pointed to several rows of benches off to the side where about twenty women dressed in red robes sat.

"Where are you going to be?" she whispered, already knowing the answer but needing the reassurance.

"I'll be in the front. You go take a seat."

His long, thin fingers squeezed her shoulder for an instant. "Remember what I said," he whispered, and his hand was gone so swiftly that Hermione wondered if she hadn't imagined the whole thing.

Hermione made her way toward the other red-clad women and sank into the nearest seat.

"Hello," the girl sitting to her right said.

Hermione nodded and straightened herself, her eyes traveling nervously to the front of the room where Snape was just taking his seat next to Malfoy.

"I know who you are," the same girl whispered close to Hermione's ear.

Hermione turned to look at her. Her face looked familiar, but Hermione couldn't place her.

"Sorry, I don't..."

"You were *his* friend, at school."

Recognition dawned on Hermione. "You were a couple of years behind us at Hogwarts. Hufflepuff, right?" she asked.

The girl nodded. "How far along are you?"

"What?" Hermione looked down at her flat belly that was concealed by the voluminous robes. "Oh. About four weeks, I think. And you?" Hermione asked out of deeply ingrained politeness.

"Five months. It's a boy, my first." The girl smiled widely, and Hermione winced.

"You do know you don't get to keep him, right?" she asked.

"Oh, I know. He'll be the Malfoys' child. But Lucius says I can stay at the Manor after he's born for as long as I want." The girl shifted her arm, and Hermione noticed an elaborate silver and opal bracelet on the girl's wrist no doubt a gift from 'Lucius.'

Hermione felt pity for the naive girl; she wasn't the first girl Hermione had met who had been swept away by the charms of a pure-blood wizard only to be tossed back to the Center when she had overstayed her usefulness in a home. But she didn't have the heart to shatter the girl's illusion there would be enough time for disappointment and tears later on, Hermione knew.

A hush fell over the crowd, and everyone rose to their feet as a bald, pale figure dressed in dark-green robes made its way to the throne. Hermione recognized Voldemort, and she could have sworn that the temperature dropped a few degrees in the room. She caught sight of a short, squat figure wearing a pink cardigan over her robes. Umbridge marched into the open area followed by about two-dozen hand-witches, all dressed in mustard-yellow robes. A shrill scream pierced the silence as another girl

Hermione recognized as Roselyn was dragged to the center of the pit by two burly Death Eaters.

The two wizards tossed the girl in the middle of the pit and turned to leave. The girl scrambled on her hands and knees trying to follow, but her path was blocked by the other hand-witches.

All eyes turned to the front of the room where Voldemort stood in front of his throne. A wide smile split his flat face, baring long, yellow teeth.

"Welcome, my fellow witches and wizards. We gather here tonight to bring justice to one of our brothers who has suffered a most grievous loss at the hands of this witch."

Voldemort extended one long, gnarled hand toward the pit, where the girl now huddled at the feet of the other hand-witches. Hisses, along with shouts of "whore" and "murderer," broke out from the crowd. Voldemort raised his hand, and silence was restored.

"Let us now hear from our aggrieved brother."

Macnair rose from his chair and went to stand next to Voldemort.

"Is this the witch that has wronged you?" Voldemort asked, pointing once more to the girl in the pit.

"Yes, My Lord," Macnair responded.

"And you are certain that she once carried your child?"

"Yes, My Lord. A Ministry appointed nurse confirmed it," Macnair said.

"And you witnessed her crime with your own eyes?"

"No, My Lord. But I did witness the aftermath and found the evidence hidden in her quarters." Macnair took something out his pocket and handed it to Voldemort.

Hermione craned her neck to see what it was but recoiled into her chair as Voldemort raised his hand for all to see, and the light of the torches reflected off a red, glass bottle identical to the one she had taken from Snape's lab.

"Behold, brothers and sisters. An empty vial of Emmenagogue Potion a substance that is forbidden in our world, and the use, possession, or distribution of which carries the penalty of death at the Wall of Traitors."

"Death, death!" the crowd chanted.

Voldemort raised his other hand in a pacifying gesture, and the crowd was once again silent.

"I understand your sentiment, my brothers and sisters, and I can't deny that I empathize. But you all know that I strive to be a merciful and just Lord." He turned to look at Lucius, who immediately rose to his feet like a marionette pulled by a string.

"Minister Malfoy, has the culprit been interrogated?"

Lucius bowed. "Yes, My Lord, she has."

"And has she during the course of this interrogation divulged the source of this poison?"

Hermione tried to swallow but her mouth had gone dry, and she felt like a boulder had been dropped on her chest. She frantically searched Snape's face for any sign of distress or fear, but the wizard sat rigidly in his chair, his eyes looking straight ahead, his features impassive.

"No, My Lord. She claims that she found it on the nightstand in her room, and that she has no knowledge of how it got there."

"And have all measures been taken to extract the truth from this traitor?"

"Yes, My Lord. Regrettably, we were unsuccessful."

"Pity."

Voldemort turned to once again address the crowd, and Hermione released the breath she had not realized she was holding.

"I hereby declare that hand-witch..."

"2 9 4," Macnair supplied.

"I hereby declare that hand-witch 2 9 4, having been proven guilty of the crimes of treason, murder, and the possession of a forbidden potion, shall with her blood make restitution to those she has wronged and offended before being hung to die at the Wall of Traitors."

Hermione heard a gasp from behind her, and a wail escaped from the center of the pit as the crowd jumped to their feet and cheered. Hermione turned to Malfoy's hand-witch.

"That's it? That's the trial? She never even got to speak, to explain herself!" Hermione exclaimed.

"It doesn't matter; there's nothing she could have said anyway that could make what she did right."

Hermione was taken aback by the girl's venomous tone.

"How can you say that? It's not fair she should have had a chance to speak! And what does that mean, 'with her blood make restitution' ~~before~~ she is hung on the Wall of Traitors?"

"Shhh," the girl admonished.

Hermione realized that in her anger and agitation she had raised her voice, and that several of the other women were now scowling at her.

"Sorry," she whispered. "But what does it mean?"

"You'll see," the girl said with a self-satisfied smile that chilled Hermione's blood.

Voldemort, Lucius and Macnair had taken their seats. The jeers and clapping from the crowd died down, and everyone fidgeted restlessly, those in the uppermost benches stretching their necks to get a better view of the pit where Umbridge stood next to the circle of hand-witches.

"Hem, hem," Umbridge said unnecessarily since all eyes were already on her.

"It is with great sadness and shame that I stand before you today," she began in her high-pitched voice. "These young women represent the future of the wizarding world,

and the Minister has seen fit to entrust their care to me, by which I'm deeply humbled. It pains me to see one of my own fall so far, but errors of judgment such as these can not, and should not, be tolerated. They steal from our future and undermine the very principles upon which our society is built: family, community, loyalty..."

Hermione wondered if it was her imagination or if Umbridge had actually glanced in Snape's direction at her last words.

"Order, along with accountability," Umbridge continued, "are imperative for any culture to thrive, or even survive, and thus it is with deep regret that I must turn the punishment for this hand-witch's transgression to those which it shames the most, her fellow hand-witches."

Umbridge stepped aside, and Hermione watched with mounting horror as the circle of yellow-clad witches closed in around the young, sobbing girl, their hands extended like talons. Hermione dug her own nails into her thighs in an effort not to rush to the girl's aid as the others tore at her hair and clothes, their nails digging deep gouges into the exposed skin, until she was naked, bloody and sobbing, then proceeded to beat her down, kicking her prone body long after she had stopped fighting back. Unable to watch anymore, Hermione squeezed her eyes shut. Only the echo of Snape's words *whatever happens, whatever you see, don't move, don't scream, don't make a sound* kept her glued to her seat.

"Open your eyes," the girl next to her whispered.

Hermione shook her head.

"You have to. You're supposed to watch. You'll get in trouble if you don't."

Hermione forced her eyes open, but refused to watch the violent spectacle, fixing her eyes instead on a spot above the girls' heads. A couple of times she glanced in Snape's direction, searching his face for any reaction, but saw none.

She breathed a sigh of relief when Umbridge raised her wand and the girls retreated to the edge of the pit. She had to look then, and what she saw horrified her. A lump of bloody flesh lay immobile on the floor, and she wondered if the girl was dead, until she saw her stir a little and heard her moan.

Macnair rose from his seat then, along with Yaxley, and they descended the few steps into the pit. Hermione frowned when she saw Snape rise to follow them. Voldemort leaned forward and said something to Snape, something she was too far away to hear, but whatever Snape's response was, it made Voldemort laugh a maniacal cackle that made Hermione's skin crawl. Voldemort nodded, and Snape joined the others at the center of the pit. The two Death Eaters that had brought the girl in earlier soon followed. Together they surrounded the girl, who made a feeble attempt to stand but was kicked down by Macnair.

The air in the room was thick with expectation, but for a moment no one moved. The faces of the witches and wizards in the crowd swam before Hermione's eyes. Something was about to happen.

"What's going on?" she asked another witch, her apprehension growing.

"It's their turn," the witch whispered back.

"They are going to beat her?" Hermione asked skeptically.

The other witch only gave her a contemptuous look that said she must be the stupidest witch in the wizarding world.

Umbridge stepped into the pit again. This time she didn't address the crowd, but looked instead at the hand-witches surrounding the pit.

"Let this witch with her blood make restitution to those she has wronged, our fellow wizards the sires of our future."

The words that mirrored Voldemort sounded strangely comical in the woman's girlish voice.

"And let this be a lesson to you all of you," Umbridge concluded, her gaze encompassing the hand-witches in the pit as well as the ones dressed in red sitting on the benches, and finally settling on Hermione. A sickening, little smile twisted the woman's face.

Macnair began to unbutton his robes, and the crowd erupted in a cacophony of cheers and epithets. Shouts of "Mudblood whore" and "murdering bitch" filled the air around Hermione, until she felt she was going to drown in them. To Hermione's disbelief, some of the hand-witches around her joined in the shouting, but most just stared ahead, their faces frozen in expressions of abject terror. And in the midst of it all, Hermione felt herself shatter inside. She kept her eyes fixed on the spot she had picked earlier, but she couldn't block out the sounds of pain, terror and lust coming from the pit, or the thought of Snape.

It seemed to go on forever, until Hermione's fingers were painfully stiff from clutching the edge of the bench, and she tasted blood from where she had sunk her teeth into her lips to keep from screaming. Only the fear that she would be dragged next into the pit kept her rooted to the spot, and for that she felt ashamed.

When she thought she couldn't take anymore, she heard Snape's voice rise above the others.

"I will not dirty my cock by putting it inside this Mudblood whore," he said.

This provoked a mixed reaction from the crowd. Many cheered, while others booed.

"Do it, brother, for me. Give it to her!" came a shout from the pit. Hermione thought it was Macnair, but she couldn't be sure of anything anymore.

She heard laughter then. It sounded like Snape, but it couldn't be, because Snape never laughed. The next words confirmed her initial suspicion.

"Oh, I shall give her something."

The cruelty in Snape's voice made Hermione shudder, and her eyes strayed to the pit just in time to see Snape drop to one knee and ruthlessly shove his hand between the girl's splayed thighs.

Hermione felt her stomach revolt at the sight, and she brought her hand up to her mouth.

"Are you all right?" someone asked her.

Hermione shook her head and bolted from her seat. In front of her was the pit, to her left Voldemort and the Death Eaters, and all around people yelling and cheering. More Death Eaters guarded the doorway through which she had come in, so Hermione dashed toward the only opening she saw, to her right and behind the rows of benches. There she dropped to her knees and emptied the contents of her stomach onto the cold, stone floor. She heaved and wept until there was nothing left inside her and finally sagged against the wall.

She had to get out of this place, Hermione decided. Even if the hex put on her by the Ministry the one that would shred her feet to ribbons the moment she took one step outside her narrowly defined boundaries cost her her legs, she had to get away.

The noises coming from the pit died out, and she heard people moving about. She pushed herself up and took a few tentative steps, forcing her unsteady legs to support her weight. Most of the people were already filing out of the room, but many still remained behind, mingling and talking as if they were the afternoon crowd at a Sunday matinee. She walked close to the wall, her eyes scanning the faces of the crowd for any sign of Snape, or anyone else who would recognize her. She silently cursed the red robes that made her stand out.

She was almost to the exit when her sight settled on a vaguely familiar face across the room. Standing next to Fenrir was a man dressed in brown and green robes, the

colors of the Werewolves in Fenrir's pack. His graying hair fell in uneven layers to his shoulders and around his face, obscuring his features. He bent forward to whisper something in Fenrir's ear, and when he turned his head toward her, a jolt of recognition hit Hermione's heart.

She rushed forward through the crowd, shoving elegantly dressed witches and wizards out of her way. The man saw her approach, and for an instant she thought she saw a glimmer of recognition in his eyes, before he turned away and disappeared into the crowd. She pressed forward with a renewed sense of purpose, until she felt iron-like fingers clasp around her forearm. She whirled around and found herself staring into Snape's dark eyes.

"Not here, not now," he hissed into her face.

"Don't touch me," she hissed back.

He pulled her close to him, so close that the fabric of his robes tickled the tip of her nose.

"If you still value your life, you will walk out of here with me quietly and without any resistance," he whispered so low that for a moment Hermione was uncertain if she had heard him correctly.

Hermione raised her eyes to his face, but he wasn't looking at her. She followed his gaze across the room, past the platform that held the now empty throne and chairs of the Faithful, to a corner where Malfoy and Umbridge stood, sly smiles frozen on their faces as they listened attentively to something Voldemort was saying.

Her eyes scanned the room. Most of the civilians that had attended the trial had left, and what remained was mostly a sea of black, hooded robes. To her surprise, Hermione realized that she didn't want to die not here, not like this, and certainly not now.

There was a sudden commotion as two Death Eaters pushed their way through to the front of the room and whispered something in Voldemort's ear. Umbridge gasped and brought her hand up to her mouth. Voldemort quickly turned around and disappeared behind the throne, and Lucius tilted his head, his steely gaze settling on Snape.

"Now would be a very good time, Miss Granger," Snape ground out softly.

She nodded to Snape, and he guided her out of the room, his hand still clutching her forearm while she held her body stiffly away from his.

The Best-laid Plans

Chapter 11 of 16

That she had once considered the man a potential ally now seemed preposterous. For the first time in the past seven years, Hermione allowed herself to admit that maybe death was the only haven left for those like her.

Hermione's legs were trembling when she stepped out of the fireplace into Snape's parlor. She felt ill and tired in a way that had nothing to do with being awakened in the middle of the night. Echoes of female screams and Snape's laughter reverberated in her ears, and her mind conjured all kinds of gruesome images to replace those she hadn't witnessed.

She felt Snape's steadying hand on her elbow.

"I feel ill. I need to be alone," she mumbled.

She couldn't look at him. The thought that this was the man who would raise the child she carried was more than she could bear.

"Should I call a medic?"

Snape's softly spoken question was the last thing Hermione heard before the room spun violently around her and she sank into darkness.

She awoke to bright sunlight and whispered voices.

"I assure you she and the child are in perfect health," a woman was saying.

"She fainted." Hermione recognized Snape's voice.

"A reaction to emotional stress. I've given her a mild sedative and suggest plenty of rest."

Hermione tried to follow the conversation, but her eyelids were drifting shut and the voices were already fading away.

When Hermione awoke again, it was nighttime; a soft glow emanated from the lamp on the bedside table, and Snape sat on a chair near the foot of her bed.

Memories of the previous night assailed her, and Hermione's eyes filled with tears.

"You're awake." Snape rose from the chair and Hermione squeezed her eyes shut, still unable to look at him.

That she had once considered the man a potential ally now seemed preposterous. For the first time in the past seven years, Hermione allowed herself to admit that maybe death was the only haven left for those like her.

"Send me away," she whispered.

"Pardon me?"

Hermione didn't know if Snape hadn't heard her or if he didn't understand what she meant. She opened her eyes and looked at him through her tears.

"Send me away into exile," she said a bit more forcefully.

Snape sat on the bed next to her, and Hermione cringed away.

"I never had any intention of doing so, least of all now that you carry my child."

At that moment Hermione understood the sense of desperation that had driven Roselyn to break the law while fully aware of the consequences.

"She had four children already, all taken away from her she just couldn't do it anymore." It wasn't a justification, just a statement of fact.

"She is safe now," Snape said quietly.

The words floated on Hermione's mind before they sank in. Roselyn was most likely hanging on the Wall of Traitors, or if lucky she was dead.

"You mean she's dead," Hermione said, her words sounding strangely hollow with the unnatural calmness of the sedative she had been given.

"No. I meant she is safe. There are people who will take care of her."

Snape bent his head as he retrieved something from the pocket of his robes, and Hermione noticed in the orange glow of the lamp how gaunt and tired he looked. Had he always looked that way or had he aged overnight, she wondered.

He produced a small, gold coin and offered it to her.

"I wanted to tell you last night, prepare you for what you were about to see, but there was no time."

Hermione pushed herself up on the bed and took the coin, examining it closely. At first glance it appeared to be a Galleon, but emblazoned on one side was the image of a phoenix and on the other the letter H it was like no currency Hermione had ever seen. She looked at Snape questioningly.

"They are used as Portkeys," he explained.

Hermione bolted upright on the bed, but dizziness forced her to rest her head back against the headboard.

"A Portkey?" she asked, still examining the coin.

Snape nodded. "It's the only way to break someone out of the Ministry building, short of a full on invasion."

Hermione wanted to believe him, wanted to imagine that Roselyn was somewhere safe where she was being taken care of like he said, but she couldn't ignore what she had seen.

"But you... you and the others raped her."

Snape didn't try to deny Hermione's words and he averted his eye. "I was unaware of her arrest until I was summoned to the trial. I had to find a way to give her the Portkey without anyone noticing."

It took a moment for the implication of Snape's words to sink in. "You put it inside her!"

Snape sighed deeply and nodded. "Believe me when I say I wish there would have been another way."

The drowsiness of the sedative was being quickly dispelled by the jolt of adrenaline to Hermione's brain.

"Rufus Ainsworth! That's how he escaped from inside the Ministry building the first time you gave him one of these!"

She remembered something else then, something that she was sure was relevant and somehow connected, but decided to broach the subject with caution. "Last night, after... after I thought I recognized someone."

"Lupin," Snape stated calmly.

"It was him! But how?" Hermione leaned forward, eager for more information.

Snape's expression became terse. "Miss Granger, you're becoming excited. The mediwitch recommended rest; perhaps we should have this discussion at another time."

