

What Lingers In The Dark

by DarkFate

She had changed, long gone was the beloved know-it-all bookworm. T'was nothing more than a memory of what she once was. Her life consumed by darkness, yet ironically she fought for the light. Severus was her saviour, and she was his salvation. Disregard HBP & DH

The Death Phoenix

Chapter 1 of 10

She had changed, long gone was the beloved know-it-all bookworm. T'was nothing more than a memory of what she once was. Her life consumed by darkness, yet ironically she fought for the light. Severus was her saviour, and she was his salvation. Disregard HBP & DH

Disclaimer: I own nothing but the plot.

Chapter 1 The Death Phoenix

In the cold darkness of night, a lone figure could be seen atop a hill in the distance. Deep crimson robes billowed out and the woman's rich, dark brown hair was tossed about with every gust of wind. Her face was covered by a mask fit to be worn in a masquerade ball, deep shimmering crimson trimmed with black and silver with phoenix feathers placed strategically to add a mystical look to her ensemble. Yet behind that mask if one dared to look closely enough, dark, mysterious, cold brown eyes could be seen, replacing the usual warm toffee coloured eyes that her friends had come to find so comforting. Suddenly a flash of red was seen, and the image of a flaming red phoenix was shot into the air, disturbingly similar to the Dark Mark, yet signifying everything that the feared Dark Lord was not. Then in an instant she too was gone.

The next day, havoc reigned at the Order's headquarters with Order members chattering away in the sitting room and Ron trying to sneak food out of the kitchens, which only resulted in Mrs. Weasley's shouting, not to mention the constant stream of people coming in and out of the house via the front door and the fireplace. Yet, all in all it was a normal day at Grimmauld Place. The place was always bustling with activity, and now with Hogwarts closed for the year, and the final battle approaching, tensions were running high. However, the main reason for the chaos this day was the content of the front page of the *Daily Prophet*.

The Death Phoenix Strikes Again

Early this morning the battered, bloody, mutilated body of Augustus Rockwood was found on the outskirts of London. Mr. Rockwood was in fact a Death Eater, and is yet another victim of the feared Death Phoenix (also known as Lady Death). Her mark shone bright in the sky, a shimmering testament to the execution of one of You-Know-Who's inner circle. This latest murder is the 12th in a series of brutal murders committed by Lady Death, as she systematically brings errant Death Eaters to their knees. Her methods are brutal, yet her true identity still eludes the public. All that is known is that her targets are Death Eaters alone, and should they cross her path, they will meet a fate worse than death. The general public has reached a sort of unofficial consensus that next to You-Know-Who himself, she is the most feared person in the Wizarding world.

To read more see page 3.

This particular article sparked chaos in the Order, since the topic of Hermione's 'work' was a constant source of controversy. It was generally agreed that her methods were... effective, though most did not approve of said methods. Yet no one could deny that she had systematically brought down more Death Eaters in the past few years than the rest of the Order combined. However, that was small comfort compared to knowing the reality of what she did and how she had changed from the once simple Gryffindor bookworm to the fierce and terrifying woman who had been dubbed 'Lady Death.'

Her life, which had once been relatively simple, had changed drastically in the course of one summer. Granted it was one horrifying, terrible summer, but a summer nonetheless. It all started that fateful day in the summer of her fifth year. It was the second day into summer and was sweet relief compared to the chaos of her fifth year at Hogwarts. That year was one that she wasn't likely to forget anytime soon, yet little did she know that the events of the past year would be nothing compared to the years to follow.

Although it was commonly believed that Hermione was an only child, this was not the case. In fact, she had an adorable six-year-old younger sister, who was the epitome of happiness. It was her sister Leigh whom she missed the most during her school terms more than anyone. She was the very picture of innocence and was in all ways an indescribable joy. Perhaps Hermione's fondness for her sister stemmed from the fact that they rarely fought and were as close as any two siblings could be. They were not without their fair share of sisterly spats, though they were few and far between. So it was on this second day of blissful freedom that found Hermione curled up in a couch on the front porch with her sister, reading a book. Her mother was out in the front yard working on the garden while her father had gone to the grocery store to get supplies for a 'special' dinner in order to celebrate Hermione's return home for the holidays. It had become a tradition of sorts and she would hardly complain, especially since her sister loved the excitement of it all. To any passerby it was the very picture of domestic bliss.

Suddenly out of nowhere, there was a series of pops shattering the silence of the afternoon. It happened so fast that before Hermione even had the chance to react, it was over. In a matter of seconds, six masked, robed men Apparated into the Grangers' front lawn and snatched Hermione, her sister, and her mother in broad daylight. For Hermione this was the catalyst which changed her life from that of a peaceful existence to one filled with dark destruction and cold indifference.

"In a dungeon somewhere in England"

"Well, don't just stand there, I want them awake...NOW!" yelled a man.

"Of course, my apologies, sir," another man said.

The first thing Hermione noticed upon waking was the pounding of her head, shortly followed by the intense pain in her ribs, probably a result of the blow that was just delivered.

"Ah, look, the filthy Mudblood has chosen to grace us with her consciousness, how excellent!" came the sickly sweet voice of a man. As Hermione's eyes focused in the dim light she realized why the voice was vaguely familiar. It was none other than Lucius Malfoy, father of her arch rival Draco Malfoy.

The next month was filled with brutality and suffering greater than could be imagined by most. They were held captive by 12 men, all of whom she assumed were Voldemort's inner circle. It was these men who came at random intervals during day and night to rape, torture and attempt to destroy the two women and child who were their victims for the time being. They tortured her sister and did unspeakable things to Hermione and her mother as they lay helpless, unable to protect themselves from such vicious attacks. Eventually the Death Eaters tired of her mother and thus raped, tortured and killed her before Hermione's very eyes. By the end of her first week of her imprisonment, she was left with only her baby sister and the lifeless corpse of the mother she had loved so dearly.

She tried so hard to protect her sister; she was just an innocent child, a sweet, vulnerable innocent who had done nothing to deserve the torture she was being subjected to. It was perhaps the torture inflicted upon her baby sister which truly broke her, rather than the horrors they inflicted upon her own body. As the days dragged on, Hermione never lost her strength of will, or her optimistic belief that they would be rescued. In her eyes, she knew she needed to be strong, not only for herself, but for her sister, they needed to get through this. Though it would seem that salvation was not an option for the Granger girls; by the third week of their imprisonment, the Death Eaters decided that they were tired of her sister and that, since she was nearly half-dead already, they would finish the job. However, it was not so simple. They killed her slowly, and in the most painful way possible prolonging her death while Hermione could do nothing but lie helpless and watch as they gleefully stripped the life from her sister's frail body. It was in that moment, the very instant they killed little Leigh that Hermione Granger died and the Death Phoenix was born.

It was two weeks after her sister's death that the Order found her. Ironic that over a month of torture and misery could have been brought to an end in the span of ten minutes, for that was all the time it took for the rescue mission to be completed. It was on August 13th that she was found by Kingsley Shackbolt, Remus Lupin, Tonks, and Bill Weasley. The sight that met them was not one they were likely to forget either, for the cell that she was found in reeked of blood and the decaying bodies of her mother and sister. There was blood splattered all over the walls and floor, and the sight of Hermione's half-dead body was the stuff of nightmares. Unfortunately they were unable to catch the Death Eaters responsible for Hermione's imprisonment. Instead of taking Hermione back to number twelve, Grimmauld Place, they used Snape Manor as their temporary safe house. Ironic perhaps that a Death Eater's house should be the safe haven for a girl recently rescued from Death Eaters, yet it was the safest place for her. It was here that she spent the rest of the summer recovering and where the story truly begins.

Thanks for reading!

The Manor

Chapter 2 of 10

Follow-up after Hermione's rescue

Disclaimer: I own nothing but the plot

Chapter 2 – The Manor

Hermione's father and Madam Pomfrey were already at the manor when she arrived. The others were quickly shoed out by the Healer, as it was clear that Hermione was

hanging onto life by a mere thread.

In the following three days, her body recovered, but Hermione still refused to answer any questions as to what occurred during her stay with the Death Eaters. Madam Pomfrey was the only one who had seen the extent of her injuries, and due to Healer-patient confidentiality, she was unable to reveal anything beyond the most basic health report. With Madam Pomfrey's 24-hour care and the use of several potions and spells, it still took a full three days for all of Hermione's physical injuries to heal. Yet even a healer as skilled as Madam Pomfrey was unable to rid Hermione of the multitude of scars that covered nearly every inch of her body.

On the fifth day of Hermione's stay at Snape Manor, she was allowed out of bed and deemed physically healthy... relatively at any rate. Hermione gingerly got out of bed for the first time since her ordeal and slowly made her way to the shower. Knowing the state her body was most likely in, she stripped quickly and stepped into the hot shower, not daring to spare a glance at the mirror. She closed her eyes as the water cascaded over her battered and beaten body, revelling in the warmth as she tried to ignore the images that flashed before her mind's eye. She opened her eyes with a gasp and started scrubbing her body, as if trying to wash away the dirt of her soul. After 45 minutes of frantic scrubbing, her body ached from both the strain of standing for so long and the skin she had just rubbed raw. Hermione turned off the shower, wrapped herself in a large white towel, and as she stepped out of the shower had no choice but to look into the mirror. She gazed at her frail form with a mixed expression of disgust and despair. She had never been a classic beauty, she knew. But now, with all that marred her body and soul, she could feel nothing but intense hate for what she had become and for what *they* had done to her.

Her arms were spattered with scars from her shoulders to her wrists. The Death Eaters had chosen to experiment with new torture techniques on her. Her legs were similarly scarred. And as for her torso... she had not the heart to look as it was currently covered by the towel. With a small sigh, she turned her back to the mirror and dressed quickly in the clothes she had set out. As she emerged from the bathroom, she was greeted by the sight of a small house-elf sitting on the floor in the middle of the room.

"Miss! Master tells me to bring you to the dining room for breakfast. Miss has visitors!" exclaimed the little elf as it sprang to its feet.

Hermione simply nodded and followed the elf down to the dining hall. Upon entering the room, she saw her father, Professor Snape, Professor Dumbledore, Remus and Bill Weasley waiting for her. Her father rushed to her side as she stepped into the room, not noticing how she cringed away from his touch. As soon as he loosened his hold, she quickly shrugged out of his grasp. The others watched and noted their interaction with interest, but said nothing.

She moved away from her father and stood off to the side as she waited for the others to explain the reason for their presence. They all stared at her expectantly, no one quite sure what to say. Suddenly the room felt very small, she felt caged, and without any warning, Hermione bolted from the room, straight back up to what she had claimed as her room.

"Perhaps I will speak with her alone first," Albus said with a sad shake of his head

"Yes, I rather think you should. The poor girl has yet to string two words together," replied Remus, staring worriedly at the spot from which Hermione had just disappeared.

With that, Albus Dumbledore made his way up to Hermione's room and, with a gentle knock on her door, asked for admittance. She came to the door and opened it slightly. After giving him a long weary look, she allowed him in and returned to her stance by the window.

"Miss Granger... Hermione, why don't you come take a seat, my dear child," he stated quietly.

For all appearances it seemed as though she had not heard a word he just said, yet she slowly turned and made her way to the bed like an obedient child obeying a parent.

"My dear child, I realize that you have been through a terrible ordeal, but it is imperative I know what happened. Forgive me for being so blunt and I do not wish to be callous, but I must know, did you recognize any of the Death Eaters?" he asked.

She nodded her head but refused to say a word.

"Who did you see? Can you remember their names?"

"Malfoy, Nott, Avery, Crabbe, Goyle, Dolohov, the Lestrangle brothers, and Bellatrix," Hermione recited in a mechanical voice, as though she were simply listing the Quidditch team line-up for the year, rather than naming the Death Eaters responsible for the deaths of her mother and sister.

"Very well. Thank you, my dear. Get some rest; I'm sure it will do you good"

She simply nodded her ascent and returned to gazing out the window as the Headmaster quietly took his leave. It pained him to see the once bright and enthusiastic girl reduced to this shell of a being. With a sad shake of his head, he returned downstairs to inform the others of his newly acquired knowledge.

When the Headmaster relayed the information to the Order members downstairs, he was met with varying reactions of shock, anger, and disbelief.

"You do realize she has just named nearly all the members of *this* inner circle, don't you?" Severus drawled.

"I am well aware, Severus, thank you," Albus replied with a tired sigh, "I wonder... how is it that so many of the inner circle took part, yet you were left unawares?"

"I do not know, but I suspect that this attack was not one authorized by the Dark Lord, but rather one of Lucius' pet projects. As you know, I am rarely made aware of those."

"Yes, of course. I did not mean to sound accusing, my dear boy."

"Indeed."

"Is there anything we can do, Albus?" Remus asked.

"I'm afraid not. We must wait until Miss Granger chooses to speak of the events that occurred during her capture," Albus replied.

"Until then, should she stay here? Or should we take her back to headquarters?" Bill asked.

"I believe, she should remain here. She does not need to deal with the others at a time like this. Should she express a wish to return to Grimmauld Place, then we shall of course comply, but otherwise, I think it best she stay here," the Headmaster answered with a tone of finality.

Hermione spent the remainder of the day locked in her bedroom, refusing to speak with anyone, and only emerging for meals. It was as though she was so deeply withdrawn into her own mind that no one, not even her father, could draw her out into present reality. By the end of the day, it was clear that Hermione was not likely to return to her normal self any time soon, if ever. So it was with this sad revelation that everyone, with the exception of Hermione, her father, and Severus, returned to Headquarters.

The remainder of her stay with the Potions master passed in a similar manner. Her father tried desperately to bring back his 'old 'Mione' but was in a constant state of

disappointment due to her continued refusal to 'behave normally'. It seemed that the more he pushed, the further she withdrew into herself, to the point where he felt there was nothing that could bring her back. It was with this realization that her father gave up and decided to return home, for it was clear that he could do nothing for his precious daughter.

Thanks for reading, leave a review please!

The Trio Reunited

Chapter 3 of 10

The gang heads back to Hogwarts for their sixth year.

Chapter 3 The Trio Reunited

Soon, it was time to return to Hogwarts. Hermione had improved slightly, for she now spoke when spoken to, but she would do no more than that. She did not chatter away as she might have done a few months ago; she had an altogether more serious, dark, and angry air about her. Her recent silence was not something the Potions master was likely to complain about, but despite his aloof appearance, he was deeply troubled by the extent of the change he perceived in Hermione.

She was seen to the Hogwarts Express by a procession of Order members. However, for the sake of her comfort and ease, the guard consisted of the same members who had rescued her earlier that summer. Hermione stepped through the barrier and was immediately accosted by several worried Weasleys and Harry.

"Hermione, dear, oh, darling, are you all right? Oh, dear, we were all so very worried. It's wonderful to have you back," Mrs. Weasley gushed as she pulled Hermione into a fierce hug.

The instant Mrs. Weasley touched Hermione, she stiffened, her arms and back ramrod straight, and for an instant a brief look of undiluted terror flitted over her features. Thankfully, no one except Harry noticed. He gave her a curious look but only received a short shake of the head as a response. In that moment, Harry knew he would have to speak with Hermione in private later.

"Well, dear, are you all right?" Mrs. Weasley pressed.

"I'm fine," Hermione responded in an emotionless voice.

"Oh," she responded, shocked at Hermione's bland tone.

Harry was shocked by Hermione's cold demeanour; he had never heard her sound so harsh and detached before. It was clear to him that the time she had spent away was not enough for her to heal. "She just needs time," he told himself, "she's strong, she'll be fine," he chanted mentally, as he approached her in a calm, yet tentative manner.

"I'm glad you're back, 'Mione; I was worried sick. We all were. We'll talk later though, ok?"

"Sure, Harry, thanks," she answered, showing more feeling than she had since she was taken. For no matter what horrors Hermione had endured, she did not wish to be an additional burden for her best friend.

"Come on, let's get on the train, yeah?" Ron said as he shifted uncomfortably.

"Yeah, at least then we can talk privately," Ginny added, giving Hermione a worried look.

With that, the Order members escorted the group of Hogwarts students onto the train, all the way up to their compartment. It seemed that the Order was not going to take any chances, because when the rest of Hermione's guard left, Bill Weasley stayed behind, sitting with them in the carriage.

"Bill, what are you still doing here?" Ron asked.

"Sorry, guys, you're stuck with me for the ride. I've been instructed to escort Hermione all the way up to the castle. We're not willing to take any chances now," he replied apologetically.

"Oh, cool," Ron said and promptly turned towards Harry to strike up a conversation about Quidditch.

Harry, however, was only partially paying attention to Ron, as he was watching Hermione out of the corner of his eye. He could see plainly that she was greatly troubled, and he didn't blame her. She had just lost her mother and sister, and Harry of all people knew how painful it was to lose family. He also realized that it must be ten times worse for Hermione; for she, unlike Harry, knew what it was that she had lost. Harry had never known his parents, so in a way it was easier than if he had known them before he lost them. He realized that his pain must be nothing compared to the loss she felt, and to have seen it happen with her own eyes... that was more cruel and horrendous than even Harry could imagine.

"Hey, you okay, Hermione?" Ginny asked softly.

"Fine, Gin," Hermione replied in a blank, emotionless manner.

Ginny sighed, and left her to look out the window, realizing that it would be a while before Hermione would be willing to talk to anyone. The train ride passed normally and without any disturbances. Due to Bill's presence, the trio were not even bothered by the usual Slytherin invasion that seemed to have made a tradition of harassing them on the annual train ride to Hogwarts.

They arrived at Hogsmeade station and were accompanied by Bill to the carriages. In a reasonably short amount of time, they reached the castle, blissfully hassle-free. However, by the time they reached the Great Hall, it became clear to Hermione's friends that she was by no means recovered from the events of the summer. During the entire trip she had uttered no more than two words and did not seem further inclined to speak at all. This new silence from Hermione was unsettling for the boys, as they were so used to Hermione's constant nagging. Things were changed, and it was becoming clear that their sixth year was going to be very different from any other. The trio took their usual places at Gryffindor table, while Ginny went off to sit with her friends. They were soon joined by the rest of their friends and the usual greetings were exchanged while Hermione sat quietly, seemingly in another world altogether.

"What's up with her?" Dean whispered to Harry and Ron.

"Nothing, leave her be," Harry hissed back, shooting his friends a warning glance.

"Whatever, mate."