Snape made to rise from the bed and Hermione grasped his hand. "Please," she begged, "I need to know."

Snape wasn't looking at her face; instead, he was looking at her hand that rested on top of his.

"You must think me a heartless creature," Snape said suddenly.

"No, I don't. It took a lot of courage to do what you did," Hermione said with conviction more courage than she was certain she had.

Something changed in Snape's expression at her words; an undefined glimmer fleeted over his eyes before his expression hardened and he said, "I don't want you to get any romantic notions about me, Miss Granger. I'm no hero."

Maybe not a hero, Hermione conceded, but perhaps the only hope she had.

"I promise to get plenty of rest if you tell me more about Professor Lupin and how he came to be with Greyback's pack," Hermione said as she leaned back against the pillows and forced a serene smile to her lips.

Snape seemed to consider her offer for a moment before he said, "Very well, but if you start to become excited again, you will take another dose of sedative and go back to sleep."

Hermione nodded. "Deal," she said, although she had a feeling she was going to have trouble holding up her end.

"As you might or might not have known, I was not the only spy for the Order of the Phoenix. After leaving Hogwarts, Lupin spent some time with Fenrir's pack."

Hermione nodded she didn't have any concrete knowledge of the activities of the Order, but she had surmised as much.

"Although it was hard for him to regain his credibility with Fenrir after the raid at the Department of Mysteries, he managed to keep his ties to the pack."

"Did he become one of them? Did he betray the Order?" Hermione interrupted.

"No, he was still working for the Order when it happened."

Hermione knew to what 'it' referred the night of the surprise attack that had put an end to everyone's hopes of ever defeating Voldemort.

"Then why didn't he warn us?"

She didn't ask what she really wanted to know why didn't you warn us?

"There was no way for him to know. He didn't have access to the Dark Lord then and he doesn't now, but I implanted the idea of using decoys in Mundungus' mind after

giving the Dark Lord the correct date of the move; the headmaster thought it would work."

"Dumbledore?" Hermione asked, stunned.

Snape nodded stiffly. "I believed it to be an ill-conceived plan from the start, but telling the Dark Lord an outright lie could have compromised my position amongst his ranks," he concluded.

Sadly Snape had been right the plan had not worked. Hermione squeezed her eyes shut as if by doing so she could shut out the memory.

They had all met at Harry's house: Ron, Fred, George, Bill, Mr. Weasley, Fleur, Hagrid, Mad-Eye, Lupin, Mundungus, Kingsley, Tonks and herself. After drinking the foul-tasting Polyjuice Potion they had split up in pairs. She had been relieved to learn she would be traveling with Kingsley on a thestral she knew how to ride a broom, but had never felt confident on one.

They had risen up into the night sky, higher and higher, far above the clouds, when suddenly they found themselves surrounded by no less than thirty Death Eaters, their black robes billowing in the darkness as if they were made of it.

They had tried to split up as was their plan but found themselves herded back together by blasts of green light coming from every direction. There were shouts and curses. She saw a bolt of green light zoom past her head and hit Bill, whose lifeless body slumped forward on his thestral. A red bolt quickly followed, hitting Fleur on the back. The girl's body, still looking like Harry's, slid off the beast and was swallowed by the night. Ahead, Hermione saw Hagrid's motorcycle careen out of control. She wriggled around and managed to shoot off a *Stupefy* before something hit her arm, and then she was falling just before she lost consciousness.

Hermione wasn't sure how much later it was when she awoke, wandless and cold, alone in a cell. She didn't know much about what had happened to the others except that five days later, on Harry Potter's birthday, the Ministry had officially fallen to Voldemort's forces, and Ron and Harry had been publicly executed the following day as part of Voldemort's victory celebration. For a long time she wondered why her life had been spared, until her fate had been revealed to her.

"Are you alright, Miss Granger?"

Hermione's eyes shot open, and she nodded her head. "So what happened to Professor Lupin that night?" she asked.

"He managed to survive the attack and make his escape. Luckily there was only one Death Eater with us that night who got a clear look at Lupin's face and let us just say that he didn't survive. When it became clear that we had lost the war, Lupin took refuge amongst Fenrir's pack."

"The potions in your lab, there was Wolfsbane."

"I've been supplying Lupin with Wolfsbane for years, before and after the Dark Lord's victory. I also provide him with special orders that he picks up once a month."

"Pick up! You mean from your lab?" Hermione asked excitedly.

Snape looked at her through narrowed eyes. "Yes. The fireplace in my laboratory is connected to a back-Floo-network, one that runs independently from the Ministry. It is safer for him to come to me than for us to meet anywhere else."

"So he lives amongst them but is still loyal to the anti-Voldemort movement."

"Correct. Last night he was there to confirm when the hand-witch had possession of the Portkey and to activate it. I was too close to the others to do it myself."

Hermione's mind was reeling with all the new information. Lupin was the person Fritzlee had heard talking to Snape in the lab!

"I want to talk to Professor Lupin," she said.

"Absolutely not; it's too risky. You almost cost that man his life last night."

"Then why are you telling me this now?" she asked.

"Because the future doesn't bode well, and I need your word on something."

Snape produced the latest copy of the *Daily Prophet* from the pocket of his robes and unfurled it on the bed in front of Hermione. The front-page headline read in bold, red letters: **MINISTRY TO LAUNCH MASSIVE INVESTIGATION SEVERAL HIGH RANKING OFFICIALS TARGETED!**

She read the article. No names were stated, and there was no mention about the events of the previous night only that there were strong suspicions of corruption inside the Ministry, and that an inquisitorial committee had been assembled to investigate but Hermione got a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"Shouldn't you flee, go into hiding?" Hermione asked anxiously.

"It's not that simple, Miss Granger. It is more important now than ever that I remain close to the Dark Lord for as long as possible. Too many lives depend on the information I can gather and my ability to have access to prisoners."

Hermione frowned. She understood the value of Snape's position amongst the Death Eaters and its potential to save lives, but why especially now?

She found her answer in two more front-page articles in the same newspaper. One announced the immediate reinstatement of the use of The Wall of Traitors, which had been suspended four years prior; she had become aware of that development the previous night. The other announced an additional hand-witch's trial scheduled for that week.

"Another one?" Hermione exclaimed.

"As I said, the future doesn't bode well," Snape stated calmly.

Hand-witch's trials were rare there had only been three conducted in the past five years including Roselyn's two hand-witch's trials in one week was unheard of. Rebellious hand-witches were usually quietly disposed of through banishment; rarely was one accused of a crime that required a trial.

"What is it that you need my word on?" Hermione asked cautiously.

"I shall vow to do anything I can to ensure your safety, but first you must promise me that no matter what happens, you will bear my child that you now carry and will do everything in your power to raise the child yourself should I be unable to do so."

Snape's request surprised Hermione, not the part about bearing his child it was clear that had been his intent from the start but his insistence that she be the one to raise the child in his absence.

There was no need for Snape to induce a promise from Hermione in that regard what was done was done she would bear the child and protect it with her own life if necessary, but she also needed an answer to the question that nagged at the back of her mind.

"You continue to work against, Voldemort yet you led me to believe otherwise and..." Hermione hesitated, remembering the reaction that her previous use of the word 'forced' had elicited from Snape, "in order for me to bear your child," she amended.

Snape nodded stiffly. "I did."

"You used me. Why?"

"I told you, Miss Granger: I'm no hero. I wanted an heir, and you were... available. Do I have your word?"

Hermione searched Snape's face for a hint of remorse; she saw none.

"I give you my word," she stated solemnly.

Hermione still had a million questions to ask but was interrupted by a loud pop as a subdued Fritzlee appeared carrying a tray.

"Miss be wanting her dinner now?" the elf asked with a deep bow addressing Hermione, but her large, wary eyes were trained on Snape.

Hermione eyed the food longingly she was famished, but she was just as hungry for information. Snape decided for her.

"You will eat now," he said, rising from the edge of the bed and retrieving a vial from the pocket of his robes.

He poured a small amount of liquid from the bottle into Hermione's cup, which Fritzlee promptly filled with tea. "It's a mild sedative," he said before Hermione could ask.

"I don't need a sedative," Hermione protested.

"Are you so soon reneging on our deal, Miss Granger? I thought we had agreed that you would get plenty of rest if I answered your questions; need I point out that I have kept my end of the bargain and then some?"

"No, you have. But I still have more questions."

"Then we shall speak again tomorrow. Good night, Miss Granger."

Snape didn't move until Hermione had obligingly finished her cup of tea. He then bowed and departed, shooting the house-elf a warning glare that made Hermione wince.

The next morning Hermione was still in bed when Snape walked in carrying a tray filled with scrambled eggs, toast, jam and a cup of tea not Fritzlee's usual extravagant fare.

"Where is Fritzlee?" Hermione asked.

"I've sent her away, back to Lucius," Snape answered with a finality that told Hermione she would not get a further explanation. "Eat quickly, there's something I must show you," Snape added.

Hermione took a couple of bites of toast and pushed the rest of the food around on her plate before she gave up.

"I feel too nauseated to eat in the mornings," she explained to Snape as she gulped down the cup of tea.

He waited patiently for her to complete her morning ablutions, get dressed and indicate that she was ready.

"Do you have your piece of parchment, the one you dropped in my laboratory?"

Hermione reached into her pocket and produced the small note; she unfolded it and showed it to Snape.

"I received it by owl shortly after the headmaster's death; I don't know what it means."

Snape ran his thumb over the letters as he stared at them thoughtfully. "What it means is not important, what matters is what it does," he said after a moment.

"I don't understand."

"Follow me, Miss Granger, and bring the parchment with you."

Hermione followed Snape to the kitchen; the room seemed strangely empty without Fritzlee. They proceeded to a small closet in the back, and Hermione was surprised when Snape opened the door to the seemingly empty closet and disappeared through the back wall. She followed and found herself in a room that wasn't really a room she stood on a narrow bridge surrounded by darkness, and in front of her, almost fluorescent in the impenetrable shadows, was the distinct door to Snape's laboratory.

"Open it," Snape instructed.

Hermione stepped into the laboratory, but instead of standing on the main floor she was looking down at it. Somehow they had traveled from the main floor of the house to the two-story high ledge on Snape's second floor laboratory. Snape brushed past her and proceeded down the stone steps; Hermione followed closely behind.

"The passage through the kitchen is an emergency access to the laboratory it's always there. Should the house be compromised in any way, you are to make your way to the kitchen and proceed through the passage *do not wait for me*. This is the most heavily warded and safest room in the house."

"But I had no trouble getting inside the first time."

"That, Miss Granger, is because you had this." Snape held up Hermione's hand in which she still held the piece of parchment.

She was beginning to understand. "The note the note is a key," she said. "But I don't understand how; I've had this piece of parchment for years."

Snape nodded. "I searched through your things the first night you were here; I found the note in the pocket of your robes and recognized the headmaster's handwriting. I suspected that it was important to you, and that you most likely carried it with you at all times. I also knew that it was only a matter of time before your avid curiosity got the best of you and you began to explore the house on your own."

"So you charmed the note into a key," Hermione concluded.

"This house is full of wards, Miss Granger, not all of them harmless. Other than to keep constant watch over you, which I freely confess I had neither the inclination nor the time to do, it was the only way to keep you from getting yourself killed it would have been most inconvenient if I had returned home to find a corpse in my house."

"I can imagine," Hermione muttered with a frown.

If Snape heard, he ignored her. "This box," he said, pointing to a small wooden box on the mantle above the fireplace, "contains Floo powder. If for whatever reason I am unable to join you here, you're to toss a handful into the fireplace followed by the note in your hand and wait; someone will come to your aid."

"Professor Lupin?" Hermione asked.

"Most likely. *Do not step into the fireplace*; these back connections are unstable and difficult to navigate, and you wouldn't know where you were going. Do you understand

everything I have said to you?"

Hermione understood only too well he was giving her a way to save herself and leave him behind to face whatever came their way.

"I understand," she said, and before she realized what she was about to do she kissed him awkwardly, a tentative brush of her lips against his.

He pulled her close in response, crushing her lips and laving them with his tongue until she allowed him entrance into her mouth.

His hands roamed familiarly over her back there was something desperate about his touch, their circumstances, her need.

When he pulled back, they were both breathless.

"This isn't a requirement of our agreement," he pointed out.

It wasn't it was something she wanted. For the first time in seven years, Hermione felt free to make a choice of her own; that her choice should be to give herself to a man she should resent was something she didn't question.

"I don't want to be alone anymore," Hermione whispered and kissed him again.

He buried his hands in her hair, holding her head still while he devoured her mouth. Hermione found herself backed against a worktable, the rough edge of the wood digging into her backside, his erection pressing insistently against her belly through the fabric of their robes. They were overdressed, and Hermione pulled determinately at his robes.

"Perhaps we should retire to a more comfortable place," he murmured against her neck.

Hermione couldn't agree more, but her bedroom was clear on the other side of the house.

He seemed to guess her thoughts. "This way."

They stepped out of the laboratory and down a narrow passage to their right. Hermione followed Snape into what she immediately identified as his bedroom. Dozens of books lined the walls, and a small desk was squeezed into a corner; a large, plush chair sat in front of a fireplace. The large, four-poster bed dominated the room, and that's where Hermione headed.

This time there was none of the awkwardness and hesitation of their two previous encounters. It was a wild and urgent union. They tumbled onto the bed together, hands and lips desperately searching for any expanse of exposed flesh. Their trembling fingers tugged and tore at the offending fabric of each other's robes until they were both naked and panting.

His mouth left hers to explore the column of her neck, nip at her clavicle, delve into the valley between her breasts and continue downward. Hermione had had sex dozens of times, but never had she felt a sensation like the jolt of pleasure that shot through her belly when his tongue parted her folds and found her core. She gasped, and her hips bucked involuntarily, but his hands were there to catch her and hold her against his mouth.

Eyes squeezed shut, Hermione allowed the pleasure to build until she succumbed to it. Lost in the throes of her orgasm, she was vaguely aware of Snape rising above her until he entered her swiftly. She spread her legs wider to accommodate his girth and dug her blunt nails into the sweat-slicked skin of his back.

"Open your eyes. Look at me," he panted raggedly, and Hermione obeyed.

His dark eyes looked down at her with an intensity that was both frightening and arousing. He took her hard and fast, and Hermione's hips rose from the bed to meet each wild thrust until his body suddenly tensed, and he emptied his seed inside her with a loud groan. After a moment he collapsed next to her on the bed, his arm wrapped possessively around her waist.

Neither one spoke. They remained like that for a long while, Hermione pondering the consequences of this shift in their relationship, Snape apparently lost in his own thoughts until his voice broke the silence.

"A while back you wanted to know how I could do things I didn't believe in. The answer is that I've done many despicable things while at the service of the Dark Lord, but not all of them have been unpleasant having you here with me hasn't been."

His words, while sweet on the surface were tinged with self-loathing, and Hermione felt a rare moment of empathy with the wizard. During the course of the past seven years, she had been forced to do things that went against the grain of everything she believed in some of those things had wrenched her heart, while others, like sharing her bed with Snape, had not been so hard.

She couldn't say that she understood the man, only that she had a better idea of how he felt.

The Long Way Down

Chapter 12 of 16

Just as they entered the parlor they were confronted by six figures in black robes. Hermione recognized Yaxley and Macnair in their black and silver robes; the other four wore plain, black, hooded robes and were strangers to her – most likely soldiers.

It happened sooner than either of them expected. Hermione and Snape were still in bed when a giant, white owl swooped down just outside the bedroom window. It circled a couple of times before it pecked impatiently at the glass.

Snape opened the window, and the owl deposited a white envelope in his hand before it took to the sky again. Hermione rose from the bed and went to stand next to Snape as he broke the official looking seal and opened the missive.

The handwriting was ornate, and the silvery blue ink shimmered against the stark whiteness of the parchment. Hermione read over Snape's shoulder:

They are coming.

I've made arrangements to ensure your safety.

You can't save her don't try.

Just as she finished reading the last words, the parchment disintegrated in Snape's hand, leaving only a wisp of light-blue smoke behind.

"What is it? What does it mean?" Hermione asked anxiously.

"It's a warning from Lucius. Get dressed!" Snape ordered. "You need to get to the kitchen and into the lab," Snape explained as they donned their robes in haste.

Hermione slipped her feet into her shoes, verified that the parchment she now knew to be a key was safely tucked inside her pocket and rushed out the door after Snape.

"Can't you keep them from entering the house?" she asked.

"Maybe, but the Ministry controls the Floo network. They could enter through the parlor using the fireplace there," Snape said as they rushed down the familiar hallways.

Hermione understood the urgency in Snape's words the parlor stood between them and the kitchen, and they didn't seem to have enough time to follow an alternate route to the lab.

Just as they entered the parlor they were confronted by six figures in black robes. Hermione recognized Yaxley and Macnair in their black and silver robes; the other four wore plain, black, hooded robes and were strangers to her most likely soldiers.

"Severus, you are to come with us by order of the Minister. Bring your hand-witch along," Yaxley said.

For an instant no one moved. Snape looked at her with black, narrowed eyes, his voice calm and soft as he said, "Hermione Run!"

What happened next was too fast for Hermione to fully register. Snape's wand was a blur as it sliced through the air. There was a green flash of light, followed by two red ones in quick succession. A black figure crumpled to the floor. An agonized scream filled the room. Hermione dashed for the kitchen door but found her path blocked by a burly Death Eater. When he tried to grab her, she turned and ran in the opposite direction.

She was darting blindly through corridors. Behind her the air crackled with the energy of each hex that was discharged. Voices, angry and confused, reverberated through the house. She could hear footsteps gaining on her but she didn't dare turn to look it would only serve to slow her down.

The house was changing rapidly now. Walls grew out of the floor where doors had been. Stairs vanished beneath her feet. Rooms narrowed into hallways, and windows turned to stone to shut out the light. Bolts of light lashed out from her pursuers' wands at the ensuing darkness. A green bolt zoomed past her. Hermione threw her body against a wall to avoid it and emerged safely into an adjacent room.

She listened for the shouted curses of the Death Eaters as they ran past on the other side. Only then did she stop to catch her breath.

She had to get to Snape's laboratory but even if she could make her way through the darkness, she could feel the room changing around her at a frantic pace that nearly matched the rhythm of her pounding heart she would never be able to find a specific room in such chaos.

Hermione wasn't sure how long she stood there each minute seemed to stretch into eternity as she listened and waited to be discovered at any moment. She thought of Fritzlee and wished the elf were still in the house. There was a slight movement to her right. Hermione almost screamed before a strong hand clasped over her mouth and yanked her back against a solid body.