The sorting proceeded normally, and after Dumbledore's usual welcome speech, he announced that the new DADA professor was going to be Alastor Moody, the real one this time. It seemed that Dumbledore wanted a trustworthy Defence professor for once, and at least this time, it was clear that he wasn't an imposter. The introductions over, the feast began, and all too soon the students trudged off to bed, none too eager for the morning which would bring about the dreaded first day of classes.

Time seemed to fly as they all quickly settled back into their usual patterns. Before they knew it, the first week of classes was over. However, while that first week flew by for most students, it most certainly did not for Hermione. For her, each day was a struggle. The once jovial girl who loved being surrounded by friends suddenly became secluded and seemed to resent all forms of human contact. Even those closest to her were pushed away in such a detached manner that it shocked everyone, including the few who knew of her imprisonment. It was that Friday Harry finally had the chance to talk properly to Hermione.

"Hey, 'Mione, care to go for a walk?" Harry asked. Hermione gave him a bland look as if to enquire why.

"Please, Hermione?" he pressed earnestly.

"All right, Harry," Hermione answered with a sigh.

"Great, come on."

With that the two walked out of the common room, leaving all their friends staring after them with awe. It was the first time since their return that Hermione had voluntarily agreed to spend time with anyone.

Harry looped arms with Hermione and took her out for a walk around the lake, eventually settling down by a large tree so they could sit and talk. The weather was beautiful; it was slightly windy and would have been cold had they not been wearing sweaters, but the autumn air was refreshing.

"How've you been, 'Mione? Like, really been?" Harry asked softly.

"Coping," she said with a small smile.

"I thought as much... I guess I kinda know how you feel, with Sirius and all...."

"Yeah... damn war."

"Heh, yeah. You know I love you, right?" he said suddenly. "You're like the sister I never had... if I could choose anyone in the world to have as a sibling, I'd choose you without a doubt."

"I know, Harry, I know. I love you too...." Hermione replied as she gazed out over the lake. They lapsed into a comfortable silence, relishing in the silent support each offered.

"We'll get them, you know" Harry said suddenly, "Those bastards who took you... they'll pay."

"No, Harry, you won't," she replied, her voice turning cold and harsh. *"I'll* get them. *I'll* make them pay. Every. Single. One. Of those sons of bitches who stole my family, my innocence, my life. I will make them regret the day they kidnapped me and my family. Not you, but *me*."

"Um, Hermione... I know how you feel about revenge... really I do, but you're kinda scaring me."

"No, Harry, you *don't* know. You did not have to see your family tortured, mutilated and murdered before your very eyes," Hermione said in the same cold voice

"You're right, I didn't. But I *do* understand. I have no family left at all now that Sirius is dead. He was my last link to my parents except for Remus... please, just... please, don't do anything stupid, 'Mione," he said, looking at her closely. "You're almost the only person I have left...."

"I promise, Harry, but I will get my revenge. Not now... not while we're still in school, but soon," Hermione answered, her voice returning to its usual tone. "Come on; it's gonna get dark soon, let's head back."

"Yeah, 'Mione."

And so the two quietly walked back up to the castle and went off to bed. Harry, however, was more worried about Hermione than before, especially after hearing her vow of revenge. But he was not about to breach her trust, so instead he promised himself that he would keep a closer eye on her because she really was the sister he never had.

Thanks for reading, leave a review please!

Discipline of the Mind

Chapter 4 of 10

Hermione's first Occlumency lesson

Huge thanks to my awesome Beta, AmyLouise!

Chapter 4 – Discipline of the Mind

The next day, Hermione was summoned to the Headmaster's office, and Harry, who was suddenly very protective of her, insisted on escorting her there. As she entered his office, Hermione immediately noticed the presence of both her Head of House and Professor Snape.

"You wished to see me?" Hermione asked bluntly.

"Yes, my dear; take a seat, please... Lemon drop?" he replied.

"No, thank you."

"Well... I have called you here to discuss the events of the summer. I know you do not want to talk about them, but ~~w~~*en*ust know everything that occurred."

"I hardly see why it could be so important to know what happened. I thought it was quite clear: they kidnapped my family and proceeded to torture and murder them, all before my eyes no less. It's really not that complicated," Hermione responded, as she reverted to that same cold, emotionless tone.

"But what happened, my dear?" Professor McGonagall asked in earnest.

"That is none of your concern, Professors. I gave you the names of those responsible. Surely there can be nothing further?"

"All right, my dear. One last thing: did they use Legilimency on you?" the Headmaster asked.

"No, they did not."

"And Veritaserum?"

"They did."

"What did they ask? Did you reveal anything?" Dumbledore asked urgently, seeming very worried.

"No, I did not. I did not reveal any of the Order's secrets. Believe me, my mother paid for that choice with her life," Hermione answered with a bitter laugh.

"I'm sorry, my dear, I truly am; but do not be so determined to take responsibility for your mother's death. Difficult as it may be to hear, her fate was sealed the moment you were all taken. It was not your fault that she was taken from this world in such a cruel and unforgiving manner. I would not wish you to drown in guilt, a burden which is not yours to bear." This reply was met with silence from the bowed head of the young Gryffindor.

"Now, the reason Professor Snape is here is that I think you could benefit from some lessons in Occlumency. We cannot risk anyone getting into your mind, not with all that you know about the Order," the headmaster continued.

"I see."

"Miss Granger, if you will come to my office after dinner tonight we can set up a schedule. Learning Occlumency will be both intensive and brutal. I will require your ~~u~~*ll* attention and I expect dedication. I will *not* have my time wasted as it was with Potter. Are we clear?" Professor Snape asked in his usual harsh manner.

"Yes, sir," Hermione replied obediently.

"Good."

"Well, excellent. That is all, my dear. Why don't you run along and enjoy the rest of your day?" Dumbledore suggested cheerfully, as though they had not been interrogating her for the last twenty minutes.

"Good day, Professors." Hermione strode out of the office, fuming how dare they question her so callously about what happened, especially when they *knew* what horrors she had been forced to live through. Do they only care about what damage may have been done to their precious Order? Was the loss of her family seen as being nothing more than collateral damage? She had always believed the Headmaster to be a kind and compassionate man, and yet in this most recent encounter he seemed anything but benevolent.

She walked up to the Astronomy Tower and settled down on the balcony, relishing the peace and quiet away from the other students. After sitting there for forty-five minutes, she finally reached a more peaceful state of mind, or at least a less murderous one. Suddenly, she heard footsteps approach and was startled to see Draco Malfoy as she turned around.

"Granger?" he asked, surprised to see her so far away from her Gryffindor domain.

"Malfoy," she replied calmly as she turned to leave. She walked away and was surprised when no taunt or jibe followed.

"I'm sorry," Draco muttered quietly to himself when he thought she was out of ear-shot.

"What was that, Malfoy?" she asked, certain she had heard the Slytherin say something.

"I didn't say anything, Granger," he replied calmly.

Not sure, Hermione lingered for a moment before deciding that either way she probably didn't want to know what he had said. So she turned once again and descended the many flights of stairs. As she made her way down, Hermione couldn't help thinking there was something distinctly strange about Malfoy's behaviour. He had hardly said two words to her, and the Malfoy she knew would have jumped at the opportunity to taunt her, since they were alone. Yet he seemed rather distant... as though he was off in his own world. In short, he seemed extremely "un-Malfoy-like". He seemed oddly non-confrontational, which was definitely a first when it came to the blonde Slytherin.

These thoughts flew around in Hermione's head as the rest of the day passed in a blur. She was still so caught up in thinking about all that had happened during the morning that the next thing she knew, dinner was over. She nodded a silent goodbye to the boys and made her way down to the dungeons to meet with Professor Snape, as promised. She approached the classroom door and knocked twice.

"Enter," came the menacing growl of Professor Snape.

She stepped into the room and silently approached his desk.

"Sit," he commanded. Obediently, she sat.

"The art of Occlumency requires dedication, practice, and full focus. It requires a strong sense of discipline, of both body and mind. Are you willing to make that sort of commitment, Miss Granger?" he asked harshly.

"Yes, sir."

"Good. We will have two lessons a week to start. It will be gruelling, difficult, and will most likely tire you out significantly. Are you prepared to have such stress put upon your body and mind?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. We will meet Wednesday after dinner, and on Sunday afternoons at 1:00. This gives you Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays to catch up on school work. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"That will be all, Miss Granger," he said, dismissing her with a wave of his hand.

"Good night, sir," she said respectfully as she walked out of his office.

As she walked out, Severus looked at her thoughtfully. She had changed quite drastically, her manner completely altered. There were other subtle differences as well, ones not likely to be noticed by her other professors or even her friends. She had always been respectful and relatively obedient, but now, it seemed that she was almost *too* obedient. She lacked life and spirit. He could hear it in her voice. Her eyes seemed dull; they lacked the exuberance and spark they once had. Severus, however, was not going to go easy on her just because of her recent trauma. That's not to say he was not sensitive to it, but coddling her would do more harm than good. For if there was one thing that Severus had learned about Hermione over the past few years, it was to never, under *any circumstances*, underestimate her.

Thanks for reading! Leave a review please!

The Lessons Begin

Chapter 5 of 10

Hermione gets her first Occlumency lesson.

Big thanks to my Beta, AmyLouise!

Chapter 5 – The Lessons Begin

The following day was Sunday, and this meant it would be her first lesson with Professor Snape. She spent her morning in the library, working through homework and simply losing herself in the blissful world of books. Lunch was the usual affair but at least this time she had a legitimate excuse to give the boys. She had not told them about her lessons, and they seemed too wary of her to ask what her meeting with Dumbledore had been about. So instead she said that she had to meet with a professor and made her way down to the dungeons fifteen minutes early. She once again knocked on the door to the Potions classroom and was met with the usual "enter."

She entered the room and stood silently in front of his desk, waiting for him to give her instructions.

"For the sake of discretion and safety, we will be conducting these lessons in the Room of Requirement; surely you remember that particular room, Miss Granger?" he said with a sneer.

"Yes, sir," she replied, seemingly unfazed by his demeanour.

"Good, follow me."

They made their way to the Room of Requirement, and when they entered, it had taken on the appearance of a comfortable room with no furniture but plenty of plush rugs and soft pillows. Professor Snape closed the door and instructed Hermione to sit in the middle of the room, on one of the rugs. He followed and sat a few feet across from her.

"Now, the first thing to learn in Occlumency is to clear your mind. Self-discipline is the key to learning to protect your mind. Clear your thoughts completely; try to reach a place of calm and peace," he instructed. "This practice of meditation is the first step. In order for you to even *attempt* to learn, you must make a habit of meditating every day. I suggest clearing your mind before bed every night."

Hermione nodded in understanding. She remembered Harry saying that Professor Snape had instructed him to do this as well. However, in the few minutes that she tried to clear her mind, she found little success. Every time she closed her eyes she was accosted with images of her mother, her sister, and of that blasted cell they had kept her in.

"Push your thoughts and worries away. Think of something soothing, something that will calm you," he said in a low, silky voice. "Nod when you have completed each task I assign."

Hermione silently nodded.

"Good, now keep that calm place... do not allow other thoughts to infiltrate that peace."

Hermione nodded again after a few moments.

"All right, good," he said, seemingly satisfied. "Open your eyes. Now am I correct in assuming that you have already read up on all the theory?"

"Yes, sir, I did it last year, to help Harry."

"Typical. Well, it makes things easier now," he replied sarcastically. "In that case, you know that Occlumency is all about managing your mind. You need to sort your thoughts; visualize them in such a way as to lock them away. Essentially, you need to make your mind a maze. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Now that is something you must work on in your own time. I cannot help you with that; it is something you need to master yourself. To begin, we will practice by seeing if you can push me out of your mind."

"All right. Um... how exactly do I do that?"

"It cannot be learned from a book: it is a practical skill. When I enter your mind you will feel some pressure, much like a burgeoning headache. When you feel this, try your hardest to push me out by sheer force of will, understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Let us begin."

They practiced hard for two hours, and still made little or no progress, leaving them both very frustrated and angry.

"You need to try harder!" Professor Snape yelled.

"I *am* trying!" Hermione answered, frustrated.

"Not hard enough," he said viciously. "Again!"

He pushed into her mind, sifting through her thoughts easily. Hermione tried to push him out. They had started out standing up, but she was now on her knees, drenched in sweat from the effort of trying to keep him out of her head.

"Push me out, damn it!" he yelled.

She gritted her teeth and clenched her eyes, anger coursing through her. Anger at everything: at not being able to accomplish her task, at Dumbledore and his idiotic questions, at the Death Eaters who tortured her, at her life in general. She used this anger, and with one final spurt of energy, she pushed with all her might.

Severus was surprised, as he was suddenly thrust out of her mind with a force stronger than he had expected. What surprised him more, though, was the lingering taste of her intense hate, anger, and thirst for revenge.

"Good," he said as he tried to regain his composure. "You did reasonably well for your first attempt."

Hermione simply nodded. She was exhausted, body, mind and soul. He certainly wasn't exaggerating when he said it would be intensive. Her body ached from the physical strain, and she was now sporting a pounding headache, thanks to their four-hour session. It seemed that these lessons were going to be more difficult than she had originally imagined. However, if there was one thing that drove Hermione to succeed, it was fear of failure. And she *would* master Occlumency, if for no other reason than to prove those Death Eaters wrong. They had tried to break her, but she would be damned if she allowed them to kill her spirit. If they thought she was strong before, that was nothing compared to what she would become.

That day Hermione vowed that by the time she left the confines of Hogwarts, she would be the most dangerous woman alive. She had already sworn to get her revenge, and in order to do that, she needed to train. With that thought, she cleared her mind as Professor Snape had instructed and then went to bed, knowing that the next day, she would attack her lessons with a new vigour.

Thanks for reading! Leave a review, please! :)

Like Father Like Son?

Chapter 6 of 10

Hermione and Draco have a chat.

The vigour she felt lasted the next day until lunch before the trivialities of daily life once again suppressed the feeling. The intensity she felt the previous day did not, however, dim with respect to her training, but Hermione had hoped that the feeling could filter into other aspects of her life. Classes were of small consequence to her now, the lectures banal, and knowledge of theories behind spells and charms that had held such academic interest before suddenly seemed inconsequential with her new perspective on life. How could such things hold her interest when a few short months ago she wasn't even sure she would be alive? So she trudged along, continuing with the normal flow of life as was expected of her. Yet she found no pleasure in it, not like she had in the years past.

Dinner was the usual affair, and Hermione made a quick escape for the sake of her sanity and that of her friends. Her disposition was not well suited to social interactions as it was and even less so as a consequence of recent events. She was not oblivious to the discomfort her housemates felt in her presence. A part of her was sad for it, but the more reasonable part of her knew that they would soon come to accept and even understand her modified attitude, or so she hoped.

Hermione meandered down the empty corridors on her way to the library. It was one of the few places in which she still found solace. But even the silent whispers of the books could not ease her aching heart. After spending an hour or two among her silent companions, Hermione left, choosing instead to wander the castle alone until curfew. She came upon a small, somewhat hidden section with a window displaying a beautiful view of the school grounds. It was peaceful there. Hermione stood by the window, lost in thought. Her solitude, though, was interrupted too soon by one of her least favourite people Draco Malfoy.

"Granger," he said in a tone of mild surprise. Draco considered this particular alcove, secluded and peaceful, his own personal haven, away from the main corridors and the students in them. He was therefore somewhat surprised to see Hermione Granger, of all people, at this particular location.

"Malfoy," she acknowledged calmly, turning to leave. She was hardly in the mood for the confrontation that would undoubtedly follow from this meeting. Unfortunately, Malfoy was not of the same opinion.

"Wait... I mean, just hold up a sec," he called out in an oddly non-confrontational tone.

"What do you want, Malfoy?" Hermione asked, sighing quietly yet not turning around to face him.

"I just, uh, wanted to say that, um, well..." he stuttered, "I suppose I wanted to convey my condolences... for the recent loss you suffered," he concluded somewhat formally.

Initially, Hermione was stunned.

That surprise, however, rather quickly turned into a fierce and burning rage as she whirled around to verbally attack him. "I have no desire to hear any of your pathetic lies, Malfoy. I have no doubt your father gloated about his latest *catch*, and perhaps you even shared his amusement, so spare me your empty sympathies."

"Don't talk about what you don't know, Granger! I could have thrown what happened this summer in your face just now, but *those* to tell you that I was sorry, and I am.

Don't think you're the only one that's suffered at my father's hand," he replied with equal force.

"I don't think you know the meaning of the word suffer, Malfoy... and yes, you did choose to convey your sympathies sincere or not but I still see no reason to believe you. It wouldn't be the first time you've tried to manipulate me."

"I never said you had to believe me, Granger, and frankly, I don't care one way or another, but I said my piece... and as for suffering, don't be so naive as to think that you are the only one who has experienced pain or loss. I guarantee you, Granger, you wouldn't last ten minutes in my life, so get off your bloody high horse."

"I never said you hadn't suffered loss, Malfoy; I know that you lost your mother this summer, and *am* sorry for that. I truly am. But losing someone to illness is hardly the same as having to watch a Death Eater torture and *murder* your mother before your eyes. That's not even considering the horrors he subjected my sister and myself to."

"Heh, illness," he muttered bitterly under his breath.

"What was that, Malfoy?" Hermione asked, not certain she had heard correctly.

"Nothing that concerns you, Mu-Granger," he sneered back.

"No... you said something about illness. Is that not what happened?" Hermione questioned. "It's what all the papers said."

She was suddenly curious about the Slytherin's odd behaviour.

"Since when have you known the papers to print any semblance of the truth?" he bit back fiercely, though immediately regretting it. He had slipped; he had not intended to reveal so much to the Gryffindor. This conversation was getting out of hand; he had already said much more than he had ever intended. All he had wanted to do was apologize, to ease his conscience and carry on with his existence. But of course, she couldn't just leave it at that... She had to prod and pry, harass him until he gave her a reason to leave him alone.

"If that wasn't the truth, Malfoy, then what happened?"

"It's none of your business, Granger. Leave it alone."

"You're the one who brought it up, Malfoy, so if it wasn't illness, what happened?" Hermione pushed.

"Look, it doesn't matter. Either way, it doesn't make her any less dead, so just drop it," he said with a certain air of finality, wishing he could just walk away. But for some reason, he didn't. He stayed and continued to let the Gryffindor question him. Perhaps it was the least she deserved; not that he was directly responsible for what had happened to her, but still, it was his father, after all.