"It's me; don't scream," Snape whispered into her ear.

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut for a moment and nodded in relief. The hand slipped from her face, and Hermione took in big gulps of air.

"I tried to get to the lab like you told me, but one of them blocked my path and then I was lost," she quickly explained.

"This way," Snape instructed as he took hold of her hand.

Hermione wondered how Snape could find his way in the complete darkness that enveloped them. Despite his guidance, she kept banging into walls and tripping over her own feet.

"I'm sorry; I can't see where I'm going," she whispered as Snape pulled her to her feet yet again.

The soft glow of a *Lumos* spell emanating from Snape's wand dispelled some of the shadows, and Hermione saw the door to the laboratory straight ahead. She had taken only two steps when the air suddenly crackled behind them; she turned around just in time to see a bolt of red light speeding towards them. Snape shoved her down, but not before the hex hit his right shoulder and sent his wand flying through the air. In the dim afterglow of the spell, Hermione saw Snape's body fall to the floor.

"Malfoy said to bring Snape in alive, you idiot!" an angry voice shouted.

"Yeah? Well then Malfoy should have come and got him himself! Anyway, it's Umbridge you should be worried about; that blood-traitor Malfoy is going to get his soon enough anyway!"

The voices were getting closer, and angry steps echoed from the walls of the corridor.

"Snape! Snape, are you alright?" Hermione whispered urgently.

Snape rolled to his side and stretched out his hand, his index finger pointing toward the laboratory. "It's straight ahead in front of you. Go!" he ordered.

But Hermione ignored his command. The glowing tip of Snape's wand was visible on the floor only a few feet in front of her, and Hermione quickly crawled towards it, staying low to avoid any more flying hexes. Suddenly a bright light filled the hallway and someone shouted, "Right there! I see them!"

Hermione didn't hesitate; she wrapped her fingers around the smooth wood of the wand and rolled onto her back. She brought the wand up and around, pointed it in the direction of the light source, twisted her wrist slightly in a half-flick and shouted, "Dissapeptum," just as a bolt of red light discharged from one of the Death Eaters' wands.

Eyes wide in amazement, Hermione watched as the bolt of light stopped in midair and violently bounced back toward its source, barely missing the two Death Eaters. The quick exchange had given Snape enough time to recover and he ran past Hermione, pulling her to her feet and claiming his wand from her hand in one fluid motion.

"It worked! Did you see that? The barrier worked!" Hermione babbled excitedly as Snape shoved her ahead of him towards the laboratory.

"I saw it, Miss Granger. Well done. But it won't hold for long, so hurry."

Behind them, Hermione could hear the angry shouts and curses of the Death Eaters as they worked to bring down her barrier. The door to the laboratory opened in front of her and Hermione dashed inside followed by Snape. Once the door was closed and secured, Hermione breathed a sigh of relief and turned to assess Snape's injuries in the light of the laboratory's torches. It was worse than she had thought. The sleeve of his robes was scorched where the hex had hit him, and blood was slowly seeping through the fabric. There was also a small laceration to his left cheek, and Hermione noticed that he walked with a limp, wincing slightly every time he put weight on his right leg.

"You're hurt! Let me see," Hermione demanded, trying to examine Snape's shoulder, but the wizard brushed her hands aside.

"There's no time for that, Miss Granger. I have made certain that this room is practically impenetrable, but you can't hide in here forever. I must get you to safety."

Snape hastened to the fireplace and Hermione reluctantly followed, still eying his leg suspiciously. He tossed in a handful of Floo powder, and before Hermione could ask where they were going, she was dragged into the cool, green flames.

They exited the fireplace into a dim, ramshackle room that smelled strangely of seaweed, but they didn't stay long. Again and again Hermione was whisked away into the vortex of Side-Along Apparition. Each brief stop revealed a new unfamiliar scene, but there was never enough time to ask Snape where they were or where they were going before the scene changed again. Hermione understood that the purpose of so many consecutive Apparitions was to throw off any pursuers or anyone who might be tracking them, but she couldn't make her spinning head and protesting stomach understand that.

They came to a final stop at a rocky ledge on the side of a mountain. She leaned against the cold stone behind her and looked around. In every direction they were surrounded by snowcapped mountains and impossible precipices. Low clouds hovered just above their heads so close that Hermione could have reached out and touched them. It was a beautiful and hostile landscape, with no shelter in sight. The air was frigid, and Hermione wrapped her arms around her torso to stave off the cold.

"Where are we?" she finally asked Snape.

"The Carpathian Mountains just north of Romania," Snape answered grimly. "We'll have to walk from here."

Hermione glanced in his direction and noticed his gritted teeth and the pallor of his skin. He was injured, how badly she didn't know, and it was obvious that the exertion of Apparating both of them over such a long distance had taken its toll on him.

"Maybe we should rest for a bit," she suggested tentatively.

Snape shook his head. "There isn't much daylight left and the temperature will drop quickly after sunset. Any charm we can use for warmth will be impotent against such temperatures."

Hermione nodded and started walking in the direction that Snape indicated. It was a steep descent. For hours they walked ever downward, sometimes side-by-side, single-file when the ledge grew so narrow that it barely allowed room for one body. The surrounding mountains protected them from most of the wind, but the temperature was still cold and their casual clothes ill-suited. Hermione was hungry, tired, cold and scared.

"Can we rest only for a moment?" she asked when they came to a wide plateau.

Snape leaned his injured shoulder against the side of the mountain, and his eyes scanned their surroundings. "It's not much farther; I could cast *Levicorpus* if you wish," he offered.

Hermione shook her head adamantly. He was already weakened by his injuries, and the idea of being immobilized and levitated didn't appeal to her anyway.

They continued thus, leaving the mountainous terrain behind and descending into a subterranean cave. There was a trickle of water that indicated a river nearby, and jagged stalactites hung from the roof of the cave like giant teeth, but Hermione couldn't see any farther than the circle of dim light produced by Snape's wand.

Snape paused suddenly, and Hermione went to stand next to him. He was murmuring some words, a spell Hermione was sure.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm opening a temporary rift in the wards, big enough for us to pass."

Hermione looked around. "Wards? There are wards here?"

She couldn't imagine what the wards would be guarding down here, or who would come looking. As far as she could tell, they were in a dank, deserted cave in the middle of nowhere.

"Of course there are wards! I said I was taking you to safety, and the place wouldn't be safe if it weren't warded!" Snape snapped.

Hermione shrugged, too tired to argue with Snape's paranoid logic.

They continued on, and a few meters ahead the mouth of the cave opened into a snowy valley filled with tall pine trees. Against the setting sun in the distance, wisps of smoke rose to the sky from what had to be dozens of chimneys. It looked like a village one of considerable size.

"Is that a town?" she asked softly, hardly daring to hope.

"Yes it is, Miss Granger the town of New Hope, last stronghold of the resistance."

Her exhaustion forgotten, Hermione wanted to run. She wanted to jump up and down, clap her hands, and squeal her delight like a child. She wanted to embrace Snape, and kiss him and thank him. She wanted to hoot and holler and do cartwheels. Only Snape's somber expression stopped her.

"What's wrong?" she asked him.

"Miss Granger," he began, his voice soft, his eyes lowered. "I want you to know that whatever they tell you, I never meant to cause you any harm."

"I don't understand. You saved my life; you brought me here; you've been working to overthrow Voldemort all this time; why would anyone think you meant to harm me?" she said.

Snape sighed deeply and straightened himself. "It's not that simple, Miss Granger."

Hermione wasn't sure how to feel about Snape's declaration, but nothing could put a damper on her exhilaration. It was all she had dreamt about for the past seven years, more than she had hoped.

A dot of light moving through the trees caught Hermione's eye. The dot grew larger as it got nearer until it revealed the figure of a young boy about ten years old with a riotous mass of red curls. He wore a fur cloak and held a lit wand in his small hand.

"Snape!" the young boy called out as he ran towards them. "I didn't know you were coming today!"

The boy came to a halt in front of them, staring wide-eyed at Hermione. "Who you got here, Snape?" the boy asked.

"This, Gavril, is Miss Granger. Miss Granger, meet Gavril; he lives in the village."

"Nice to meet you, Gavril," Hermione said with a wide smile.

Snape took a step and the boy quickly turned his attention away from her.

"You're hurt! Should I get help? Was it Death Eaters? Where is your broom? Did the fighting start already?"

If Snape was annoyed by the boy's rapid-fire questioning and agitated movements, he didn't show it.

"Yes, I am injured, but there is no need for you to seek assistance; I can walk. My injuries were caused by Death Eaters. My home was attacked, and I didn't have the opportunity to retrieve my broom, but the fighting hasn't officially begun," Snape responded calmly.

Ignoring Snape's protests, the boy wrapped his arm around Snape's waist and began to guide him towards the town. Hermione walked quietly next to them, impatient with their slow progress. She noticed that they took a roundabout route, avoiding the center of the village and approaching a small cottage that sat to the outskirts. Gavril released Snape and ran ahead, bursting into the house without bothering to knock on the door. Hermione concluded this must be the boy's home.

Hermione had barely set foot inside the house when she found herself whisked into a tight embrace.

"Hermione, I'm so glad you're here."

Hermione pulled back and stared up into the face of Remus Lupin. "Professor Lupin!" she exclaimed before she threw her arms around him to return the hug.

Lupin released her awkwardly. "I haven't been a professor for a long time, and then only for one year. Please call me Remus."

Gavril came back into the room, dragging a small woman with short, sandy hair and small, impish features behind him.

"See, see? I told you!" he babbled excitedly.

"I see," the woman said softly, standing back from the group.

"They walked all the way down!" the boy announced, his voice high with excitement.

"You must be cold and tired," the woman observed from her place close to the farthest wall.

"Hermione, this is Veera, and I guess you've already met her son, Gavril. Veera, this is Hermione; I've spoken to you about her," Remus said with a gentle smile that spoke of a deep affection for the quiet woman.

The woman smiled shyly and nodded her head in greeting. Her slanted eyes turned to Snape who until now had held back near the doorway, leaning weakly against the doorframe.

"Come into the kitchen; I will tend to your injuries," Veera said to Snape.

To Hermione's surprise, Snape allowed the woman to assist him into the kitchen without protest.

"Veera is a bit wary of strangers, but I have no doubt she will warm up to you in no time," Remus explained to Hermione as they followed the other two into the kitchen where Gavril was already perched atop a stool, placing a teakettle on the old stove.

Hermione took a seat at the table, her thoughts reeling with unanswered questions and possibilities. She chanced a glance at Snape, who sat across from her, his features unreadable as he suffered the small woman to examine his shoulder.

"This is bad, Remus. I can fix some of it, but I think he should go to the clinic," Veera said.

"That shall not be necessary. Do what you can, Veera, and I shall take care of the rest," Snape declared through gritted teeth as the woman ripped open the sleeve of his robes.

Hermione noticed that Snape had not said a word to Remus since they had arrived.

"His leg also requires attention," Hermione pointed out.

Veera looked at Remus. "Could they...?"

Remus nodded before the woman finished the question. "Of course. Take him to our bedroom. Hermione, you can share Gavril's room, and Veera and I will camp out in the living room for tonight. We'll make other arrangements in the morning."

Hermione glanced at the young boy who seemed thrilled to have such an interesting guest sharing his sleeping quarters. Snape, on the other hand, looked as if he was about to protest.

"There's no need to inconvenience Gavril. Snape and I can share a room."

Remus frowned but didn't argue, and Snape allowed Veera to guide him to the bedroom after a reassuring nod from Hermione.

"How long has this town been here?" she asked Remus after the other two had left the kitchen.

Remus took a seat next to her, and Gavril busied himself pouring tea and heating up a kettle of some delicious smelling soup.

"Since the end of the war." Remus answered. "Charlie Weaseley knew of this place long before and had always thought that with the proper wards and charms it would make a perfect hideout. When it became obvious that the war was lost, a small group fled here. Many more have joined us over the years."

Seven years, Hermione thought. For seven years there had been a safe place in the wizarding world, and yet no one had bothered to look for her. Remus must have guessed her thoughts.

"It's not that simple, Hermione. Hand-witches have no identity, no names; we had to rely on sightings and word of mouth to track your whereabouts, and it wasn't until recently that we found a spell that would counter the hex put on hand-witches by the Ministry to track them and keep them from running away. Before that, to try to rescue a hand-witch would have meant certain discovery and the death of the witch."

It made sense. Hermione still remembered the agonizing pain of the spell slicing through the soles of her feet like a hot knife when she had tried to escape, and the quickness with which she was found made her suspect that the spell included some kind of tracking charm.

A bowl of soup was placed in front of Hermione, and she dug in unabashedly.

"I'm sorry, I'm starved," Hermione offered when she noticed Remus watching her with an amused smile.

"Veera is a good cook," Remus said.

Hermione nodded her agreement. "What about Snape? He must be hungry too."

"I got it!" Gavril announced, balancing a tray as he left the kitchen.

"Is Gavril your son?" Hermione asked. She didn't think so; the boy appeared too old to have been born after the end of the war.

Remus confirmed her suspicions. "Not biologically; he is Veera's son. She lost her husband a while ago."

Hermione only nodded and took another bite of the soup, not wanting to intrude into the affairs of her hosts, but it had not escaped her attention that Remus and Veera shared a bedroom.

She finished her meal quickly, anxious to find out more about Snape's condition.

Remus placed a hand on her shoulder just as she was about to leave the table.

"I really am glad you're here. I only wish that it could have happened sooner as things were, all we could do was have Snape watch over you and trust that he would keep you safe," Remus said, a hint of sadness creeping into his warm smile.

"He did," Hermione assured him, but Remus didn't release her shoulder.

"Hermione, there are people here who care deeply about you. You can come to any of us for help if you need it, you should know that. Veera and I would be happy to have you stay with us."

Hermione considered Remus' words for a moment. "Thank you. After all I've been through, it means a lot to know that I'm not alone, but there's really no need for you to be concerned I'm fine now."

Remus nodded, the lines of concern around his eyes softening slightly.

"I just wanted you to know," he said. "They are going to be so happy to see you," he added, his eyes looking strangely bright.

"Who is?" Hermione asked curiously.

"Harry and Ginny of course!" Remus explained.

Something about her expression must have given away her shock.

Remus' look of concern returned. "He didn't tell you that?"

Hermione shook her head, thinking that what she'd heard must be some kind of misunderstanding.

"That's not possible. Harry is dead," she said.

The werewolf looked suddenly uncomfortable. "Perhaps Snape should explain it to you."

Hermione didn't waste any time. "Where is he?" she asked.

"Down the corridor to your right, two doors down."

Veera and her son were leaving the bedroom when Hermione reached the door.

"He has eaten. I tended his wounds the best I could and gave him something for the pain. He refused anything to help him sleep," Veera informed Hermione just outside the bedroom.

Hermione noticed that the woman was avoiding her eyes, looking instead to the tray she held in her hands as she spoke.

"Thank you Veera, and you, Gavril."

The boy beamed and puffed his chest out proudly. "You're welcome!"

Veera only nodded as she walked away, followed by her son.

Inside the bedroom the lights were dim, but Hermione could clearly distinguish the outline of Snape sitting up on the bed, his head resting against the headboard.

"How do you feel?" she asked as she approached the bed.

"I shall recover," Snape answered.

Hermione wondered if the man ever admitted to any pain or discomfort.

The exertions of the day were quickly catching up with her and she felt exhausted, but Snape owed her some answers before she could fall asleep.

"Remus told me that Harry is alive," she said without preamble as she disposed of her robes and climbed into the bed.

Snape nodded.

"But that's impossible; I saw him die."

Everyone including prisoners had been forced to stand outside the Ministry in the cold rain and watch her two friends, their bodies battered, torn and bleeding, their arms stretched high above their heads, their broken torsos heaving with each laborious breath as they hung from The Wall of Traitors.

Harry's death had been mercifully quick in comparison to Ron's. Voldemort had climbed onto a scaffold high above the crowd and with a flourish of his wand had cast the Avada Kedavra that had put an end to Harry's life: it had taken Ron hours to die as he lingered suspended from the wall next to the lifeless body of his friend.

"You saw what everyone else saw. Letting the Dark Lord believe he had triumphed was the only way to mitigate the slaughter and ensure that Potter would still be alive to fight when the odds were better," Snape explained.

"How?" she wanted to know.

Snape pushed himself higher on the bed and winced with the effort. "Harry was badly injured and captured during the ambush. He wasn't breathing when they found him. But we managed to break him out and replace him with a decoy before he was tortured and hung on the wall."

Snape's explanation didn't make her feel any better. "Who was the decoy?" she asked, not sure if she wanted to know the answer, but needing to know the identity of the anonymous hero anyway.

"Neville Longbottom."

Hermione gasped. "Neville! You handed Neville over to Voldemort to be tortured and killed?"

"No! Neville volunteered. I was prepared to do it myself, so was Lupin and some of the others. But the potion that we used..." Snape sighed, as if he had told the story so many times that he had grown weary of it. "I designed the potion myself, in case my cover was blown and I needed a long-term disguise to escape. The effects of Polyjuice potion were too short-term, and charms too unstable and easily detected, so I created a potion that combined the long-term effects of a charm with the stability of Polyjuice. The trouble was that the potion had its own set of limitations. Rearranging soft tissues and dead proteins like hair is one thing, but reconfiguring bones and getting them to hold their shape is a nasty business. For the disguise to be convincing, we needed someone with a height and build comparable to Potter's. The match didn't have to be exact, but close enough that someone who knew Potter wouldn't be suspicious. At the time, Neville was the closest match we had."

"Poor Neville," Hermione sobbed.

"The boy couldn't brew the simplest potion if his life depended on it, but he was brave," Snape admitted somberly.

"But wouldn't Voldemort know when he looked into his mind?"

Snape's eyes shifted to an indefinite spot on the wall. "Not if his mind had been so damaged during interrogation that it was impossible to extract any further information. It happens sometimes."

Hermione was going to be ill.

"You?" she asked softly.

Snape nodded. "I was entrusted with his interrogation while the Dark Lord planned his seize of the Ministry. The only stipulation was that the boy should still be alive when I finished with him. It was an odd sort of mercy; I don't think Longbottom was aware of much of what happened after that."

Despite the warmth of the room, Hermione felt a chill course through her body. It would take tremendous commitment or inconceivable callousness to do what Snape had done maybe a combination of both.

"Get some sleep; there'll be plenty of time to talk tomorrow," Snape said suddenly. "If I know Lupin, he's calling a town meeting on account of your arrival even as we speak."

Hermione lay down and closed her eyes, basking in the warmth of the little cottage and the softness of the bed, but sleep was slow to come her thoughts kept drifting to the possibility that she would soon see Harry alive and well, and to the certainty that she would never see Neville Longbottom again.

Sharper than a Serpent's Tooth

Chapter 13 of 16

[Hermione] had little knowledge about Snape's relationship with Lucius Malfoy, but she was certain that the Minister could not be trusted. For all they knew, it was Malfoy himself who had killed the young girl in order to lure Snape back.

Their cottage in the town of New Hope was little more than a three-room shack with a single bedroom and a small bathroom attached. It had belonged to Rufus Ainsworth, whom Hermione had been saddened to learn had been executed shortly after his arrest without divulging any information.

"It's not much, but it's all we have available at this moment," Remus said apologetically, looking around the small living room with its scant, worn-out furnishings.

"It will be sufficient," Snape stated.

Despite the injuries sustained the previous day, Snape had insisted that he was well enough to make the move into their own place and that there was no need for them to further inconvenience Remus and Veera. Hermione had got the impression that the wizard just wanted to be away from the others.

Remus had shown them the few yards to the cottage, and Veera had provided Hermione with a set of cream-colored robes and a warm cloak. The robes were not as voluminous as the ones she owned and they were a little too short, but Hermione gladly exchanged them for the red robes that announced her pregnancy to anyone that cared to know. She was not ashamed of her condition, but neither was she prepared to answer the questions that the circumstances surrounding the conception would no doubt raise.

She walked into the kitchen and began to examine the sparse contents of the cupboards. Low voices drifted in from the living room where Snape and Lupin had remained.

"You didn't tell her about Harry," Lupin said.

"I didn't think it was prudent at the time."

"He trusted you to keep her safe and bring her to us."

"She is here, is she not?"

"She is pregnant."

"That's none of Potter's business, Lupin, or yours."

"I'm only warning you that Harry is bound to find out, and he might not see it quite that way."

"You mean he doesn't know yet?"

"I didn't think it was my place to tell him."

Hermione heard the front door open, and the two wizards stopped talking suddenly. Curious, she started for the living room when the door to the kitchen burst open, and a pair of powerful arms lifted Hermione off the floor in a bear hug that threatened to cut off her respiration.

A loud, screeching voice sounded from just beyond the doorway. "Charlie Weasley, are you trying to suffocate that girl? Put her down!"

Molly Weasley pushed aside a grinning Charlie and wrapped a protective arm around Hermione's shoulders. "It is so good to finally see you again, dear. How are you?"

"I'm well, thank you," Hermione answered, her eyes welling up with tears.

The trials of the past few years were apparent on the woman's lined face and copiously gray hair. Hermione could scarcely imagine the pain of losing five children and a husband in such a short period of time.

Over breakfast that morning, Lupin had filled Hermione in on the details of the events following the ambush. All the protectors had been killed that night except for himself and Kingsley, who had managed to escape to the remote valley that would become the town of New Hope. Of the decoys, all had been captured, and only she and Fleur had been spared. Fleur had apparently been deemed too old for one of the reformation camps and had been sent to work in one of the Ministry-sanctioned bordellos instead. She had been moved two years later, and Lupin and the others had lost track of her whereabouts then.

Molly patted Hermione's back consolingly. "Oh, there there, no need for tears now; I've shed enough of my own."

"I'm sorry. I'm just a bit overwhelmed, I guess." Hermione offered a weak smile as she wiped the tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand.

"I've brought a few things I thought you might need. How about we spruce up this kitchen; what do you say? Have you had breakfast yet?" Molly's voice lacked some of the optimism that Hermione remembered; it was now the voice of someone who had become accustomed to presenting a brave front, even when circumstances didn't warrant it.

Hermione nodded and looked around the room. Remus and Snape had joined them. Other than Kingsley, Harry and Ginny, it seemed that the people gathered there were all that was left of the army that had once dreamt of defeating Voldemort. It hardly seemed enough to try again.

"Where are Harry and Ginny?" she asked, suddenly remembering.

"Kingsley, Harry and Ginny are away, but we've sent them word of your arrival, and they should be here shortly," Remus offered.

"They are going to be so happy to see you," Molly said with a reassuring smile as she started bustling around the kitchen and dispensing orders. "Charlie, bring those boxes in here! No, not that one; those are linens. Remus, would you kindly take them to the bedroom? Goodness, look at this sink!"

One flourish of Molly Weasley's wand, and the sink began to fill with sudsy water, a broom started to dance across the floor, and plates flew from their boxes to line themselves neatly on the shelves.

By noon everyone had departed, and Snape had retired to the bedroom looking haggard and withdrawn. This left Hermione's afternoon free for her to ponder her circumstances and the events that had led to them. No longer a prisoner, a world of possibilities and choices had opened up before her, but Voldemort's presence still loomed in the distance, and there was the open question of her relationship with Snape. None of the old acquaintances she had encountered so far had questioned her decision to continue to share a roof with the moody wizard even though it was no longer a requirement, although Remus had in his own roundabout way expressed some concerns. Hermione knew that was something that was bound to change. She only hoped she could come up with an explanation other than that she didn't want to seem ungrateful to the wizard now that she was back with her old friends.

She must have fallen asleep on the small couch in front of the living room fire, because the sun was already starting to descend when she awoke to find Snape looking down at her. Hermione noticed that he looked much more rested than he had that morning, although he still seemed to be favoring his right side.

"It's almost time for the meeting; we should join the others in the Meeting Hall," Snape announced.

The Meeting Hall was a large building in the center of town, and as they approached, Hermione could see people already milling about. She searched the small crowd for familiar faces and felt relieved when she saw Molly making her way to the entrance. The older woman paused, and Hermione followed her gaze toward the sky. Three figures mounted on brooms were approaching at breakneck speed, their outlines clearly visible against the setting sun.

"It's Harry!" a young boy exclaimed from somewhere behind her.

Hermione was running before his feet even touched the ground and then she was tumbling down in a tangle of gangly limbs and robes as both Harry and Ginny leaped from their brooms and threw themselves at her. For some time there were no words, only sobs as the three embraced each other, until Harry looked uncomfortably at the curious crowd gathered around them and jumped to his feet, offering both Ginny and Hermione each a hand up.

Harry's eyes were moist with tears as he continued to cling to Hermione's hand, and Ginny seemed unable to stop grinning. Harry was still thin but taller, his unruly mop of black hair looking even more so from the long broom ride. Dark, thin stubble covered his lower face and gone were the awkwardness and clumsiness of his days at Hogwarts. He stood with the confidence of someone used to taking charge. Ginny looked older and thinner, but still very much like her mother.

They had so much to talk about, yet none seemed to know what to say. Hermione was grateful when Snape spoke up from behind her.

"We should go inside; I believe we have official business to discuss before the town meeting starts."

Harry nodded, released Hermione's hand, and started for the building, broom slung over one shoulder. He gave Hermione a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes as he walked past her. Kingsley, who had arrived with the other two but had remained standing back, now stepped forward.

"It's been hard on him, knowing that you were alive somewhere and he couldn't just go and get you," Kingsley explained as he shook Hermione's hand.

"We practically had to restrain him to keep him from jumping on his broom and taking off when Snape told us he had found you," Ginny added.

"The others are waiting," Snape reminded them, and Hermione nodded.

The main hall inside the building was brightly lit and furnished with long benches that could easily accommodate a couple hundred people. Hermione and Snape followed Ginny and Kingsley down a corridor to a smaller room.

Snape closed the door behind them and cast a silencing charm around the room; Remus, Molly, Charlie and Harry were already waiting inside.

A round table with eight chairs sat in the middle of the room, and Snape and Hermione took a seat along with the others.

"Harry insisted that there always be a chair for you at each meeting," Ginny informed her.

Hermione was touched by the thoughtful gesture, but no sooner had the meeting started that she began to feel out of place. There were so many things of which she was unaware that had to be explained to her.

Harry opened the meeting by informing the others that the mission had been a success and that the sixth Horcrux had been destroyed. Apparently, after the war, Harry had carried on with his plan of finding and destroying Voldemort's Horcruxes. That Harry himself had at one time been a Horcrux, and that a piece of Voldemort's soul had been released from his body during the night of the ambush when Harry was hit by a death curse from Voldemort's wand, came as a shock to Hermione, but when she thought back to Harry's strange connection to Voldemort and his ability to speak Pasetlongue, it made sense.

"The final one is going to be tricky though; it's Nagini, Voldemort's snake, and he always keeps it close to him," Harry concluded, and he immediately turned to Charlie to inquire about the progress of flying lessons for the new students.

Molly explained to Hermione that the anti-Apparition wards encompassed not only the town, but the immediate mountains and caves, and no fireplace in the village was

connected to the Floo, not even the back-connections that Snape used; the only way in or out of the village was to hike for several kilometers as she and Snape had done, or to fly high above both the mountains and the wards children began flying lessons as soon as they were old enough to sit a broom.

"Progress is good, but you were missed as usual," Charlie supplied. "Don't worry, Hermione, we have a few thestrals," he added with a wink, and Hermione smiled her relief.

"Any new arrivals besides Hermione and the hand-witch?" Kingsley asked.

Lupin shook his head. "About that..." he said and produced a roll of parchment out of his robes.

Everyone leaned forward to look at the front page of that morning's edition of the *Daily Prophet* as Lupin unfurled it onto the table. Molly turned quickly away, Ginny gasped and Hermione felt Snape tense beside her but she still could not get a good enough look as everyone huddled around the page. She finally managed to read the headline: **Minister's Hand-Witch Kidnapped and Gruesomely Murdered!**

The photograph just below the headline showed the sprawled body of the girl Hermione had met only days before at the hand-witch's trial, the front of her robes soaked with blood, her mouth open in a silent scream, her unseeing eyes wide as she lay on a public sidewalk. The words *Mudblood Whore* were scribbled on a wall behind the body in what appeared to be blood.

Hermione felt her stomach revolt, and she took several deep breaths trying to calm her urge to vomit.

"I thought it prudent to halt all rescues until we have more information about what is happening," Remus said.

The others nodded their agreement, but Hermione was still confused.

"Rescues?" she asked.

Kingsley filled her in on the details. "For several years, we've been smuggling low-profile Muggleborns and sympathizers out of Wizarding Britain anyone who would be an asset to the cause but whose disappearance wouldn't raise too many flags. Just last month, we successfully rescued our first hand-witch, but according to our informants, three hand-witches were reported kidnapped last month, and we know we only took one. There've been others in the past year, although the Ministry has been careful to keep the situation under wraps. And now this." Kingsley motioned toward the newspaper. "We were hoping that records from the Center would give us more information about who the other missing hand-witches were, and what happened to them."

"Do you think someone is kidnapping and killing hand-witches?" Hermione asked of no one in particular.

"Muggleborns," Snape said softly. It was the first word he spoke since the meeting had started.

When the others turned to look at him, he pointed to the word *Mudblood* in the photograph.

"Snape, do you have any idea of who is behind this?" Lupin asked.

"I might," he answered as he ran a finger over his lower lip and stared thoughtfully at the photograph. "Lupin, may I borrow your broom?" Snape asked suddenly.

Hermione frowned. "Where are you going?" she asked, as anxious as the others to find out about any theory Snape might have.

"I need to speak to Lucius," Snape stated calmly.

Hermione felt the first stirrings of uneasiness. "Are you sure that's prudent?"

"It isn't as much prudent as it is necessary, Miss Granger," Snape answered.

Hermione waited for someone to object.

"Sure. Veera is probably already in the Main Hall, but you can let yourself into the house you know where I keep it," Remus said after a moment.

"No!" Hermione protested. "He can't go back! It was Malfoy who sent the Death Eaters after us. They'll catch him, and he'll be killed!"

Everyone was looking at her as if she had suddenly started speaking in a strange tongue no one could understand; Harry's eyes practically burned through her.

"Miss Granger," Snape began softly. "Your concern is unfounded. It wasn't me Lucius sent the soldiers after, but you. My life would not have been in peril had I not attacked them."

"What about Voldemort?" Hermione asked, her agitation increasing.

"I'm certain that by now the Dark Lord has heard about my insurrection, but I have ways of contacting Lucius without the Dark Lord's knowledge."

She had little knowledge about Snape's relationship with Lucius Malfoy, but she was certain that the Minister could not be trusted. For all they knew, it was Malfoy himself who had killed the young girl in order to lure Snape back.

Lupin's voice intruded into her thoughts. "Hermione, Snape knows what he is doing; he can take care of himself. We need whatever information he can procure."

"You are safe here, Hermione. You can stay with me and Harry," Ginny offered in a cheerful tone that grated against Hermione's heart.

She knew they needed the information, was well aware that the lives of other hand-witches depended on it, but for a reason she couldn't explain, the thought of Snape being captured and killed filled her with dread. It took all of her will for Hermione to push her reservations aside and nod her agreement.

~*~

Severus hesitated for the space of a heartbeat before he entered Lucius' study. Despite his words of reassurance to Hermione, Severus was uncertain of what awaited him on the other side.

The door closed behind him with a soft click. A fire roared inside the fireplace, and Lucius sat on a high-back chair directly in front of it, his body slightly slumped as he stared into the orange flames. Across the room stood Draco. Looking regal in purple velvet robes, he leaned against a window frame as he stared out of the pristine glass into the night.

"Come to gloat, Severus?" Lucius asked without looking at him. His skin looked waxy in the firelight, his eyes strangely dark and sunken.

"I've come to offer my condolences and to seek your counsel," Severus replied with a slight bow.

Lucius looked nonplussed. "Do you hear that, Draco? Severus expresses sorrow at my loss and deems my advice worth seeking."

Draco glared at his father, his face pinched, lips pressed tightly into a thin line, and Severus noticed for the first time the red rims around the young man's eyes. Lucius' distress he had expected Severus knew well the value that the proud wizard placed on his progeny and how much he and his wife had hoped for a new child but the

evidence of Draco's recent tears was disconcerting.

Severus waited for Draco to say something, anything that would divulge the source of the tension that he sensed in the room, but after a moment, Draco quietly returned to look out of the window.

Severus tried again. "Lucius, I know that this is a most inopportune time given your recent loss, but it is important..."

Lucius' hoarse voice cut across Severus' softly spoken words. "And tell me, Severus, what do you know about my loss when you've whisked away your own riches to safety at my expense and against the same advice you now so keenly seek?"

Lucius' caustic tone surprised Severus, and he quirked his brow. He was aware that his hasty departure must have caused Lucius no small measure of strife with the Dark Lord, but he also knew that Lucius had slithered his way out of worse in the past.

"Surely you don't think that I had anything to do with what happened to your hand-witch and child!" Severus exclaimed.

For the first time since Severus had entered the room, Lucius looked directly at him.

"You, Severus? With your acerbic tongue and yielding heart? No. This is the work of a different kind of snake, one not as aggressive but far more lethal when it does strike."

Severus followed Lucius' gaze to the window where Draco stood, his head now bowed as in penitence, and a terrible understanding dawned on him.

"Draco?" he called hesitantly.

The young man's head snapped up, and he looked at Severus.

"I didn't know they were going to do *that* to her!" he yelled. "*I didn't know!*" he repeated, this time looking at Lucius, his words sounding more like a plea as tears threatened to erupt again.

Severus was on him in two steps. "Who, Draco, *who*?"

"I don't know."

Severus' fingers wrapped tightly around Draco's slender arm and dug into the fine fabric of his robes. "Then tell me what you do know."

Draco's eyes shifted briefly to his father, and out of the corner of his eye Severus saw Lucius' slight nod.

"They call themselves the Knights of Domitian. They are pure-bloods who believe that our blood should remain pure. They have a leader, but I've never met him."

"So killing the Minister's pregnant hand-witch was a public declaration against mixing the blood of pure-bloods with that of Muggleborns?" Severus asked.

"It was a loyalty pledge. To become part of the group, one must first cleanse its house."

Lucius snorted his disgust. "He doesn't even realize he's been used!"

"Macnair did it too," Draco offered lamely.

"Macnair? Macnair's hand-witch was tried in the pit for aborting his child," Severus observed.

Draco looked defiant now, his remorse seemingly evaporating under the heat of Severus' questioning and his father's scorn. "Macnair set her up. He placed the Emmenagogue potion in her quarters knowing that she would use it, then walked in at an opportune time and turned her in to the Ministry."

Snape nodded; he knew the pure-blooded wizard was capable of that and more. "So, Macnair who else?"

"Umbridge she seems to speak for the leader, whoever that is. She was the one who approached me, told me about the group and that they wanted me to join them. She was also the one who waited for me in the woods behind the manor when I lured the hand-witch out. She wore a hooded robe then, but I would know that sickeningly sweet voice anywhere," Draco offered.

Severus remembered another voice he had heard while he lay wounded in the hallway of his home *it's Umbridge you should be worried about; that blood-traitor Malfoy will get his soon enough* Yaxley's voice.

"Who else?"

"I told you, I don't know! Everyone wears hooded robes to the meetings; I thought I recognized some of the voices. Nott, maybe Crabbe. I didn't recognize anyone else."

Except for Umbridge, the people Draco had named were all members of the Dark Lord's inner circle, those nearest and dearest to him, the ones he would least suspect. The hand-witch program had been controversial from the start, and discontent amongst many of the pure-bloods had been brewing for a long time, but Severus never imagined that they had grown so organized or so bold.

"Does the Dark Lord know?" Snape asked Lucius.

"Our Lord is blind; he still thinks this was all brought about by a handful of Potter's followers trying to cause discord within our ranks."

Severus tensed at the mention of the name was it possible the Dark Lord suspected that Potter was still alive?

"Potter's been dead for seven years, and the Dark Lord still blames all his woes on the boy," Lucius commented with a dry chuckle.

Lucius' words put Severus' mind somewhat at ease on the matter if the Dark Lord had any suspicions about Potter, he would have shared them with Lucius.

"And have you not enlightened him?" Severus pressed on.

"Thanks to you, Severus, I no longer have Our Lord's ear or trust the way I used to. You want me to go accusing members of his inner circle of treason? And on what proof: the word of my traitorous son?"

"I just wanted that Mudblood whore out of my house!" Draco exploded.

Lucius jumped to his feet. "*Your* house?"

The implied threat of disownment had its predictable effect; Draco lowered his head as he looked away.