Suddenly it became clear to Hermione. Why hadn't she seen it before? All the signs were there, the little spats of bitterness. Naturally, he was defensive. How could he ~~not~~ be? It was hardly the kind of revelation he would make to a loathed classmate.

Tentatively, she asked, "It wasn't an illness, was it, Malfoy? Was it even an accident?"

Her question was met with a tense silence as they sized each other up.

"Like I said, either way, she is gone, so I guess it doesn't really matter how it happened," he repeated quietly.

"You and I both know that's not true, Malfoy. She was your mother;*of course* it matters how she died," Hermione said softly.

"And why would I tell you what really happened, huh, Granger? Why would I betray my family for some Gryffindor?" he asked tauntingly.

"Because I'm probably one of the few people in this school who would understand... especially after what happened this summer. And I think you know that I wouldn't tell anyone," Hermione replied in a calm manner.

"No, you'd just run off and tell your precious Potter and Weasley; so no thanks, I think I'll pass."

"I would never betray a confidence, Malfoy."

"And why would I choose to confide in a girl who obviously despises me? A girl who now probably wants my father to die a slow and painful death? I will not put my family in harm's way simply to ease your sense of curiosity."

"Oh, I don't want to harm your family, Malfoy... just your bastard of a father," Hermione said darkly.

"He's still my father, Granger, and if you haven't noticed, he's practically the only family I've got left," he said quietly, as though trying to convince himself, "regardless of what he's done."

"He tortured and murdered a little girl, Malfoy!*My sister!*" Hermione said emphatically.

"There isn't enough parchment in this school to account for all his victims, Granger, dead or otherwise."

"Then why are you defending him?"

"Because, at the end of the day, he is still my father,"

"And that makes everything okay?" she asked incredulously.

"Don't be stupid, of course not!"

He paused for a moment before adding, "It's not a question of it 'being okay', but rather what you can do about it. We all have our roles to play, Granger; I'm just playing mine."

"So you're just going to pretend that your father's not a murderer?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah, Granger. That's exactly what I'm going to do."

"Then you're a coward, Malfoy."

"Why? Because I still have a sense of family loyalty? Because I'm not a self-righteous Gryffindor do-gooder?"

"Hmph, family loyalty? Murderers don't deserve any measure of loyalty, Malfoy. And I think it's cowardly, because you can't face the truth! Even when it's staring you in the face!" she snapped back viciously.

"Don't preach about things you don't understand. Open your bloody eyes; life isn't as black-and-white as your little friends make it out to be."

"And what is it I don't understand, Malfoy?" Hermione asked, completely ignoring his taunt about her friends.

"You want to know what happened? You think it's hard to see your family being tortured by a murderous maniac well, how the hell do you think it feels to see your own mother murdered by her husband?" he shouted back, frustrated and angry with her, with life.

Hermione gasped, unable to hide her shock. Draco's eyes widened a fraction when he realized just what he had said, and more importantly, to whom. He stared at her with an expression of fury and bewilderment, unsure of what exactly had happened. They had been shouting at each other, and the whole exchange had just caused him to snap.

Making a quick decision, Draco snapped out his wand and cast four spells in quick succession. First, he bound and silenced her; then, he sealed the area where they stood from any passersby; and finally, he took her wand so she wouldn't hex him.

"Sorry, Granger, but I can't let you run off after what I just told you. I'm not going to harm you, but I need you to swear not to tell a soul about any of this. Now, promise not to attack me, and I'll release you," he said quickly, undoing the silencing spell but leaving her bound.

"Malfoy, you bastard, let me go!" Hermione growled angrily.

"I will. As soon as you promise not to attack me. Surely you must understand my need for secrecy, Granger."

Hermione huffed, glaring at the blond boy before reluctantly agreeing.

"Now give me my bloody wand back," Hermione demanded.

"Fine," he said, giving it back to her, "but I still need that vow."

Hermione was silent for a moment. She looked at him searchingly before giving him a curt nod.

"Will you tell me what happened?"

"It's still none of your business. You wanted to know, I told you: my father murdered her. End of story."

"I'm so sorry, Malfoy," Hermione said sincerely. "I can hardly imagine. Well, I suppose I can somewhat imagine now, but still... your own *father*? Merlin, that's twisted."

"You're telling me," he muttered bitterly.

"But... how-how did it get passed off as an illness?"

"Bribery, fear, magic take your pick," he answered, cynicism strong in his tone.

"I see," Hermione said shortly. She found that explanation sadly believable. *What a sick and twisted world we live in* Hermione thought. Human deaths were being pushed under the proverbial rug like nothing more than dead flies. The war was tearing at the seams of their world without their even knowing it... the very fabric of society unravelling with its occupants blissfully unaware.

"I still want an oath, Granger," he reminded.

"Yes, of course," she replied somewhat absently, still thinking about this latest revelation. It was enough to make her head spin.

After getting her oath, Draco removed the privacy spells and walked off without uttering another word. He had no desire to linger and see the pity that would undoubtedly be etched upon her face. Pity could do nothing for him now.

Hermione stood in the alcove for some time. Her mind could hardly process all the new and horrifying information it had just received *His own father?* Hermione thought, still frozen with disbelief. To think he had to live in the same house as the man who killed his mother... *worse*, he would have to show respect, be kind, *be gracious* to that monster of a man.

He must be one hell of an actor, she thought, as she continued to stare out the window, unseeing. *I wonder how he manages... I doubt I could ever do that. The mere thought of that bastard makes me want to murder someone, so how in the hell does Malfoy continue to live with him? Knowing that his father murdered his mother! Unthinkable!*

Unable to stand alone in that alcove any longer, Hermione turned and strode off quickly. She needed to get her mind off this, or surely it would drive her insane. She swiftly made her way to Gryffindor Tower, hoping to find solace from the silence that now seemed rather oppressive. Entering the common room, Hermione was relieved to hear the typical chatter and laughter that seemed to encompass the room like a warm blanket. For once, she was pleased about the noise, the very sound of happiness. Moving through the room, Hermione was quite happy to see Harry and Ron sitting by the fireplace playing chess. It was such an ordinary scene. One so common it nearly broke her heart. Everyone in this room was carrying on like normal... nothing in their world had really changed. Her mind immediately drifted back to Draco Malfoy, and she could not help but feel for him. No matter how poorly he had treated her over the years, she would never wish something like this on him.

"Hey, Hermione?" Harry asked, looking up at her.

"Oi! 'Mione!" Ron said more loudly, reaching up to poke her. She had been standing near them but was staring off in a dazed sort of manner. Upon being poked by Ron, however, she started looking down at them with an almost bewildered expression.

"What?"

"You've been standing there, staring at the wall for the past ten minutes," Harry said, smiling with amusement. It wasn't often he got to call Hermione on zoning out; it was usually *she* who called *him* on it.

"Oh! Sorry, boys, I was lost in thought," Hermione explained. "So, who's winning?"

Glancing at each other oddly, the boys sat mute for a moment before Ron broke the tense silence with a loud guffaw.

"Do ya have to ask, 'Mione? Honestly, the only way Harry could be winning is if I let him!"

"Hey! I don't need you to *let* me win! Careful Weasley, I think you're gonna lose this one good and proper." Harry defended with a look of exaggerated offence.

"Easy, mate, don't wanna look silly in front of our 'Mione now, do ya? Especially when my knight's about to crush your queen!"

This remark was well punctuated as Harry's queen was promptly beaten over her head by the black knight, under Ron's instruction.

"Aw, man!" Harry moaned, turning his gaze from Hermione, back to the board.

"Staring at 'em ain't gonna help them much, mate," Ron stated smugly.

The only response he got was a withering glare from his best friend. Ron was completely unfazed by the look. Hermione, on the other hand, was quite amused. It was refreshing to know that some things would never change, that there was still some measure of normalcy in their lives. After spending a few more hours together, they parted ways as they slipped off to bed. Hermione hoping the following day would bring no more surprises and the boys hoping the following day would bring more of the same interaction from their beloved bushy-haired friend.

Thanks for reading. Leave a review please!

The Forest

Chapter 7 of 10

Lessons continue and Hermione has an interesting encounter near the forest.

Hey all, hope you guys enjoy this chapter! Huge thanks to my wonderful beta, AmyLouise!

Chapter 7 The Forest

The next week passed in a blur for Hermione. Between her N.E.W.T. level classes and her extracurricular lessons with Professor Snape, she was rarely found in the common room. This, however, was nothing for her to complain about, since her frequent absences meant that her friends wouldn't pester her with inane questions. Not to say that she didn't appreciate their concern, just that she was not fond of being interrogated at every turn. Therefore, she carefully avoided the boys and ended up only seeing them at dinner every evening.

Harry was concerned by her behaviour. He understood her instinct to withdraw from those around her; heck, he felt the same way, what with everything that had happened at the Department of Mysteries with Sirius. But what concerned him more was the frightening amount of anger and determination for revenge she seemed to be constantly suppressing. He felt anger and a thirst for revenge too, but certainly not to that extent. What Harry hated the most was how distant she was. Usually she would turn to him or Ron for anything... everything! Now, she seemed to withdraw into herself, and *that* was a very un-Hermione-ish thing to do.

Hermione knew of Harry's worries, for she had become even more observant in her solitude. She found that now that she was silent for much of the time, she picked up on more of the subtle interactions of her housemates. She seemed to have slowly developed a skill for observation, and this, Hermione knew, could only be an asset in the times ahead.

The days were difficult for Hermione, as she was constantly balancing all of her responsibilities and tasks. In order to maintain her sanity, she had taken to having early morning jogs around the castle grounds. She found that the physical strain allowed her to think, sort out her thoughts, and try to cope with the myriad emotions that were wreaking havoc in her system. What had started out as quick half-hour jogs every morning had turned into an obsession for Hermione. She now tended to jog for one hour in the morning, a half hour at lunch, and for one and a half hours before bed. This new, exhausting exercise regime also proved to be helpful for her sleeping, for by the time her day was done and her nightly jog finished, she was completely sapped of all energy. All of this on top of only sleeping for a mere four to five hours a night.

Days turned to weeks, and soon everyone realized that Hermione was irrevocably changed. She was near silent in class and generally only spoke when spoken to. Her professors found her continuously withdrawn behaviour troubling, and her friends and dorm mates were afraid to so much as question her about it, for fear of being subjected to her fearsome wrath. Yet Hermione continued on, seemingly oblivious to all of their opinions. She soon began to relish her lessons with Professor Snape, for no matter what turmoil she was faced with, he treated her the same as always. He was fair in a twisted way. He didn't make exceptions for her; if anything, he pushed her harder now that she had seen the reality of the war. This was a welcome relief from the continuous coddling she received from the rest of the staff and the careful caution from the students.

Before she knew it, it was December, and the first hints of winter were emerging. The weather turned cold, matching her mood perfectly. She was feeling particularly bitter one Sunday morning and decided to go on a jog to calm herself down before her Occlumency lesson at 1:00 p.m. It was now 11:00 a.m., so she decided to skip lunch as she wasn't very hungry anyway and go for a nice two-hour jog.

She changed into jogging pants and a long-sleeved shirt and made her way outside. As she stepped out of the Entrance Hall, the cold instantly hit her with its biting chill. Ignoring this, she went down the front steps and took off at a slow jog towards the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Running the perimeter of the forest always gave her a strange sense of peace. Perhaps it was because she knew she was on the edge of the dark unknown, both figuratively and literally. Whatever the reason, the forest always comforted her in some way, not to mention that it was a nice long stretch and served as the outermost boundary of Hogwarts grounds. This meant that it was not only secluded, but had that slight hint of danger that was irresistibly enticing.

Hermione jogged steadily for an hour before she stopped for a short break. She continued to walk along the forest when a sound from the trees caught her attention, disturbing the eerie peace of the afternoon. She stopped short in order to peer into the depths of the forest, not knowing what creature was approaching. When the noise faded, she assumed it was nothing and was about to start jogging again when all of a sudden a large, distinctly male hand closed around her upper arm in a vice-like grip. Startled, she lashed out, turning quickly and thrusting the heel of her hand out towards her attacker's jaw while simultaneously bringing her knee up to hit him in the stomach as she wrenched her arm free. All of this happened with such speed and accuracy that her attacker was caught by surprise, and he immediately stepped back a pace. He had not meant to startle her so much and hence was not expecting such a brutal defence. Hermione looked up hastily, wand in hand and several hexes on the tip of her tongue. It was only then that she got a good look at her attacker.

"Impressive response, Miss Granger," Professor Snape drawled.

Hermione's eyes widened almost imperceptibly. He was the *last* person she expected to be facing.

"Professor Snape! My apologies, I didn't know it was you," Hermione replied cautiously.

"Indeed. Well... you of all people should know better than to wander so close to the Forest. What's more, I believe your lesson will begin in twenty minutes or so?" he sneered, giving her a rather pointed look.

"I am well aware of the time, Professor; I was just about to finish my jog before coming to my lesson," Hermione replied coolly.

"I see. In future, do not jog so close to the forest," he said. "And, Miss Granger, that is not a suggestion, but a direct order."

"Yes, sir," she ground out, starting to get annoyed. "I'll see you in half an hour, sir."

With that, she took off at a run, intent on finishing her loop before her lesson. *Just what I needed*, she thought sarcastically. She had finally reached a relatively peaceful state of mind when he had to show up and send her right back to square one.

More like square minus one, she thought bitterly, as the memory of his hand closing around her arm led to more painful memories of her time as a prisoner of the Death Eaters.

No... I will not dwell on those thoughts; they can do me no harm now... they will not break me she chanted mentally as she jogged. It was the same mantra she had chanted relentlessly during her time as a captive, and it had served her well so far.

She finished her loop and ran up to the castle, slowing only when she reached the doors to the Entrance Hall. She quickly made her way to the Room of Requirement, pausing as she flicked her wand over herself to clean off any remnants of her jog and cast a quick spell to remove any lingering sweat. With that, she entered the room to find Professor Snape already waiting for her.

"Finish your jog all right, Miss Granger?" he asked politely

"Yes, sir" she replied cautiously, wondering at this newfound civility.

"Good, let us begin."

Their lesson progressed normally, though she lacked focus today. She was only able to stop half his attempts, rather than her usual 80% success rate.

"Focus, dammit!" Snape yelled, frustrated by her lack of success.

"I *am!*" she replied, equally annoyed with her own deficiency.

"Stop. Enough. Your attempts have not been this poor since at least early October. What in Merlin's name has got into you, girl?" he sneered.

"I don't know, I'm just having a bad day. I'm sorry, I'm trying!" she replied, more angry with herself than with him.

"If you aren't up to the task, then don't waste my time," he growled. "I warned you when this started. I don't care for any of your pathetic excuses; I will stand for nothing less than complete focus and determination. Whatever petty problems you have, leave them at the door. Do. I. Make. Myself. Clear?" he bit out.

"Petty problems?" she shouted in outrage. "My problems are far from petty; how dare you say such a thing, you insensitive bastard! I'm sorry if I'm having a bad day, and I am *soo* sorry my pain, anguish and loss is such an *inconvenience* to you. I am so *very* sorry I did not *die* in that miserable torture chamber they held me in. I'm so terribly sorry for being such a goddamn burden. So fine, leave me the hell alone because I honestly don't care; it's not like there is anything that can be done to cause me more pain anyway," she ranted angrily, tears streaming down her face, defeat and anguish written clearly in the desolate brown of her eyes.

"You are not an inconvenience; if I thought that, I would not sacrifice so much of my time in training you. Nor are you a burden, and if *yobad* died in that cell, no doubt we would have lost the war because your precious Potter would not have been able to take that loss," he replied in an oddly calm voice. "I am not admonishing you for having a bad day, nor for submitting to memories of the horrors you've lived through. You may believe me to be cold and cruel, but I am not blind to true pain. I only impress upon you that you must overcome the urge to submit to those thoughts and memories, regardless of how you are feeling, in order to master Occlumency."

Hermione had calmed by the end of his speech, feeling oddly relieved after her emotional outburst.

"Fine. I'm sorry, I'll try harder... shall we try again?" she asked timidly.

"Very well," he replied as he suddenly plunged into her mind unexpectedly. He sifted through her thoughts for a few minutes before she was finally able to push him out again.

They continued in this manner for two hours, until she had tired too much to continue. They parted ways, and she returned to her dormitory to shower. The rest of her day passed dully, and by 10:00 p.m. she was thoroughly exhausted; too much even to do her customary before-bed jog. She collapsed into bed, intent on getting a good night's rest, especially after her hectic day. Apparently luck was not with her, as she fell into a fitful sleep riddled with nightmares of the horrors of the summer.

Thanks for reading. Leave a review please!

Memories

Chapter 8 of 10

Hermione is assaulted by her memories of what happened during her capture.

Huge thanks to my wonderful beta, AmyLouise, without whom I could not have posted this chapter.

Hermione awoke with a start, her hand reflexively gripping at Lavender's throat. She released her as suddenly as she had grabbed her, the blariness of sleep slipping away. Lavender stumbled back in fear, shaking fiercely.

"Lavender, I'm sorry did I hurt you?" Hermione asked, concerned for her dorm mate.

"N-n-no," she stuttered as Parvati put a steadying arm around her shoulders.

"You were screaming in your sleep. Nightmare or something. You okay?" Parvati asked tentatively.

"Oh... uh, yeah. Thanks. Sorry again; it was just a reaction, nothing personal... sorry," Hermione replied, getting out of bed. She was not likely to get any more sleep

anyway. She quickly made her way to the bathroom, starting a shower in hopes of chasing away the remnants of her nightmare, no... her memory.

She stepped into the shower, closing her eyes as she welcomed the warm rush of water over her tired body.

"No, stop! Please, not my sister," Hermione begged as a Death Eater began whipping her baby sister Leigh with a thick leather strap.

Her cries rang out in the room, mixed with the cruel laughing of the men who tortured them. Hermione lay there, helpless, as they tortured her poor sister. She could do nothing but watch in horror as the metal studded leather strap came down upon the young child's body repeatedly.

"Please... stop... stop... anything leave her be, please, she's just a child! Take me instead, please," Hermione continued to plead.

"Well, since you insist," Malfoy sneered, leaving her sister unconscious on the floor as he descended upon Hermione.

"I do believe you will provide much better entertainment for me," he leered provocatively, as he trailed a finger along her breasts...

Hermione's eyes flew open in alarm as the water, mingling with her tears, began to turn cold.