Seemingly satisfied, Lucius returned to his chair. "I need a word with Severus; go help your mother pack," he ordered. "And for fuck's sake take off those robes!" he added as Draco rushed out of the study.

"Is Narcissa going on a trip?" Severus asked as he took the seat that Lucius offered him.

"I'm sending her and Draco abroad. Wizarding Britain is no longer safe."

Severus wanted to point out that it had never been, not since the ascendance of the Dark Lord, but he held his tongue.

"What about the children?" he asked instead.

Lucius frowned. "What children?"

It was just like Lucius not to think about things beyond the scope of what affected him directly. It was one of the many flaws in his character that Severus had learned to accept and circumvent.

"The children of pure-blood wizards and hand-witches. Have they become a target?"

Lucius seemed to give the question some thought. He shook his head after a moment. "There is one other pregnant hand-witch that went missing a while back. I haven't heard anything about any murdered or missing children yet."

Yet. Severus felt his guts clench. The other hand-witch to whom Lucius referred was safely hidden at New Hope. The murder of children always produced a general outcry, and for whatever reason the Knights of Domitian weren't prepared to draw that kind of attention to themselves yet. But Severus had no doubt that should they ever seize control, the mass slaughter of children would soon follow.

In his mind he saw the image of one child in particular, a little girl with brown curls and chubby cheeks, reaching out to him from inside a framed photograph.

He only had one question left for Lucius. "Why did you send Yaxley, Macnair and the others after my hand-witch?"

Something oddly akin to regret fled across Lucius' features. "I still believed I could save us both. Her existence was starting to raise too many questions already; you have no idea the amount of memos Wishington has had to reroute in the past couple of weeks! Umbridge discovered that it was my signature on the allocation papers and the stay of banishment, and she was speculating about why you didn't go through the normal channels to procure a hand-witch. When she saw the girl's questionable behavior at the trial, she wasted no time in bringing your lack of control over her actions to the attention of Our Lord. Like I told you before, it was only a matter of time.

"When the other hand-witch disappeared right in front of the soldiers' eyes as she was led away from the pit, I knew that your hand-witch had got to you somehow, convinced you to help the other one. I know you, Severus; it isn't like you to volunteer when it comes down to rape and torture. I thought if I could dispose of the girl... it doesn't matter now," Lucius concluded with a sigh.

"You should have come to me; I could have managed it."

"No, you couldn't have. When it comes to that girl, you're as blind as Our Lord, Severus. She has made you that way." Lucius' tone lacked the disgust and contempt that Severus would have expected. Maybe the old snake wasn't as irredeemable as Severus had once thought.

Severus couldn't deny that his attraction to the girl had clouded his judgment on more than one occasion, but there were also other considerations: promises and commitments he had made, to others and to himself, and Severus was nothing if not a man of his word.

He waited for Lucius to say more, but the wizard had turned his attention back to the flames that danced cheerily under the ornate mantle.

"My home defiled, my son a traitor, my loyalty to the Dark Lord in question... my days are numbered, Severus," Lucius mused aloud.

There were no words of reassurance that Severus could offer Lucius: perhaps they were all doomed. He rose quietly and made his way to the door. He paused with his hand on the brass doorknob when he heard Lucius' voice again.

"Good luck, Severus."

"And to you, my friend," Severus whispered as he stepped into the corridor outside the study and closed the door behind him.

Draco was waiting for him just around the corner from the study. The young man's steel-gray eyes, so much like his father's, looked haunted and dull, and his bottom lip quivered.

"They cut her open, Severus," he said bluntly. "They cut her open and pulled the baby out. It was awful."

Severus didn't react. He thought instead of another young man many years earlier, one too full of naive bravado and ambition to fully take into account the price he would have to pay for the choices he made, until it was too late.

"My father is going to die, isn't he?" Draco asked suddenly.

"Not if we can help it," Severus responded with an assurance he didn't feel.

Draco snorted derisively. "What can we do? There are too many of them, and we can't go to the Dark Lord!"

A plan was taking form in Severus' mind, one plagued with risks and unknowns.

"No. But perhaps there's another way. Here's what I need you to do. Get your mother and wife to safety and then return to Britain. Go to Umbridge. Tell her that you have severed your ties to your family and are ready to embrace the Knights of Domitian as your new kin. Find out everything you can about what they plan to do next. I will meet you by the bent oak tree in the woods behind the manor just after sunset in three days. Do you remember where it is?"

Draco nodded.

"Give me whatever information you have gathered, and in exchange, I will do what I can to help your father. Have you been practicing your Occlumency?"

Draco nodded confidently.

"Do we have an agreement, then?"

Draco stared quietly at Severus for a moment before he nodded his head. "Yes."

"Very well. I will see you again in three days."

"Do you really think this will work, that my family will be safe?"

Severus didn't want to offer Draco any false hopes. "The outcome depends on the contents of the information you bring back," Severus explained.

Severus rushed off to inform the others of what he had learnt, the thought that the future of the wizarding world now rested partially on the shoulders of Draco Malfoy settling uneasily in his gut.

Truths of the Heart

Chapter 14 of 16

Snape suddenly stopped yelling, and Hermione could do nothing but stare agape at him. She knew he had not meant to say so much, and he looked horrified by his own confessions.

Hermione had turned down Ginny and Harry's offer to stay with them, choosing instead to spend the night alone at the cottage despite their baffled looks. She had been waiting for Snape, on the living-room couch where she had succumbed to sleep several hours earlier, when he arrived early that morning carrying his broom in one arm and cradling a cauldron filled with an assortment of potion ingredients, a couple of books, and her few personal items (including the photograph of her daughter that she usually kept by her bedside) in the other.

The news that Snape had brought back was unnerving, but Hermione was secretly relieved that he had returned at all. An impromptu meeting had been, called and they had spent the better part of the morning discussing the pros and cons of the latest developments. The fact that Voldemort could no longer count on the loyal support of the same pure-bloods who had driven him to power was positive news, but Voldemort was the evil they knew, and they had little idea what to expect from this new foe. The Knights of Domitian's activities could prove to be an effective diversion behind which to conceal their own activities, but at the same time their reckless attacks could draw attention to what had until that time been a discreet and secretive operation. In the end, the only thing that they had all agreed on was that they didn't have enough information and would have to wait until after Snape's rendezvous with Draco before they could decide on an appropriate course of action.

After the meeting, Snape had set about quietly brewing potions in the kitchen while Hermione prepared their lunch from the supplies that Molly had provided the previous day. There was a certain feeling of domesticity about those activities that Hermione found both comforting and unsettling.

Hermione cast furtive glances in Snape's direction as she scraped the remnants of their lunch from the plates.

"Miss Granger."

Hermione looked up from the sink full of dishes at the mention of her name.

"I believe that your time could be better invested in other ways."

Snape was placing several vials of potions into a small pouch.

Hermione smiled. "I don't mind. I grew up in a Muggle household; washing dishes without the aid of magic is not exactly new to me," she pointed out.

"What I meant is that there is something more important that requires your attention if you will come with me."

Her curiosity aroused, Hermione dried her hands, donned her cloak and followed Snape out of the house.

The town was somewhat larger than Hermione had first imagined. For a while she and Snape treaded through winding, unpaved roads lined with snow-dusted cottages. The back roads were mostly quiet, but once they reached the center of town, Hermione found herself amidst a bustle of activity. The buildings were much larger here, and she was surprised to discover that some of them were shops. Witches and wizards clad in heavy cloaks shuffled through the fresh snow as they went about their business, some with young children tottering along. It was an oasis of normalcy in a world turned upside-down by war.

"How many people live here?" she asked Snape.

"Last count nearly six-hundred. Kingsley would have the exact figure; he keeps track of all new arrivals," Snape answered as he continued to walk stiffly beside her.

"Six-hundred!" Hermione was stunned by the figure she had expected a far lesser number.

Snape didn't seem so impressed. "Only about two-hundred-and-fifty are able-bodied witches and wizards the rest are crippled, too young or too old for battle. There are also a few Muggles."

Hermione stopped short. "Muggles?"

Snape nodded. "Many of the residents are Muggleborns; some brought relatives along when they fled."

The thought of her own parents assaulted Hermione.

"My parents were in Australia when it happened," she said tentatively.

"They still are," Snape informed her.

Hermione's eyes grew wide she had hoped that her charms had held, but always harbored the fear that they had not.

"Harry told us what you had done very clever of you. Kingsley checks on them occasionally, but we deemed it kinder to them not to remove the charms just yet, given our precarious circumstances."

Words couldn't express Hermione's gratitude, and she smiled.

"Where are we going?" she asked Snape, her enthusiasm boosted by the knowledge that her parents were alive and well.

"You need a wand, Miss Granger," Snape stated calmly.

"A wand?"

"That is what I said. Every able-bodied witch and wizard in town over the age of ten is required to carry a wand at all times and to have at least a rudimentary knowledge of how to use it. Kingsley would find me remiss if I failed to provide you with these."

"Kingsley?" she asked.

Snape nodded. "He is in charge of law enforcement in the village, leads the informal Auror training program," Snape responded, a bit out of breath.

"And there is a wand maker here?"

"Obviously. How else would we procure a wand for you?" Snape's tone was clipped, but Hermione suspected that his brusqueness was caused, not by annoyance at the inanity of her questions, but by physical discomfort, and she slowed down her steps.

They reached a two-story, corner building. "We are here," Snape announced.

The interior of the building was small, dusty and dimly lit. Hermione could see several rows of neatly stacked, rectangular boxes behind the massive and intricately carved wooden counter that seemed out of place. Her heart skipped a beat; soon one of those wands would be hers, and only hers.

"I'll be right there!" a voice called from the top of the spiral staircase.

A tall and lanky man ambled down the steps. His height was impressive, his hands the size of saucers. Had it not been for his incongruously thin frame, he would have reminded Hermione of Hagrid.

"What can I do for you this fine morning?" the man asked in a voice that boomed inside the room despite its amiable tone.

"Miss Granger needs a wand," Snape informed him.

"Well, of course she does!" the man said, studying Hermione. "I take it this isn't your first wand," he said after a moment.

Hermione shook her head. "The first one was vine wood with a dragon heartstring core, but it's gone now."

The man squeezed behind the counter and began to look through the shelves. "Well, not much vine wood around these parts, but plenty of dragon hearts." He opened several boxes and discarded each one in turn. "No. No. Hum... no."

Impatience and excitement were eating away at Hermione; she had the most irrational urge to grab the nearest box and start trying out wands one by one, but her good sense and manners prevailed. Finally, the man produced a golden wand and placed it in her hand. A tingle spread through Hermione's fingers, and she knew even before she cast the *Engorgio* charm that it was the right one.

The man clapped his hands with the delight of a child. "Aha! I was right! Yew, 12 1/2 inches, dragon heartstring!" he declared.

The wand was beautiful—light gold with a buttery smooth surface and delicate carvings on the handle. Hermione twirled the wand thoughtfully between her fingers until that moment, she had not considered the matter of payment. Snape stepped forward and pulled the wand-maker aside. After a brief discussion, Snape handed over the pouch filled with potions. The man nodded, smiled, and showed them to the door.

"I'll pay for it. I'll find something I can do around here to earn money, and I'll pay for it," she muttered just outside the door, unable to take her eyes away from the wand.

"No need, Miss Granger. Currency doesn't have much use around here. Ivan suffers from a multitude of aches and pains brought on by his medical condition; I brewed a few potions that should help alleviate the symptoms, and he is quite satisfied," Snape informed her.

"Is he very ill?" Hermione asked.

"Not exactly. The way I understand it, it is a condition from which he has suffered from birth; it accounts for his above average height."

Hermione nodded. She had once read something about Gigantism in a Muggle medical text her parents kept, and she knew enough about magical creatures to understand that despite its name, the condition was not related to Giant ancestry, but to a malfunction of the pituitary gland in otherwise perfectly average humans.

Hermione smiled, threw her arms around Snape's torso and kissed him on the cheek.

"Thank you," she whispered against the side of his face. She felt his body stiffen in her arms.

"Hermione!"

Hermione turned around to see Ginny trotting towards them through the snow.

"I've been looking for you. I see you got a wand! Harry told me to make sure you did. Come on, you have a lot of practicing to do if you're going to catch up to me!"

Ginny pulled insistently on Hermione's hand, but Hermione's legs refused to move. She cast an uncertain glance in Snape's direction.

"We were just on our way to go find you, Miss Weasley. I assumed you wanted to begin practice sessions with Miss Granger right away," Snape said in a soft, even tone that sounded almost cordial.

"I thought you would be teaching me," Hermione interjected.

Surely Snape was a more qualified instructor than Ginny. Hermione loved her friend, but she had a hard time picturing her as a competent, or even serious, teacher.

"I have other responsibilities to fulfill. The full moon is only a week away, and I have to brew enough Wolfsbane potion for the dozen or so werewolves who reside in the village, including Lupin and his family," Snape explained.

Hermione tried not to let her disappointment show for the sake of her friend. "I'll be home by supper time," she informed Snape, but the wizard was already walking away.

"Come on, I know the perfect spot!" Ginny exclaimed, practically dragging Hermione in the opposite direction.

~*~

"You just have to concentrate harder, Hermione." Hermione heard Ginny say, just as the silver mist in front of her dissipated into thin air.

The past two days had been an exercise in both triumph and determination. Ginny had proven to be a far more successful teacher than Hermione had anticipated; whether that was due to Ginny's skills or Hermione's resolve was hard to tell, but in the past forty-eight hours Hermione had mastered several spells far more complex than anything she had learned at Hogwarts. She could now cast a barrier strong enough to block hexes and jinxes, and she had come up with what Ginny thought was quite an ingenious way to turn a chunk of ice into a temporary key. Yet, the ability to produce a fully formed Patronus eluded her. No matter what memory she used, all attempts to produce a Patronus more substantial than a silver blob had been in vain. The once happy memories of her younger years were now nothing more than reminders of all she had lost.

The sun was quickly setting in the horizon, and Hermione returned her wand to the sleeve of her robes.

"I think we've done enough for today," she said.

Ginny shrugged. "We still have at least another half-hour of sunlight left, and we can light some torches afterwards if you want."

The truth was that Hermione missed Snape. Between her lessons with Ginny, Snape's brewing, and Lupin and Kingsley's constant demands on Snape's attention, the two had barely spoken, and the following day he would be leaving for his meeting with Draco.

"I have to prepare dinner," Hermione lied.

"Mum cooks for Harry and I; you could join us!"

"That sounds lovely, Ginny, it really does. But I would still like to rest before dinner time."

Ginny's smile disappeared, and a stern look took its place.

"It's him, isn't it?" she asked.

"Who?"

"Snape. People are talking, Hermione."

Hermione had started walking in the direction of her cottage, and Ginny fell into step next to her, seemingly unwilling to drop the subject.

"Talking about what?" Hermione asked in spite of herself.

"About you and Snape, about how you're still living with him even though we've all offered you a place to stay, about how you change the subject every time we ask about the time you spent with him before coming here."

"I don't want to be a burden to anyone. There was only one empty cottage in the village. Snape and I are the new arrivals, so it makes sense that we should share it. And I've already told you everything about Snape's house and the attack that brought us here. What else is there to tell?"

"I saw you kiss him in front of Ivan's store," Ginny blurted out.

Hermione was moved by the concern she saw on her friend's face. They were standing a few yards outside of the town, near a wooded area, and Hermione dragged Ginny behind the thick trunk of a massive pine tree.

"I'm pregnant, and Snape is the father," she stated calmly.

Ginny blanched. "Shit! Hermione, did he... did he force you?" Ginny whispered, her eyes wide.

"No. I agreed to sleep with him, and he's treated me well, even risked his own life to save mine."

"Are you in love with him?" Ginny asked, her expression making it plain that she found the possibility even more appalling than the news of Hermione's pregnancy.

"I can't answer that," Hermione stated truthfully. "Everything just happened too fast. But you don't need to worry about me; he hasn't hurt me, and I don't believe he will."

Ginny didn't seem convinced. "Hermione, Snape is a spy. Lies and deception come as natural to him as breathing. Are you sure he didn't, you know, maybe trick you into sleeping with him?"

"Maybe at first, but not after. After the second time, I wanted to be with him."

Ginny frowned and looked as if she was about to protest, when Hermione spotted Harry walking towards them.

"I'll explain more later," Hermione whispered loud enough for only Ginny to hear as she waved at Harry.

"Hello, Harry!" Hermione called out.

Harry kissed Ginny on the lips and gave Hermione a peck on the cheek. "I hope Ginny isn't working you too hard; she can be a bit of a dictator," Harry said with a wide grin and a wink.

Ginny responded by elbowing him on the ribs. "Am not!" she protested.

"I think I can hold my own in that department," Hermione joked.

Harry winced dramatically. "Yeah, I forgot about that."

It was at times like these that Hermione was able to glimpse the way things had been, and the feeling was almost painful.

"Molly sent me to find you," Harry said to Ginny. "She said she knows you've been using your sessions with Hermione as an excuse to avoid your chores, and that she will no longer tolerate it."

Ginny rolled her eyes. The three parted ways as they entered the town. Ginny cast a concerned glance in Hermione's direction as she walked away hand-in-hand with Harry, heading toward the house they shared with Molly and Charlie; Hermione continued walking in the direction of her cottage.

~*~

Hermione watched from the bed as Snape donned his robes. The day had dawned cold and dreary; they had made love in the dim light of the early morning, and again in the cramped, rustic bathroom before returning to bed.

Now it was almost time for Snape to leave for his meeting with Draco, and a dark cloud settled over Hermione's heart.

"I have a bad feeling about this," she commented from the bed. She was propped up on the pillows, arms crossed over her chest in a gesture of determination.

"I shan't be long; you'll be safe here until my return. How are your practice sessions with Miss Weasley coming along?"

The question was a diversionary tactic, Hermione knew. Snape had not inquired as to her progress until that moment.

"I still can't produce a Patronus," she informed him.

Snape frowned at this, but did not comment.

How could she explain to him that it wasn't her safety she was concerned about but his? How could she make him understand that the thought of never seeing him again made her heart constrict and her eyes grow damp, when she couldn't understand it herself?

"Take Harry with you," she suggested.

"To Malfoy Manor? Have you taken complete leave of your senses, woman? Do you have any idea of what would happen if the Dark Lord gets so much as an inkling that

Potter is still alive?"

"Then take Remus."

"We need Remus to continue to have access to the Ministry, and he is the only connection we'll have left if something should happen to me. We can't risk both of us getting captured together."