'No. It will do me no good to remember... forget, Hermione, forget,' she thought as she finished her shower quickly. She stepped out and dried and dressed hurriedly, not sparing herself so much as a glance in the mirror; the sight that would undoubtedly meet her eyes was not one she wished to see. She pulled on her uniform and threw on her robes as she emerged, leaving the bathroom empty for the other girls. She grabbed her books and went down to breakfast, hoping to eat and get out before the boys arrived.

She finished her breakfast in peace, as it was far too early for most students to be up. Noticing that she had time to spare, Hermione decided to take a walk around the grounds. It was cold, and the bitter chill numbed her body, much as the dream had numbed her mind and soul. The grounds had a strange calm about them at this hour. They were untouched and serene. She slowly made her way towards the lake, and as she approached, she saw a lone figure staring out into the depths of the lake, deep in thought. The figure turned at the sound of her crunching footsteps.

"Granger." Malfoy nodded, rather indifferently.

"Malfoy," Hermione replied cautiously. "Where're your goons?" she asked.

"Hmph. Dreaming of sweets and cakes probably," he replied with a snort. "Where're yours?" he countered.

"About the same. Although they're probably dreaming about Quidditch more than sweets," Hermione answered good-naturedly.

"Yeah, well, at least *someone* in this school can dream of something pleasant," he said bitterly.

"You're telling me," she muttered under her breath.

"So, what terrible nightmare plagued *your* dreams, Malfoy?" Hermione asked, not entirely sure why she was still speaking to him. Goodness, she hadn't had this lengthy a conversation with even Harry in weeks, so why *Malfoy*? Hermione wondered idly.

"My father," he answered honestly, sending her a sideways glance. "You?"

"Same," Hermione replied softly.

They lapsed into mutual silence, both acknowledging the cause of the other's nightmares. After ten minutes, he suddenly pushed off from the tree he was leaning against.

"Well, I'm freezing, and the other students will be up soon. Catch ya later, Granger," he said, heading back towards the castle.

"Uh, yeah. Later, Malfoy," Hermione replied, somewhat confused about what had just happened.

Since when am I friendly with Malfoy? My God, have I forgotten what his father did? she mentally berated herself. *Ahh, but he isn't his father, and he's been hurt by Lucius almost as much as you have, her conscience countered. Oh, whatever, I'm freezing; might as well get to class now... being late won't help my situation any,* she thought, turning to head back.

She made her way to Transfiguration, meeting up with the boys along the way.

"Morning, 'Mione," they mumbled in unison.

Hermione merely nodded at them. This had become rather normal, and they didn't say another word till they reached the classroom. The rest of the day passed in a blur. Hermione had been oddly silent all day, and by dinner, Harry's curiosity was driving him crazy.

"You okay, 'Mione? You've been awfully quiet today," he said softly.

"I'm fine, Harry," Hermione replied, as normally as she could. All day her thoughts had been plagued by random flashes from her nightmare, each one more painful than the last. All of this, on top of the confusion of her early morning encounter with a certain blonde Slytherin. It was enough to drive her insane!

"If you're sure... you know I'm always here for you, right?" he persisted.

"Yes, Harry, thank you, I'm fine... Look, I've got to get to my lesson; I'll see you in the common room later, all right?"

"Sure, 'Mione," he replied, defeated.

"See ya later, Hermione!" Ron said when he noticed her leaving.

Hermione wandered the halls aimlessly, lost in her own thoughts. Dinner wouldn't be over for another half-hour, and she didn't want to simply sit and wait in the Room of Requirement. She wandered up to the Astronomy Tower, sitting idly as she allowed her thoughts to consume her. She was caught up in her own little world and failed to notice the four Slytherins that were approaching until it was too late to make an escape.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't the Mudblood Granger," Pansy Parkinson sneered.

"What's wrong, Mudblood, miss your mama?" Theodore Nott Jr. baited her as Crabbe and Goyle grunted and laughed from behind him.

Hermione flinched slightly before saying in a cool tone, "Go to hell maybe then you can have a little family reunion." She then made to go around them, but Crabbe and Goyle blocked her way.

"I suggest you tell your thugs to move unless you all want to be on the receiving end of my wand," Hermione threatened dangerously.

"Heh, yeah, we're terrified, Mudblood; what're ya gonna do? There's four of us and one of you, and from what I hear, you don't put up all that much of a fight either," Nott replied.

"Would you really like to test that theory? 'Cause that's all it is. I'll show you reality," she answered in a deceptively calm voice.

Then, just as a duel was about to break out, Professor Moody appeared.

Impeccable timing, Professor, Hermione thought sardonically.

"And just what is going on here? Four against one? Typical cowardly Slytherin behaviour. I might have known. Twenty points from Slytherin! Now get out of my sight before I get really angry," Moody growled menacingly.

The Slytherins scampered away, but not before sending Hermione one last threatening glance. She would have to watch her back from now on.

"All right there, lass?" Moody asked gruffly.

"Fine, sir, thank you," Hermione replied politely. "If you'll excuse me, I believe I have a lesson in a few minutes."

"Of course, of course. You watch out for yourself; those Slytherins are nasty pieces of work."

"Yes, sir," she replied, giving a polite nod before she made her way down to the Room of Requirement.

Hermione was frustrated to note that she was no less distracted in this lesson than she had been on Sunday. Snape refused to go easy on her, and this was not something that she objected to, for it was his constant pressure that provided her the motivation and drive to strive higher. However, on one of his probes he happened to come across the memory of her dream from that night. The memory was so strong that he found himself unable to pull out of her mind and was forced to watch the horrors unfold before his eyes. When he was able, he pulled out of her mind abruptly; disgusted, shocked and pained by what he saw. Hermione, however, had a glassy look in her eyes as she was once again forced to relive those moments.

"My sincere apologies, Miss Granger; I had no intention of invading your privacy in such a manner," he apologized sincerely.

Hermione remained silent, as though she had not heard a word he said. She seemed to be lost in her memories. Severus knew that the mind was a delicate thing, and he knew that a person in such a state should not be shocked out of their memory. It could be disastrous. It was for this reason that he approached her carefully and calmly tried to break her trance.

"Miss Granger? It's all right; you are in Hogwarts," he said in an uncharacteristically soft manner.

"You are safe," he continued as he gently touched her shoulder.

She flinched slightly, but showed no sign of emerging from her trance-like state. This worried the Potions master, as it was clear she had withdrawn into her mind and was trapped in the memories of her tragic summer.

"Miss Granger... Hermione, they cannot harm you here," he persisted soothingly. He knew that the only way to safely draw her from her memories was to coax her out.

He continued in a similar manner for nearly thirty minutes when all of a sudden, as though a veil had been lifted, she snapped back into the present with a shuddered gasp of pain. Hermione gasped and trembled in a mixture of pain, anguish and grief, silent tears cascading down her pale cheeks. Her eyes looked haunted as she tried desperately to gain a firm grip on reality once more.

Severus, knowing that this stage was critical, continued his soft, gentle assurances and kept his hand lightly on her shoulder, as if to ground her to the present with his mere touch.

Hermione suddenly lurched forward and clutched onto Severus as though he were a lifeline in her bottomless pool of pain. Severus was shocked by her sudden motion, but slowly and carefully put his arms around her, shushing her as she cried herself to exhaustion. After several moments and even more tears, Hermione finally quietened. By this point she was tired... physically, mentally and emotionally, but she regained her bearings and flushed with embarrassment as she pulled away from her professor.

"Professor Snape, I am so sorry, I didn't mean to accost you like that; I don't know what came over me..." Hermione apologised, showing a glimmer of her former self.

"It's all right, Miss Granger. It is not an unusual reaction for someone who has suffered such trauma," Severus replied stiffly, clearly uncomfortable with the situation.

"Thank you, sir," she said softly, knowing how awkward he must have felt.

"Indeed. I believe that will be all for today."

"I think it would be best if we acquired a Pensieve for you during these lessons. It would be both dangerous and foolish to risk another withdrawal like the one you just had."

"Yes, sir. Good night."

Severus merely nodded as he watched her walk out of the room. He followed shortly, but could not get the images of her torture out of his head. He had seen torture, participated in it, been subjected to it; yet for some reason he could not get her anguished screams out of his head. He felt responsible on some level, and guilty... for not doing enough; for having been foolish enough to have joined the Death Eaters in the first place. Severus had a long, not-so-healthy relationship with guilt and regret, and it seemed as though this last occurrence merely added to the long list of reasons why he had said relationship. It was with these last thoughts and images that he went to bed, knowing that the memory he had witnessed would fill his nightmares for the days to come.

Thanks for reading. Leave a review please!

Compliments From Snape? Never!

Hermione spends some time with Harry, Ron, and Ginny on the last day of term before the Christmas holidays.

Huge thanks to my awesome beta, AmyLouise! This chapter, and this entire story, could not have been posted without her.

Disclaimer: I own nothing but the plot.

Hermione awoke the next morning, dreading the day to come. A good night's sleep did not seem to diffuse the strong sense of embarrassment she still felt over what had occurred the previous evening. She had been so careful about maintaining her image of imperviousness, not daring to show any real emotion or even a modicum of weakness to anyone since her 'rescue'. Until now, that is. She felt like a fool, weeping like a distraught female, and in front of Snape, of all people! Of all ways to be shamed! He was quite possibly the *last* person she wanted to see her in such a state. Alas, nothing could be done about it now, but it was almost guaranteed that her next lesson would be awkward. So with these thoughts bouncing around in her head, she finished her morning routine and got ready for her morning jog.