Snape's calm and condescending tone was infuriating.

"Then take someone else just don't go alone!"

"Draco would become suspicious if I were to show up with a stranger; he might not talk."

"You can't trust Draco."

"Under any other circumstances, I would not. But I know in this instance that he wants to make amends to his father; for that reason alone I trust him."

She was about to let Snape know, in no uncertain terms, that as far as she was concerned both Draco and his father could go fuck themselves, when a loud crash from the living-room startled them both, and Snape swiftly reached for his wand.

Harry's voice rang from somewhere inside the house. "Snape!"

Hermione frowned, and Snape gritted his teeth and muttered something Hermione couldn't understand but was certain was nothing pleasant. He stalked out of the room; Hermione reached for her robes to follow him.

She found the two wizards facing each other across the living room, wands drawn, their expressions angry.

"You son of a bitch! We trusted you with her!" Harry yelled, his face red with fury.

"You didn't even know where she was until I told you!" Snape spat.

"You were supposed to keep her safe and bring her to us; instead, you took advantage of her. I knew you couldn't be trusted."

"Wait!" Hermione yelled, but neither wizard was paying attention to her. She jumped in front of Snape and extended her hands imploringly towards Harry.

At that moment, Ginny ran in with Remus and Molly in tow, and Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. The three surrounded Harry, their wands drawn.

"Harry, stop!" Ginny yelled, stomping her foot on the floor, but Harry's grip visibly tightened around his wand, and he refused to lower it.

"Miss Granger and I have an understanding," Snape said through gritted teeth.

Harry's eyes met Hermione's, and he seemed to realize for the first time that his wand was no longer pointed at Snape, but at her chest instead. He slowly lowered his arm, but his stance didn't otherwise change.

"Ginny told me you're pregnant. Is it true?" Harry asked.

Hermione's eyes shifted to Ginny. "You told him?" Hermione asked in disbelief.

Ginny looked contrite, but not enough to admit wrongdoing. "We are worried about you, Hermione! Harry was wondering why you would choose to live here with him instead of with us. It's not right he was supposed to protect you."

"He did!" Hermione argued.

"What did he do? Threaten you? Blackmail you?" Harry asked angrily.

Hermione thought about it. Had Snape ever threatened to send her into exile? She carefully went over their conversations in her mind no, he had never threatened her, only allowed her to believe that which she had been so ready to believe about him.

"No. He didn't threaten me, and he didn't blackmail me either."

"Then what was it: a spell, a potion?" Harry pressed on.

The avid expressions on the others' faces told her that they were as curious about her relationship with Snape as Harry was, although not as willing to share their concerns.

"It's none of your business, Potter!" Snape hissed from behind her, and Harry made to step around her before Remus restrained him.

"Enough!" Hermione yelled.

Everyone stared at her wide-eyed, and Hermione squared her shoulders and raised her chin.

"Harry, I understand and appreciate your concern, but Snape is right; my pregnancy and how it came about is none of your business. The same goes for the rest of you. I don't want to hear another word on the matter unless I bring it up. Is that understood?"

Molly nodded, and Remus smiled and shrugged his shoulders, but Harry and Ginny still seemed unconvinced.

"You heard the lady; put them away, boys," Molly announced and wrapped a loving but stiff arm around Ginny's shoulders.

"You too, Ginny," she added.

When all the wands were put away, Molly smiled and patted Harry on the back.

"Well, glad that's settled. Now I best get home; I think I left something on the stove. Remus, didn't you have something you wanted to show Harry?"

Remus looked confused for a moment before he seemed to catch on. "Oh, yes. Yes. I need you to take a look at my broom, Harry, if you don't mind. It seems to be pulling a little to the left."

"Come along, dear," Molly said as she guided a reluctant Ginny toward the door.

Remus wrapped an arm around Harry's shoulders and did likewise with Harry.

"This isn't over you're going to pay for this, Snape!" Harry spat over his shoulder as he allowed Remus to pull him away and shut the door behind them.

The moment the door closed, Snape grabbed hold of Hermione's arm and spun her around.

"Never again step in front of me like that when I have a wand pointed at me!" he hissed into her face.

Hermione wrenched her arm away and took a step back. "You're welcome. Harry wouldn't have hexed me, anyway."

"He might not have meant to do it, but it could have happened!"

"Then maybe next time, I'll let him hex you!"

"I can hold my own against Potter."

"Maybe. And maybe you wouldn't have to if you had done the right thing!"

"Are you saying his actions were justified?"

"I'm saying that they were understandable under the circumstances."

Snape's face twisted with rage, and an unbecoming, pink tint colored his cheeks.

"I did everything I could!" he spat. "I watched over you, used my contacts inside the Ministry to keep informed about your status! I made sure you were placed in the best homes where you were least likely to be mistreated! For five years I followed your every move, and when I found out that you had been slated for banishment despite my best efforts..."

Snape suddenly stopped yelling, and Hermione could do nothing but stare agape at him. She knew he had not meant to say so much, and he looked horrified by his own confessions.

"And when you found out I had been slated for banishment what?" Hermione asked when at last she found her voice.

Snape looked both defeated and as if a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. "I went to the Ministry and petitioned Lucius for a hand-witch," he said softly, his eyes averted.

"You asked Lucius for me?" she asked incredulously.

"I didn't have to he offered you to me but I would have if it had come to that."

"But but when I got to your house, you said you didn't want me."

"Wishington was there I'd rather Lucius didn't think I was too eager to save your life, but at the same time, I couldn't pretend not to know who you were in case Lucius was already aware of your identity."

Snape said no more his eyes studied her as if he were trying to decipher her reaction.

Ginny had been right; Snape was a master at deception, worse than Hermione had known. She hadn't just been available; he had targeted her. He had lain in wait, watching her like a predator does its prey, and then pounced when she was at her most vulnerable. Her eyes filled with tears, and the words caught in her throat.

"All those years... why didn't you contact me, let me know?"

"We couldn't rescue you then, and we all agreed that it was best you didn't know of our existence. It was too great a risk should you be interrogated for whatever reason and..." Snape hesitated. "After two years in one of the Dark Lord's re-education camps, we had to make certain you could still be trusted," he stated coldly.

Hermione could understand taking precautions to protect the knowledge of their existence, even if it had been at her expense, but to know that her friends, those she believed knew her best, could think her untrustworthy, was like a knife-wound to the heart.

"And even if I couldn't be trusted, I was still good enough for you to use."

"No! During the years I spent watching over you, I grew to realize what an exceptional witch you are. When I realized I had no other recourse but to bring you into my home I just hoped that perhaps, out of gratitude..." Snape seemed to have given up on trying to offer an explanation. "I'm sorry," he concluded.

An unbearable pressure built inside her chest and threatened to erupt she didn't want him to see her cry. Hermione ran into the bedroom and slammed the door shut behind her, dissolving into sobs.

It was only when the house grew quiet that she realized Snape had left for his meeting with Draco, and she hadn't said goodbye.

Hermione knew that Snape was supposed to meet Draco at sunset, and she didn't expect him back that night, but when he had not returned by morning, she began to grow concerned.

She paced around the house, and when the walls began to close in on her, she went out into the frigid morning to take a walk down by the lake where she and Ginny had held their practice sessions.

She sat on a rock by the lake, heedless of the bone-chilling cold or the dampness that seeped through her wool cloak. She was angry angry at Snape for not being honest with her, angry at herself for not being able to forgive him, and angry at the others for not minding their own business.

She looked up when a shadow appeared next to her. Remus took a seat on a nearby rock and for a long time said nothing; he only stared out at the frozen lake.

"Hermione, I feel I need to talk to you," he said hoarsely after a while.

"Have you heard from Snape?" she quickly asked.

Remus shook his head. "No, it's not about Snape; it's about Veera."

Hermione's head whipped around to look at Remus.

"Is she alright?" In the short time she had known her, Hermione had grown fond of the unassuming woman and her vivacious son.

"She is not ill or in danger if that's what you're asking, but I don't know if she will ever be alright," Remus answered.

Hermione frowned. "What do you mean?"

"After Tonks died and we lost the war, I was numb for a long time. I was spending most of my time with Fenrir's pack, in the service of the Dark Lord."

"But you were a spy; you really weren't one of them," Hermione quickly pointed out.

"For all intents and purposes, I was. Someone who hasn't lived through it probably wouldn't understand the things I've seen, the things I've had to do it changes a person, does something to the soul. I kept searching for some meaning, some way to make sense of it all."

"One full moon, the pack came across this small cabin in the woods with a family inside. The wards were weak, and we had no trouble getting inside. Fenrir killed the husband, but he kept the wife and child, bit them and dragged them back to the den with us."

"Veera and Gavril?" Hermione asked, already suspecting the answer.

Remus nodded. "Veera was Fenrir's slave; Gavril was forced to stand by while he and the others raped, beat and humiliated his mother on a daily basis, and he wasn't faring much better. He was very young then, so I don't know how much he remembers."

"But you didn't abuse them, I mean." Hermione knew Remus, knew that the werewolf was too gentle to ever participate in the atrocities he was describing.

"No. But I was attracted to Veera; I wanted her in the carnal sense just not like that.

"A month later, Fenrir, some of the others and I came across another pack of werewolves deep inside our territory. I killed three of them that night didn't know any of them, didn't have any quarrel with them other than that they had crossed into what Fenrir considered his territory, which honestly I couldn't have cared a fuck less about."

Hermione frowned. "Then why did you do it?"

"Because I wanted Veera, and I knew that if I pleased Fenrir by distinguishing myself in the fight, he would give her to me if I asked."

"So you did it for her you rescued her."

"Did I? Some would argue that she went from being Fenrir's slave to becoming mine. Here, she is her own woman, free to do as she pleases, but out there, in the Dark Lord's world, she is my property, mine to do with as I please. And in the eyes of some, that's all she'll ever be."

"But you would have never..."

"Taken pleasure from her body?" Remus raised an eyebrow. "I'm a man, Hermione, not a Muggle saint."

Hermione could feel her cheeks grow warm. "I was going to say hurt her."

Remus' eyes softened. "No, I would never hurt her, nor would I allow any harm to come to her or her son, even if it meant giving up my own life to protect them. For me, Veera and Gavril became that which I had been searching for my reason for being."

"She seems happy with you," Hermione admitted.

"I think content would be a more apt description. We've both found comfort in each other, a reason to live and love."

"Love?" Hermione asked.

Remus smiled. "Yes, Hermione. Ours is a love story." Remus stood and dusted the snow from his cloak. "And like with all love stories, it makes no difference how the story begins only how it ends."

Remus started to walk away but seemed to reconsider. "Sometimes, it just takes a little bit of forgiveness," he said before continuing on his way.

"Remus," Hermione called out.

The werewolf paused and turned to look at her.

Hermione smiled. "I know Veera is going to be alright because she has you."

Remus beamed a warm, sincere smile that could have melted the icecap on the lake.

Hermione saw it then, out of the corner of her eye a small, silver shape gliding over the snow.

"What is that?" she asked Remus.

As it came closer, the shape became more distinct a silver fox trotted in their direction.

"It's a Patronus," Remus answered, his eyes following the silver shape.

Hermione wasn't familiar with anyone's Patronus except Harry's. "Whose?"

"I don't know," Remus said, and Hermione felt the wizard tense next to her.

The fox came to a stop in front of Remus, and when it opened its mouth, Hermione was surprised to hear Snape's breathless voice:

"I'm surrounded by the Dark Lord's soldiers capture is imminent.

Coup d'etat at the Throne Room two nights hence;

Ministry must not be allowed to fall into the wrong hands.

Please take care of Hermione for me."

The fox disappeared, and Remus was bounding across the snow-covered ground before Hermione had a chance to react. As she ran after him, she watched the wizard take out his wand and aim it up at the sky, shooting three volleys of red sparks into the air. By the time they reached the Town Hall, a crowd had already started to gather there.

The Die is Cast

Chapter 15 of 16

Hermione waved with the others from the mouth of the cave as more than two hundred witches and wizards mounted

their brooms and lifted from the frozen ground, their combined billowing robes obliterating the afternoon sunlight as they took to the sky.

Hermione and Remus were met by Kingsley, Harry and Ginny. Molly soon joined them.

"What is it? What's going on? What happened?" they all seemed to ask at once.

"A message from Snape. Inside!" Remus barked.

Hermione followed the others to the small room inside the Town Hall where they'd had their first meeting.

"Where's Charlie?" Kingsley asked once they had gathered inside.

"He was with the children; he's probably trying to find their parents," Molly answered.

They all grouped around the table, but no one took a seat. They listened attentively as Remus spoke.

"Snape has been captured, but he managed to send out a message before it happened; there's going to be an attempt against the Dark Lord's life at the Throne Room in two nights that's inside the Ministry building presumably by the same pure-bloods Snape told us about. If they succeed in killing the Dark Lord, we can't allow the Ministry to fall into their hands we have to do something."

It was astounding with how much ease Harry took charge. "Kingsley, what do you suggest?"

"It's what we've been waiting for; we can use the attempt on You-Know-Who's life as a distraction to get inside the Ministry his soldiers will have their hands full then, and the wards might be temporarily down if the pure-bloods plan to infiltrate the building."

"Are we ready for this?" Molly asked with an edge of anxiety to her voice.

"The Aurors are ready Harry just has to say the word."

"Good. Remus?" Harry said, turning his attention to the werewolf.

"We should move the children and the infirm into the caves where they'll be protected, just in case something goes wrong."

"Good idea. Molly, you and Charlie take care of that. Kingsley, you and Remus gather the Aurors and any one else who is fit for battle."

"We will have to be in position before the attempt happens; that doesn't give us much time," Remus observed.

"What about the last Horcrux?" Ginny inquired.

"The Dark Lord keeps it close to him at all times; we can dispose of both at the same time," Remus answered.

Harry nodded. "Just make sure that I know when it happens, so I know when I'm clear to fight Voldemort."

Hermione had been anxiously listening to their plan. "What about Snape?" she asked.

The room grew quiet, and everyone turned to look at her.

Harry's eyes narrowed. "What about him?"

It seemed obvious to Hermione, and she glared back at Harry. "He's been captured; shouldn't we be coming up with a plan to rescue him?"

"There's no time for that, Hermione. Haven't you been listening? We have less than two days to move this entire village into the caves, gather an army and get it to the Ministry building without being detected," Harry explained.

"I understand that, but we can't just leave Snape. Remus, you can go inside the Ministry building, can't you?"

Remus nodded. "If I have a reason to be there."

"Can't you make up a reason, say you have to talk to Greyback or someone else, and then get a Portkey to Snape?"

Remus shook his head sadly. "Snape would be considered a high-profile prisoner only the Dark Lord's closest men would be allowed to go near him or even know where he's kept I don't have that kind of access."

Hermione turned imploring eyes to Kingsley. "Can't you send in an Auror or two ahead of the others, have them sneak in after the building closes, like Harry and I did the time we sneaked into the Department of Mysteries?"

"I'm sorry, Hermione. Security is a lot tighter at the Ministry these days, and it would be too risky now. If they got caught, You-Know-Who might become suspicious and change his plans, and we would have lost our opportunity."

"There has to be another way," Hermione muttered thoughtfully.

"Hermione, for all we know, he is already dead," Harry pointed out.

"Harry!" Ginny screeched.

"I'm sorry, but it's true," Harry said more quietly.

They were the words that Hermione didn't want to hear, what she had avoided considering. She studied the faces of those gathered in the room, looking for a glimmer of hope, but their somber expressions confirmed her worst fears Harry was right; for all they knew, Snape was already dead.

"Is there anything else?" Harry asked.

When no one answered he continued. "Fine. Let's go to the Main Hall, then, and start dividing the people into those who will go to the caves and those who will come with me. And one more thing: no one leaves the village until we are ready to depart. I don't want to risk any information about what we are doing leaking out."

Hermione knew that it was a sensible proposition, but after their confrontation, she couldn't help but take it personally perhaps Harry didn't trust her not to go running to she didn't know whom in what he would consider a misguided attempt to save Snape.

The next two days were a flurry of round-the-clock activity as villagers gathered their essential belongings, families said their goodbyes, children, the old and the sick were

taken to the adjacent caves, and Harry briefed those who were to go with him into battle. Hermione helped Molly and Charlie with the children; she was grateful for the distraction, but her thoughts kept straying to Snape and what he must be going through. She couldn't allow herself to think that he was dead especially not after the way they had parted.

She often thought about something Remus had said to her after the meeting. He had caught up with her just outside of the building.

"I'm sorry, Hermione. If I thought there was something we could do to help Snape, I would do it, but Harry and Kingsley are right: there's too much at stake, and we don't even know where he is."

Remus at least had the kindness not to say they didn't know if he was alive.

Hermione gave him a sad smile. "I understand."

"I do have to ask you something, though: what does your Patronus look like?"

Hermione thought it was a strange question indeed. "I haven't been able to produce a Patronus since I've been here, but before, it was an otter. Why?"

Remus seemed to consider her words for a moment. "It's just that Snape's Patronus has changed; that's why I didn't recognize it down by the lake."

Hermione was curious. "Changed how?"

"It used to be Lily's doe."

"Lily? You mean Harry's mother?"

Remus nodded.

"Isn't that a little strange, that Snape would have the same Patronus as Harry's mother?" she asked.

"Not 'the same as' it was the same Patronus. I guess before that, his own Patronus must have been the fox. I'm sure he'll tell you about it when this is all over," Remus had offered with a reassuring smile.

While she and Veera guided the last group of children into one of the caves, Hermione pondered how one person could get someone else's Patronus.

"Veera, do you know how one person can get another's Patronus?" she asked.

Veera smiled shyly. "Only through great love, and great loss."

Hermione frowned that didn't make much sense, unless Snape had loved Harry's mother at one time, and if that was the case, why would his Patronus change again now?

"Well, that's the last of them; I guess we're ready," Harry said from behind Hermione.

She spotted Harry, Molly, Charlie and Ginny standing by the mouth of the cave, and she rushed to join them.

"I'm coming with you," she informed Harry.

Harry looked stunned. "What? No!"

"Why not?" she asked.

"Because it's too dangerous, Hermione," Harry answered.

"It isn't any more dangerous for me than it is for everyone else."

Ginny reached out to touch her arm. "Actually, it is, Hermione. We've been training for this for years; you've only been here a little over a week."

Hermione couldn't argue with Ginny's logic. Still, she had to make Harry take her along someone had to look for Snape and help him, and she didn't trust anyone else to do it.

"I'll stay out of the way; I won't take any unnecessary risks," she pleaded.

"Hermione, I said no," Harry said stubbornly.

Remus walked up to join them. "Ready?" he asked.

"Yes," Harry and Hermione answered in unison.

Harry glared at her, and Remus gave her a questioning look.

"What's wrong?" Remus asked.

"She wants to come along with us," Harry answered before Hermione got a chance to plead her case.

"Hermione, that's not possible. You're not ready for this; we don't know exactly what we'll be walking into, and we'll all be too busy to watch out for you."

Hermione crossed her arms stubbornly, but she didn't argue she didn't want to be a hindrance, or to jeopardize someone else's safety because they were too preoccupied looking out for her.

Remus put his arm around her and pulled her aside.

"The last thing Snape said to me in his message was to take care of you, and I know he would hold me up to that. He wouldn't want you to risk your life or that of his child for him. I can't allow it." Remus' words were compassionate, but his expression was stern.

Hermione knew she wouldn't be able to change his mind. She nodded her understanding. "I know."

Remus hugged her close. "If I can get to him, I will," he whispered into her ear.

"Thank you," Hermione whispered back.

She then marched up to Harry and kissed him on the cheek. She had already parted ways angrily with one person she might never see again she didn't want to make the same mistake twice.

"Good luck," she said to him.

Harry gave her a wide smile and held her close for a moment. "Thank you I'm going to need it," he said.

"You too, Ginny," she said to the girl next to her.

"Oh, I'm staying."

Harry looked at Ginny in surprise, and Hermione could have sworn Ginny blushed.

"We can't leave the town completely defenseless, just in case," Ginny explained.

"The town won't be defenseless; Kingsley is leaving a dozen Aurors behind, and many of those here might not be fit enough for a long journey before a battle, but they are not exactly helpless either," Charlie pointed out, glancing at his mother who looked ready to single-handedly take on a battalion of Death Eaters.

"True, but one more able body can't hurt. If Harry knows I'm there, he will be able to think of nothing else; I'll be a distraction. He'll be able to concentrate better if he knows I'm safe. This is too important."

Hermione was impressed by Ginny's thoughtfulness she had grown up so much in the time they had been apart. Harry looked pleased and relieved, and the two embraced. Hermione looked around the cave. She spotted Remus and Veera in a corner. They stood close, talking in low voices, and then they kissed a long, passionate kiss that made the children giggle and the adults discreetly look away. Hermione felt Snape's absence more keenly then.

She waved with the others from the mouth of the cave as more than two hundred witches and wizards mounted their brooms and lifted from the frozen ground, their combined billowing robes obliterating the afternoon sunlight as they took to the sky.

Their shapes faded into the distance, and the sunlight returned, bathing with its light a valley that looked eerily calm, quiet empty. Hermione hoped it wasn't an omen.

~*~

Fifteen minutes Hermione estimated that would be enough of a head start for Harry and the others that they wouldn't notice her presence, but she could still follow their trail. She stole out of the cave and followed the wide path that led to the forest. She had never seen the thestrals, but she had inquired about them and had a general idea as to their location.

The trail narrowed as she reached the trees, and Hermione ducked behind a large evergreen to catch her breath. Her heart was beating wildly, and she caressed the wand strapped to her waist for reassurance. The others had been right; she wasn't ready to join them in the battle, but neither did she have any choice. Remus was only one wizard if something should happen to him, there would be no one left who cared enough to look for Snape. If she were there, she could concentrate on helping Snape while the others fought.

Hermione dodged between tree trunks and drooping branches, looking for any sign of the thestrals.

"Do you even know where you're going?" a voice called out from behind her.

Hermione whirled around. Ginny stood a couple of yards away leaning against a tree trunk, a broom slung over one shoulder, a small bag over the other.

"What are you doing here?" Hermione asked.

"I'm following you," Ginny answered with a grin.

"Go back, Ginny, this is none of your business," Hermione spat, turning around and continuing to walk, still angry at Ginny for betraying her confidence.

"If you say so. But I should tell you that, if you're looking for thestrals, you're going the wrong way."

"What is it to you?" Hermione asked, although she did change direction no point in continuing to walk the wrong way just to spite Ginny.

"I want you to know that I'm sorry, and that I realize I shouldn't have told Harry," Ginny said as she fell into step next to Hermione. "I just wanted him to make sure you were safe I should have known he was going to go off like a Blast-Ended Skrewt."

Hermione stopped and looked at her friend. "Are you going to tell on me again?"

"No. I'm coming with you," Ginny announced.

"But you told Harry..." Hermione was beginning to understand.

Ginny's grin widened. "I said he would be able to concentrate better if he didn't know I was there. I had a feeling that with or without Harry, you were going to try to help Snape I couldn't let you go alone."

Hermione smiled her relief the idea of going alone had been terrifying. "You're a good friend, Ginny."

Ginny's grin widened. "Then we're good?" she asked, tilting her head.

Hermione nodded emphatically. "We're good."

"Then let's go!"

Remus had been right sometimes all it took was a little forgiveness.

The clearing where the thestrals took shelter during the winter was a few yards ahead. There were only about a dozen of them, and they all raised their snouts at their approach. Hermione rushed toward the herd and nearly walked into the wizard who came seemingly out of nowhere to block her path.

"Charlie!" Ginny screeched. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm following you," Charlie said accusingly.

Hermione gritted her teeth her plan just wasn't going the way she had envisioned it.

"Charlie, we have to do this. Please don't try to stop us," Hermione said, infusing her voice with as much confidence and defiance as she could muster.

Charlie snorted. "I'm not daft; last time I tried to stop Ginny from doing something, she hexed me, and she still did it! This time it's two against one, but I'm coming with you just the same."

Hermione was both relieved and surprised.

"How did you know?" Ginny asked Charlie as he held one of the thestrals for Hermione to mount.

"You're my little sister. I've known you all your life, and you have never once volunteered to stay behind from anything. I knew you were up to something; Mum told me to

watch over you."

"Molly knows too?" Hermione asked in astonishment.

Charlie shrugged. "I guess."

Hermione wondered how Snape managed to keep any of his activities secret around these people, but their concern and unquestioning support tugged at her heart.

"In case I don't get an opportunity later, I want to thank you for this, both of you."

"We best hurry if we hope to keep up with the others," Charlie said, mounting his broom.

Ginny nodded and did likewise. In a few minutes, the three were flying high above the mountains.

~*~

The clouds parted to reveal the looming hulk of the Ministry building. Mostly shrouded in darkness except for the occasional flicker of a torchlight visible through a window, it looked deserted.

"Where are they?" Ginny asked over the roar of the wind in their ears.

Hermione squinted, scanning the shadows around the building and indicating with her thumb that they should go lower.

They circled the building several times before they spotted movement on the roof. Under the cover of a concealment charm, they hovered closer. Four figures dressed in purple robes materialized on the rooftop and quickly disappeared through a small side door.

Hermione glanced at Charlie, and he nodded that was their way in. They descended on the roof and dismounted. As they suspected, the door was unguarded and unwarded someone inside must have purposely left it that way to allow the cloaked intruders access. Wands at the ready, they began to descend a narrow flight of stairs.

"Where do you think they would have Snape?" Hermione whispered to Charlie.

"I don't know, but he could be in the Throne Room. Lupin said that's where You-Know-Who holds council with his goons maybe tonight is Snape's trial," Charlie speculated.

Ginny unfurled a piece of parchment. "Snape made a few of these for our meetings; Remus thought they might come in handy tonight. It's incomplete, but it should give us a general idea of where to go."

Incomplete was an understatement. The hand-sketched blueprint of the Ministry building had obviously been drawn with some very specific locations in mind. It only covered three levels, and most of the areas were unlabeled.

"There!" Hermione pointed at a square near the bottom of the parchment, clearly labeled Throne Room, in the second dungeon level.

Something about the scribbled words caught her attention. "Did you say Snape drew this?" she asked.

Ginny nodded. "Yes, why?"

"It's just that the handwriting doesn't look like his." Hermione distinctly remembered Snape's spidery handwriting from the copious notations he had made on her school essays.

"Snape used a spell to distort the letters. These maps were drawn for missions; it wouldn't do for one of them to fall into the wrong hands and be traced back to Snape."

Ginny swiped her wand over the parchment and huffed in frustration. "It should show us where we are, but the location is not on the map."

She quickly rolled the parchment and returned it to her bag.

"We'll just have to find our way to a lift," Hermione observed.

The stairwell opened into a wide hallway where the bodies of three soldiers in black robes laid crumpled on the floor.

Ginny chuckled softly. "They are making this easy!" she whispered.

"Shhh," Hermione admonished.

They quietly followed the trail of dead bodies that the other cloaked figures had left behind, until they reached the lifts and cautiously descended to the second lower level unimpeded. The three soon came to a balcony that overlooked a massive room. There was no sign of the purple-robed figures, or Harry and the others, but several feet below, Hermione could clearly see Voldemort sitting on a massive throne, surrounded by his Faithful and about two-dozen soldiers. At his feet, a massive snake slithered across the floor, its forked tongue tasting the air.

Lucius Malfoy was speaking he looked pale and agitated.

"My Lord, with all due respect, perhaps we should consider other possibilities," he said.

The others in the room looked at Voldemort apprehensively as he turned his attention to Malfoy.

"I have been careless in the past; I'll concede that much to you, Lucius. I thought that by cutting off the head, the beast would die. But Severus' betrayal and his entanglement with that girl *Potter's friend* is even more proof that his followers carry on without him. Of course, they are nothing without Potter, but such insolence cannot be tolerated. Frankly, Lucius, I fail to understand how you could not have seen this, considering how close you've always been to Severus."

Lucius eyes grew wide, and his face paled even more. "My Lord, he fooled us all!" he exclaimed.

"Not me! I always knew he was a traitor!" Bellatrix screeched from her chair.

A little smile twisted Voldemort's features. "Of course you did, Bella, and I have not overlooked the fact that it was your alertness and diligence that brought him to justice."

Bellatrix looked immensely pleased with herself. "Thank you, My Lord! You should have seen the look on his face when he saw me at the Crispuses! I could have captured him right there, had he not been holding that little, porky girl! But he had no baby when the soldiers got him." Bellatrix's red lips spread into a too-wide smile that made her appear even more deranged.

"You didn't even know he was going to be there it was just a coincidence that your husband was out of town and you were visiting with Madam Crispus that night," Lucius observed disdainfully.

"Enough, Lucius! Bella did the right thing by rescuing the child and summoning the soldiers! The Crispuses are most grateful. But that distasteful matter with Severus is

finished now; let us speak of it no more."

A tremor traveled through Hermione's body. Snape had been at the Crispuses, trying to get her daughter out of the house, when they captured him! Voldemort's declaration that 'the matter with Severus is finished' had a ring of finality that shook Hermione to the core.

"Snape is not here; where else could he be?" she asked Charlie and Ginny, refusing to acknowledge what deep in her heart she believed Snape was dead.

The other two seemed at a loss.

"Snape and Lupin have mentioned a maze of dungeons with detention cells in one of the lower levels of the building, but I don't know where," Charlie suggested.

Ginny quickly withdrew the map and the three huddled around it. With a swipe of Ginny's wand, a small dot appeared next to the square labeled Throne Room.

"We're here," she indicated.

On the other side of the page was a cluster of squares labeled detention cells. They were on a different level, and the lift they had taken down didn't seem to be connected to it. Hermione traced the passages on the map with her finger.

"It seems that we have to go up to the ground level, take this lift back down and we'll come *out* there, right in front of the detention cells."

The others nodded their agreement. They were about to turn around and return the way they had come when suddenly Voldemort rose to his feet.

Hermione, Charlie and Ginny ducked quickly behind the railing and held their breath while they waited. There was a scuffle below, and Hermione chanced a peek in time to see the first streak of light hit Voldemort on his left side, just below the rib cage.

A look of utter shock and disbelief twisted the wizard's features for an instant before chaos erupted. Bolt after bolt of light pierced Voldemort's body. Bella and Lucius sprung to their feet, shooting their drawn wands at the attackers. Nagini reared her head and sank her fangs into the nearest body, unfortunately one of the soldiers who appeared to be trying to protect Voldemort. It was mayhem as the Faithful and soldiers shot curses at each other, none of them certain who the enemy really was.

"Where the hell are Harry and the others?" Charlie shouted over the commotion as he pointed his wand into the room below and fired a red stream of light that hit Nagini on the neck.

Voldemort roared and raised his wand into the air.

Charlie swore softly under his breath.

"Get out of here, Hermione!" Ginny yelled as she too started to shoot hexes down at the snake.

Hermione took one last look over the railing of the balcony, catching a glimpse of purple robes beginning to materialize amongst the crowd, before she whirled around and ran. A bolt of yellow light cut off her progress and bounced off an adjacent wall in the corridor outside. Hermione saw a group of black-clad soldiers quickly advancing in her direction.

Her escape route blocked, she had no choice but to dodge into the nearest doorway. The room appeared to be an empty office, and Hermione quickly located an alternate exit. She stepped out into pandemonium. In every direction, witches and wizards were running, yelling and firing hexes. The flashes of light from their wands were blinding, and Hermione soon joined the foray as she fought her way through a small group of black-robed soldiers. Luckily, Hermione's presence seemed to go unregistered in the confusion no one seemed to be aiming at a definite target, more concerned with making their way toward the Throne Room and Hermione managed to break free of the cluster of fighters. She quickly erected a barrier behind her and continued to run toward the lift. Amidst the bedlam, she sighted several of the Aurors from the village making their way towards her.

She pointed to an alternate direction away from her barrier, "That way! The other corridor is blocked!"

The Aurors ran past her with barely a nod of acknowledgement.

"Hermione!"

Hermione turned around and saw Remus running towards her. The werewolf was sweaty, his face flushed. "Hermione! What are you doing here?" he asked, his eyes wide with shock.

"I had to come. I had to find Snape I think they killed him!" she practically screamed.

Remus pulled her into a doorway to avoid another group of Aurors who ran swiftly past them in the direction of the Throne Room. Hermione caught a glimpse of Harry amongst them.

"Gods, Hermione. I'm sorry, but you have to get out of here."

Hermione nodded. "I'm trying," she said desperately.

If she could make it out of that floor, she could use the fighting as a distraction and make her way to the detention cells she had seen on the map. There was still a chance that Snape was there.

"Don't try to Disapparate; the anti-Apparition wards are back up, and the Floo has been shut down. You have to make your way out of the building."

Hermione shook her head. She didn't want to leave the building, but she didn't want to tell Remus that.

"I came in through a corridor that leads to the roof, but that's where everyone is fighting now."

"Then you have to make your way to the ground floor and exit that way. Follow this corridor and keep turning left until you get to the lifts. You shouldn't find too much resistance once you leave this area, but Hermione be careful, and don't hesitate to blast anyone that gets in your way. Do you understand?"

Hermione nodded.

"Then go!" Remus shoved her out into the corridor and took off in the direction of the fighting.

Hermione ran as fast as her feet could carry her in the direction that Remus indicated, her wand firmly clutched in her hand.

She was almost to the lifts; she could see the doors at the end of the corridor. She visualized the route she had traced on the map. Once she made it inside the lift, all she had to do was ascend to the ground floor, cross the entrance hall to the other side of the building, and use the other lifts to come back down. But something held her back, a sense of impending doom and desolation. Snape was dead killed trying to rescue her daughter dead because of her. Goosebumps broke over her skin, and she hesitated.

The hallway and the sounds of the battle receded, and a heavy fog filtered into her head, clouding her thoughts.

She tried to shake off the feeling, but all she could see before her was Harry hanging on the Wall of Traitors, gasping his last breaths, and then the image of Harry turned into Neville, and then Snape, and hundreds joined him their bodies broken, their mouths open in silent screams. Hermione leaned against the wall and shut her eyes against the images that assaulted her, but that only made them more vivid. Dead they were all dead. The corridor was cold much colder than it had been a few seconds earlier.

She looked curiously around, and that's when she saw them two giant Dementors just around the corner. Hermione panicked. She tried to run but her legs wouldn't obey her; all she wanted to do was give up lie down in that cold, deserted corridor and let the Dementors take away her pain. Her hand shook with the effort of raising her wand.

All she needed was one happy memory, one drop of undiluted bliss in an ocean of pain and despair. She heard Ginny's voice in the back of her mind *you just need to concentrate harder*. Hermione squeezed her eyes shut and fought her way through the cloud of sadness that enveloped her. She pictured the town of New Hope as she had seen it for the first time against the setting sun, wisps of smoke rising into the air and Snape was next to her, except he didn't look sad or worried; he had an arm wrapped around her shoulders. And her little daughter stood by her side.

"Thank you," Hermione whispered, and the Snape in her embroidered memory smiled down at her and nodded.

At that moment, Hermione pointed her wand at the Dementors and shouted, *"Expecto Patronum!"*

A silver mist shot out of her wand and took an unfamiliar shape. Through a haze of tears, Hermione watched a small, silver fox trot through the air, and the Dementors scattered.

Only through great love and great loss Hermione crawled the few yards to the lifts and hurled herself inside when the doors opened.

When the doors to the lift opened again, Hermione dashed out into blinding crossfire as a small contingent of purple-cloaked figures rushed in through the main entrance of the building and were met by some of Voldemort's soldiers. Hermione spotted a squat figure amongst them, furiously waving a wand in the air, a pink cardigan buttoned over the purple-velvet robes. The figure's hood slipped off, and Hermione recognized Dolores Umbridge. The woman looked even more ridiculous than usual in her purple robes and girlish bow, like a giant, festooned grape.

Hermione knew the moment Umbridge spotted her by the twisted look of rage on the witch's face. The path blocked, Hermione dodged into one of the adjacent hallways and ran with Umbridge close on her heels.

"There shall be no running in the hallways!" Umbridge called out just as a bolt of light shot out of her wand.

Hermione effectively blocked the hex.

"*Stupefy!*" Hermione yelled, pointing the wand over her shoulder, but Umbridge diverted the spell with a casual wave of her wand.

Hermione continued to run, shooting protective spells over her shoulder.

"You insolent, mouthy, pretentious Mudblood!" Umbridge screeched behind her.

Through a series of turns, Hermione came to a large, empty room with no other visible doors. She was trapped as Umbridge barged into the room after her.

Hermione crouched down in a defensive position and prepared to fight off the other witch, but Umbridge's look of loathing turned to one of surprise when a bolt of light hit her hand and sent her wand flying. By the door stood Lucius Malfoy. His robes were askew, his usually flawlessly-coiffed hair disheveled; a look of rage distorted his admittedly handsome features into a feral mask, and Hermione instinctively took a step back and tightened the grip on her wand.

"Minister Malfoy!" Umbridge squealed. "Well, I was just about to take this traitor into custody!"

Malfoy smiled a cold, lopsided, mock smile that didn't quite reach his steely eyes.

"Oh, I don't know, Dolores, as tempting a morsel as Ms. Granger is, I suddenly find myself hankering for bigger game."

Malfoy was slowly advancing toward them, his wand trained on Umbridge, and Hermione saw the woman visibly blanch.

"Minister Malfoy, I'm sure I don't know what you mean!" Umbridge gave a little shrug and raised her hands in the air, as if she was at a loss, but Hermione caught the quick flicker of the witch's eyes toward the wand that lay on the floor a few feet away.

"Then please allow me to refresh your memory: Draco, my hand-witch, *my unborn child*... Do any of these things hold any significance to you?"

Hermione's eyes shifted to the door. Malfoy was standing between her and the way out; she didn't think she could make it if Malfoy decided to turn his wand on her.

"It was for the best, Lucius. You of all people surely understand. Mixing our blood with that of inferior creatures is profane the thing that woman carried was an abomination!"

"He was my son!" Lucius roared, and a thin stream of orange light shot from his wand as Umbridge launched for her own.

"*Accio* wand!" Hermione called, and Umbridge's wand flew into Hermione's hand.

Lucius' curse hit Umbridge on the back, leaving a black blotch on the pink fabric of her cardigan.

For an instant nothing happened, and Hermione began to think that the witch had deflected the curse somehow, until she saw the look of terror on Umbridge's face.

Umbridge suddenly clutched at her chest and pierced the air with an agonized scream. Hermione stumbled backward, confused by what was happening. Wisps of smoke emanated from Umbridge's eyes and open mouth as the witch desperately tore at her robes as if trying to get to the skin underneath. Hermione watched in horror as for almost a minute Umbridge wailed and flailed her arms, her skin turning first a bright shade of pink, then an ashy grey as it began to melt off her bones, until finally, with an orange burst of light, her body incinerated, leaving nothing but a pile of ashes behind.

The ensuing puff of smoke cleared, and Hermione spotted Lucius Malfoy standing only a few feet away, his wand trained on her, his eyes wide. The sounds of the battle outside the room were dying down, and an eerie calmness ensued, disrupted only by the occasional blast of a hex and the erratic beating of Hermione's heart.

Malfoy lowered his wand slowly and shuffled to the nearest wall, resting his back against it. The wand slipped from his elegant fingers and hit the floor with a low clatter.

"It is done," Malfoy whispered.

Hermione approached him slowly, discarding Umbridge's wand and lowering her own.

"What's done?" she asked hesitantly.

Malfoy raised the left sleeve of his robes, revealing a faded and shriveled Dark Mark.

"The Dark Lord is dead," he declared.

Hermione glanced nervously toward the door. "The others... the pure-bloods..."

Malfoy shook his head. "They are too few; they don't stand a chance against Potter's army. The Dark Lord's soldiers will give up the fight soon enough without him."

There was no hint of bitterness or even regret in Malfoy's voice – it was as if all the fight had been drained out of him. For a moment, Hermione almost felt sorry for the man, although she wasn't sure why.

Hermione could hear approaching footsteps now, and Kingsley's voice barking orders.

It is done, then, Hermione thought.

"Snape, is he dead?" she dared to ask.

Malfoy seemed unsure. "The Dark Lord wanted him to be captured alive, to make an example out of him, but he was interrogated. If he's still alive, he is in the dungeons, lowest level. Use the lift to the right, last cell on your left."

Hermione barely heard the last words – she was dashing down the corridor, past Kingsley and the Aurors, through rubble and the lingering stench of singed flesh, toward the dungeons. Hermione knew by the way Malfoy had said the word *interrogated* that he didn't mean questioned, but tortured.

She blasted through the door of the cell with her wand and rushed inside. The interior of the cell was dim, and it took Hermione a moment to locate Snape's form huddled on the floor.

He was bloody and sweaty, his eyes closed. Hermione dropped to her knees and gathered the limp body onto her lap, looking for a sign of life. At first she thought she had imagined it, the slight fluttering of his lashes, until his eyelids slowly opened and his coal-black eyes stared up at her. Hermione almost laughed with relief.

She carefully pushed him off her lap, back onto the floor. "Don't move, don't try to talk. I'll get help."

But his fingers latched around her wrist with surprising strength and wouldn't allow her to rise.

"I tried..." he croaked, his raspy voice barely a whisper.

"I know. I know you tried to rescue my daughter. She's fine." Hermione assured him, trying to break free from his grasp.

"The others?" Snape insisted.

"They are here. We got your message. We won! Voldemort is dead."

She thought the knowledge would bring him some reassurance and he would release her, but his grip on her wrist tightened instead.

His voice was barely above a whisper. "Hermione, always remember *hope*."

Hermione frowned. How could she forget? It was the one thing that had carried her through to this point – from the day of the ambush and through the horrors that had followed, that one word written on a piece of parchment that Dumbledore had sent her... a vague feeling of uneasiness stirred inside her, the sensation of having forgotten something but not being sure what.

There was something about the note, about Snape's words. She thought back to the day when she had received the envelope. She distinctly recalled the note being delivered by owl to her parent's home sometime during the summer after her sixth year, and she could remember carrying it in her pocket when she was led onto the train that would take her to the reformation camp, but she couldn't remember having it on her when she was captured, or how she had managed to hold on to it after all her personal possessions had been stripped away in preparation for her transport. It didn't make sense.

She recalled Ginny's words, and something clicked *Snape uses a spell to distort the letters*.

"It was you – the note and the memory of how I got it?" she asked in disbelief.

Snape nodded slowly.

"When?" Hermione asked.

"The train station. Only for a moment... but it was too late."

Hermione nodded. "I understand."

By then, the tracking spell had already been placed on her, and even if it hadn't been, as Harry's friend, she was being closely watched – just like with Ron, it would have raised too many questions to have her disappear suddenly. He had given her the only thing he could, even if he had been forced to take the memory away – the hope that one day he would come back for her. She wished she could remember the exact words he had said to her that day.

Snape's eyelids slid closed, and Hermione thought he had slipped into unconsciousness until she heard his voice again.

"Don't go. Please stay with me, only for a little while."

It was ill advised; he was in dire need of medical help, but Hermione couldn't bring herself to pry her arm away from him, so she stayed, for a little while, until she heard people approaching and Remus and Charlie's voices calling out her name.

"I'm here. Hurry!" she called back to them.

"I'm here," she whispered more quietly, looking down at Snape's pale, peaceful face.

Post Facto

Chapter 16 of 16

Hermione had lost seven years of her life – seven years with no magic, no freedom, no belief other than a frail and

absurd hope that she now knew was the lingering awareness of a brief and temporarily Obliviated conversation.

A.N.: This is the epilogue to this story; I hope it pleases. I want to thank all of you who made it this far, and a heartfelt thank you to my PI beta, Moonrevel, who stuck with me through the entire process and whose suggestions and insights were invaluable. :)

~*~

Hermione picked up the copy of the *Daily Prophet* that an owl had delivered earlier that morning. The front page headline read **FORMER MINISTER OF MAGIC, LUCIUS MALFOY, SENTENCED TO THREE YEARS IN AZKABAN PRISON. HIS SON ABSOLVED OF ALL CHARGES**. Despite the uproar that the Wizengamot's decision was bound to provoke, Hermione suspected that Lucius would serve even less time for his crimes.

The newspapers had long since stopped publishing stories about the dozens of trials that had followed Voldemort's fall the news of Bellatrix Lestrange's suicide after discovering that her own husband Rodolphus had led the insurrection against her beloved Dark Lord had been nothing more than a postscript. But unlike other Death Eaters who had met swift justice, either during the night of the battle or later in front of the Wizengamot, the Malfoys' trial had dragged on for six months and had been plagued with mysteriously disappearing documents and curiously forgetful witnesses.

With a resigned sigh, Hermione set down the newspaper and turned to the mirror. She gathered her hair back and secured it with a pin at the base of her neck. It had taken some convincing for the healers at St. Mungo's to allow her to go home with Harry and Ginny, but her work had proven more curative than any treatment she could have received.

As a founding member of the Hope Project, and with the full backing of the newly restructured Ministry of Magic, Hermione had reunited dozens of children with their hand-witch mothers and had placed many others in suitable, adoptive homes.

There was a soft knock at the door.

"Come in," she said.

"You wanted the owl?" Ginny asked, stepping into the room and motioning toward the Spotted Owl perched on her arm.

"Yes, thank you."

Hermione picked up the letter from her nightstand and secured it to the owl's claws. "Take this to Severus Snape," she said and watched the owl take flight out the window.

"I don't understand you write to him everyday, but you won't speak to him. And he never writes back," Ginny observed, her hand absently massaging her own pregnant belly that barely showed beneath the robes, a contrast to Hermione's, which looked about to burst.

"He knows why I couldn't see him, and I asked him not to write to me," Hermione explained.

Hermione had lost seven years of her life seven years with no magic, no freedom, no belief other than a frail and absurd hope that she now knew was the lingering awareness of a brief and temporarily Obliviated conversation.

It had been raining that day, and water had gathered in shallow puddles on the rickety platform of an unfamiliar train station. The oldest of the group, Hermione had gathered the frightened, younger children around her, trying to instill a sense of security in them that she didn't feel, the memory of Harry's and Ron's deaths still fresh in her mind.

"We are going to be alright, just be very quiet and pay attention to what's going on around you," she had been saying to a panicked girl who could have been no older than twelve, when she was brusquely yanked away from the group by one of the black-hooded guards.

Every instinct told her to resist, but the children were staring up at her with wide, frightened eyes, and she didn't want to scare them any further, so she went willingly with the Death Eater. Behind a large, wooden beam that concealed them from view of the others, the Death Eater pushed back his hood, and Hermione found herself staring into the face of her former Potions master.

"We only have a moment, Miss Granger, so listen carefully. I don't have time to explain to you now why I did what I did, but know that I'm not what you think. You won't remember any of this, but I couldn't let you go without the knowledge that there are others who survived, and that I will do what I can to keep you safe until you can be rescued. No matter where you are or how long it takes, I will find you, but you have to promise me that no matter what happens, you won't give up hope."

She was stunned. Unable to formulate a coherent thought, she merely nodded. Snape then shoved something into her pocket and replaced his hood; he gripped her chin tightly and stared into her eyes.

"You won't remember any of this," Snape said, "instead, you will remember receiving a note from the headmaster during the summer after your sixth year, and carrying that note with you at all times in the firm belief that one day it will lead to your rescue. Do you understand?"

Hermione nodded slowly, trying desperately to hold on to a memory that was already fading away.

"Get back there!" the Death Eater ordered in a strangely distorted voice, pushing her toward the platform no sooner had he pulled her away from it.

Hermione looked up at him in confusion.

"Any trouble?" another Death Eater called out to the one shoving her ahead of him.

The Death Eater who had pulled her away shook his head and walked away.

"What did he want?" the young girl asked her.

"Nothing. He was just trying to frighten me some sick game."

Her heart still beating erratically, Hermione had reached into her pocket and touched the note from the headmaster she always carried with her for reassurance.

Ginny's voice brought Hermione's thoughts back to the present. "He's going to be there, you know."

"I hope so," Hermione muttered.

Hermione flashed her friend an enigmatic smile and threw a cloak over her shoulders.

"Let's go; we are running late, and I still have to drop Camilla off at my parents' on the way."

Hermione followed Ginny to the living room where Remus was kneeling on one knee, talking to Gavril.

"Why can't I come too?" Gavril whined in a voice that sounded much younger than his eleven years.

"It's not a very nice place where we're going. Besides, Hermione's parents need you to help them take care of Camilla."

Gavril twisted his face in disgust and glanced at the toddler that sat patiently on Molly's lap. "Alright," he conceded once he had made his displeasure known.

Hermione gathered the toddler in one arm and offered her other hand to Gavril.

Remus watched her through narrowed eyes. "Are you sure you don't need any help?"

"I'm sure. You go ahead; I'll meet you all there."

"May I?" Gavril asked excitedly.

Hermione nodded. "Go ahead,"

Gavril tossed a handful of Floo powder into the fireplace.

"Grangers' home," Hermione said as all three stepped into the green flames.

The visit to her parents' home was brief this time. Normally she would stay for hours, catching up on lost time with her parents and giving them the opportunity to get to know the granddaughter that until recently they didn't know they had, but today more pressing matters intruded into Hermione's thoughts, and her heart fluttered with excitement at the idea of seeing Snape again. After saying her goodbyes, she Dissipated from her mother's kitchen.

She felt the bone-chilling cold and heard the strange howl of the wind before her eyes had a chance to adjust to the gloominess of her surroundings. She was high on a rocky cliff, and dozens of witches and wizards stood on every protruding rock and jagged peak around her, staring somberly at the valley below.

It had taken months of research and trials to find the counter-spell that would release the souls trapped in the Valley of Death, and it would take the combined effort of this much magic to see it through, but the truth was that even if they hadn't been needed, every one of those people would have wanted to be there for the singular pleasure of wiping out one of the last physical remnants of Voldemort's existence from the face of the earth.

"I see you didn't receive my message, or perhaps you did and simply chose to ignore it," Snape's voice said from behind her.

"And I see you received mine and chose to acknowledge it," Hermione responded without turning around.

She had suspected that Snape would write back asking that she abstain from attending the gathering at the valley; that's why she had waited until the last minute to send the note asking him to meet her at the same spot where they had stood when he had first shown her the valley.

She had fervently hoped that he would come, but too much had happened since the battle at the Ministry for her to harbor any certainty. Snape had spent two months at St. Mungo's recovering from his injuries, and another week in a cell awaiting a hearing in front of the Wizengamot in which Hermione had refused to testify. The trial had been a formality, seeing as how Kingsley Shacklebolt was the head of the Wizengamot, and most of the members had at one time lived in the town of New Hope and were already well versed on Snape's activities as a spy.

"You seem determined to place yourself and our child in the path of danger." Snape's eyes studied her carefully as he took his place next to her.

"The only way I would have missed this is if I were at the hospital giving birth."

Snape didn't argue; instead he said, "About that, Miss Granger..."

"Hermione," she interjected. "You make me feel like a foolish schoolgirl when you call me Miss Granger."

"You were never foolish, Hermione, not even as a schoolgirl."

Hermione wondered if the stirring of pride she felt was because the compliment came from one of her former professors, or from Snape.

"I assume the reason you wanted to speak to me is because of the impending birth of our child," Snape added.

Hermione nodded that would be a start.

"I'm afraid I've already overstayed at Grimmauld place. Ginny is expecting, and Charlie is getting married in a few weeks the house is getting a little crowded. I will be moving into my own place in a few days."

"Potter is putting you out on the streets?"

Hermione almost laughed at the undercurrents of suspicion and indignation in Snape's tone. Despite her numerous talks with Harry, and his fervent testimony at Snape's hearings, Hermione doubted the two wizards would ever come to an amicable understanding of each other they were just too different.

"No. I just think it's time."

She would have said more, but at that moment Harry's voice rang across the valley, clear as if he had been standing next to her.

"Ready your wands," he ordered.

Hermione aimed her wand at the valley below, and Snape did likewise.

"On the count of three one, two, THREE!"

Light flooded the valley and pooled at the bottom. The wind picked up for an instant, whipping the luminous pond into a violent whirl that suddenly gathered and shot up to the sky in a brilliant jet.

Together they watched the souls of their long-departed comrades soar in the light, free and triumphant at last. Hermione felt Snape's arm slide around her waist, and she smiled.

~*~

Twenty-five Years Later

Hermione stood to the side of the stage in her prim black robes, waiting for the last of the former hand-witches to finish addressing the crowd. The applause from those gathered was her cue to enter.

"Thank you, Roselyn," she said to the woman leaving the stage as she took her place behind the podium and looked out into the sea of solemn, young faces before her.

Since the publication of her two books: *Despotic Principles of the Dark Reign: An Analysis of Documents* and *The Dark Reign as Seen through Diaries*, both part of the standard curriculum for the Modern Magical History course she taught at Hogwarts, Hermione had conducted these lectures dozens of times in schools and auditoriums,

church-halls and Quidditch stadiums and this was always the hardest part. There was always something more she wished she could say, something that would convey the true horror of the times, but she knew that no words could ever do justice to such suffering. So she settled for her usual closing words.

"During the first year after the end of He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named's reign, the Hope Project rescued fifty-eight hand-witches from slavery and provided many more with medical care, counseling and shelter in the years that followed. But those women were only a fraction of the true measure of this atrocity committed against Muggleborn witches. Ministry records discovered after the war put the number of hand-witches at roughly three hundred and fifty; some estimate the actual figure to be as high as six-hundred. The identities and fates of many of these witches remains unknown to this day, so it's up to us who are here today to make certain that even though their names are lost to history, their sacrifice was not in vain. We should remember them, be ever vigilant of the warning signs, and ready to take action so that history does not repeat itself. I thank you all for coming. Good night."

The crowd broke into thunderous applause, and Hermione took a bow. She was leaving the stage when she noticed a young woman in the front row, her outstretched hand waving frantically in the air.

"Madam Snape, Madam Snape!" the girl called out.

"I see you have a question," Hermione said with an amused half-smile.

The girl nodded and jumped to her feet.

"Is it true, Madam Snape, that your husband was one of You-Know-Who's Faithful, and that you were his hand-witch?"

The crowd fell silent, and all faces turned expectantly toward her. Hermione tensed for a moment, but she continued to smile indulgently. Severus Snape's work as a spy for the Order of the Phoenix and his role in Voldemort's final downfall had been well publicized after the end of the Final War, but the tale of the hand-witch that married her captor was just too tantalizing for people to easily let it go.

"My husband was a spy for the Order of the Phoenix, posing as a Death Eater," Hermione explained.

"Were you a spy too; is that how you knew who he was?" the young woman's companion asked.

"No, I wasn't a spy I was a hand-witch and he didn't tell me he was one at the time either."

"And you still married him?"

Hermione looked to the back of the lecture hall, where Severus sat accompanied by their two grown children, Camilla and Tobias, their son-in-law Gavril, and their little granddaughter Hope, who was bouncing happily on his knee, before her eyes traveled back to meet the young woman's.

"Yes, I did. Because, you see, ours is a love story, and a very good friend once told me that it makes no difference how a love story begins only how it ends."

The End