Remembering Professor Snape's warning, she made sure not to venture as close to the Forest as she usually did, for if there was one thing she knew about Snape, it was that he didn't say anything without a reason. Not to mention it was perfectly logical, and she probably wasn't doing the brightest thing in the world by jogging so near the forest anyway. Logically, she knew that, but the irrational part of her brain was somehow drawn to the forest regardless of the dangers. With that in mind, she set off for her jog, and this time it was peaceful and uninterrupted. She returned to her dorm, showered, and still managed to beat Harry and Ron to breakfast. Thankfully, today she would not have any Occlumency lessons, but there was still Potions to worry about. Hermione, feeling a little reluctant to be alone, lingered over her breakfast, hoping at least to be in the company of the boys.

"Hermione! You're usually long gone to the library by this time!" Harry exclaimed in surprise.

"Usually, yeah. Is it so wrong to want to spend some time with my best friends?" Hermione asked calmly, fixing him with a somewhat sly look.

"Of course not, 'Mione, we always love your company! I was just surprised, is all pleasantly though, mind," he replied cheekily, with a grin and a wink.

"Morning, Hermione," Ginny said softly.

"Morning, Gin, Ron," Hermione responded with a small smile, almost seeming shy for a moment.

Ron gaped, seemingly incapable of speech, too shocked by Hermione's suddenly near-normal behaviour. All he could do was stare at her with wide eyes as if she'd morphed into some strange creature.

"Ron!" Harry hissed, elbowing him discreetly. "Say something!"

"Wha... oh, yeah, morning, 'Mione. Blimey, it seems like it's been *ages* since I talked to you," Ron said in his typical, blunt manner.

Hermione merely smiled, knowing that her friend meant no harm. In that moment, she almost felt normal again, as though the summer had never happened. Sitting there watching the boys stuff their faces was such a normal occurrence that she suddenly realized just how carefree she had been before. It may look the same now, to an outsider, but Hermione knew it was different. *She* was different. It seemed that sitting with them as she used to only made it more clear that things could never go back to how they were.

Long gone were the happy days when they were constantly getting into mischief and ready to solve the next great puzzle. No, it no longer seemed like a game or a fun adventure to Hermione. It was too real: the loss, the suffering, the true horrors of the war. If there was one thing Hermione could wish for, it was to have everything go back to how they were. She longed to be the naive, *innocent* girl she once was. But there was no use pining for that which could not be attained. Sadly, nothing could change what happened, but she *could* make the most of it and pour her heart and soul into winning this war. If she lived to the day of the final battle, nothing would be able to keep her from standing at Harry's side when he faced down Voldemort once and for all.

Lost in her own inner musings, she was startled when Harry gently shook her shoulder to tell her to come to class.

"'Mione, come on, we're going to be late for Potions," said Harry.

"Yeah, Snape'll give us detention till Christmas if we show up late," Ron added.

"Of course; sorry, boys, let's go then, shall we?" Hermione answered.

So the Golden Trio united once more traipsed off towards the dungeons and their least favourite class. Potions dragged by for the Gryffindors, and Hermione had never felt so eager for a class to be over in her life. If it wasn't bad enough that it was the first class of the morning, it just *had* to be a double period as well. It was by far the most awkward one-and-a-half hours she had been forced to endure for some time. During the entire time, Hermione tried desperately to avoid Professor Snape's gaze, though not entirely successfully.

The instant the bell rang, she bolted for the door, not even waiting for the boys. By the time they caught up with her, they were already half-way to Transfiguration.

"Bloody hell, Hermione, what's the rush? I mean, I hate Snape too, but really!" exclaimed Ron as he jogged up to her.

"Yeah, 'Mione, I've never seen you so eager to get out of a class before," Harry agreed, giving her a curious look.

"It's nothing, don't worry about it boys... Come on, don't want to be late for Transfiguration, do we?" Hermione replied, neatly ignoring their questions.

"Uh, yeah, sure," Ron said, still confused by Hermione's strange behaviour.

And so the rest of the day passed uneventfully. Hermione's mind, however, drifted more than usual in her classes. She could not get the events of yesterday out of her mind. It was so strange; Professor Snape had seemed almost kind, "almost" being the operative word.

Unfortunately, Wednesday passed too soon, and before Hermione knew it, she was standing outside the Room of Requirement with an intense feeling of dread. If there was one thing that Hermione hated more than anything, it was failure... at anything. Lately, her progress in Occlumency seemed to have stopped short; or rather, it was deteriorating. It was infuriating to her! Giving herself a mental shake, she steeled herself for another couple hours of hard work as she entered the room.

"Miss Granger," Snape said with a slight nod of acknowledgement.

"Professor Snape," she replied calmly.

Then, without any warning, he suddenly plunged into her mind. Hermione snapped into defensive mode almost on reflex and poured all her strength into warding him out. In a few moments, Snape was forcefully thrown out of her mind with such strength that he nearly collapsed.

"I see you've been practicing; good," he said coolly as he composed himself.

"Thank you, sir," Hermione replied demurely.

"Again!"

They passed the next two hours in a similar manner, with Hermione improving by small amounts each time. After one particular attack, they took a quick water break. It was important that Hermione take breaks in order to give her mind a few moments' rest. Not doing so could result in serious damage, as the mind is a delicate thing. It was during one of these breaks that Snape confronted her about their 'meeting' by the Forest.

"I trust you no longer venture near the forest on your jogs, Miss Granger?" he asked nonchalantly.

"No, sir," she replied obediently.

"Good," he said.

Then, after a short pause, he casually said, "Are you in the habit of attacking anyone who approaches you without seeing first whether or not they mean you harm?"

"I-I- no, sir; sorry, sir. I didn't mean to attack you; I was merely startled. It was a reflexive reaction."

"Indeed. Have you been formally taught hand-to-hand combat?" he questioned in the same cool manner.

"No, sir... I learned out of necessity, when the opportunity presented itself. Needless to say, I could have done without the lesson."

"I see... no training whatsoever?" he persisted.

"No, sir... May I ask why you are so interested in whether or not I have been formally taught?" Hermione questioned cautiously.

"Suffice it to say, I was... surprised... by your quick reflexes and precision," he replied carefully.

"Oh... thank you," she said, in shock that Professor *Snape* had just complimented her. Granted, it was a rather carefully stated compliment, but a compliment nonetheless.

"All right; again!" he stated, abruptly switching back into attacking mode.

It was silently but mutually agreed that the events of Monday were not to be discussed or allowed to affect their lessons, and so the lesson passed in a state of normalcy that was undeniably appreciated by both mentor and student. As Hermione left that night, she could not help but wonder at Professor Snape's strange behaviour. The thought that he would ever speak to her in a less than threatening or snarky manner was shocking, but for him to have actually *complimented* her was completely out of character, or so she thought.

The rest of the week passed in relative peace. Hermione's lessons progressed well and the oddity of Professor Snape's behaviour was soon forgotten as he once again slipped back into his "evil Potions master" persona. Time passed quickly, and soon there was only one week left before the Christmas holidays. As everyone else slipped into the giddy, festive spirit that usually accompanied the holidays, Hermione sank deeper and deeper into herself. This would be the first Christmas without her mother and sister. In short, Hermione had little or no desire to return home. The mere thought of returning to her childhood home was repulsive to Hermione; it would do nothing more than remind her of those who would no longer be there.

"Hey, 'Mione!" Ron called out cheerfully as Hermione passed through the common room.

Hermione nodded in acknowledgment but continued on her way out without saying a word.

"Hey, wait up, can we talk?" he persisted.

Hermione sent him a side-long glance, nodding slowly in consent but not stopping.

"Great!" he replied, excited that she had actually agreed to talk to him. "So, I was thinking, what are your plans for the Christmas holidays this year?"

"Nothing... I'm staying here," Hermione replied dully.

"Oh... What about your dad?" Ron asked confused.

"What about him?"

"Don't ya wanna spend Christmas with him? I mean, it being your first one... after what happened and all," Ron stuttered out anxiously.

Then, in an instant, before he could even blink, Ron was slammed into the nearest wall. Hermione pinned him there with one hand at his throat and a mad glint in her eye.

"Don't you *ever* talk to me about 'what happened' as you so kindly put it: Do. I. Make. Myself. Clear. Ronald?" she snarled viciously.

"Uh... um... yeah, crystal clear, 'Mione... I'm sorry! I just meant that maybe if you wanted someplace to stay, we'd be happy to have you at the Burrow, is all... I didn't mean to make you mad... Sorry," he said nervously, eyeing her as if she were an angry hippogriff.

"Oh... sorry, Ronald... I didn't mean to attack you like that," Hermione said, snapping out of the angry haze that she had just been in. She carefully removed her hand from Ron's throat and stepped back five paces.

"Look, I'm sorry I freaked out like that... and thank you for the offer, Ronald, but I think I'd rather stay here."

"Oh, yeah, 's okay. Don't worry about it... I'll see ya later, 'Mione," he said before he scampered off back to the safety of the common room.

Hermione didn't know what was wrong with her; the incident with Ron earlier had really shaken her. It was as though, in that instant, she hadn't been herself. The action had been instinctive; it had felt like it happened before she had even had time to think. All in all, it was strange.

Yet Ronald had a point... since her 'rescue' she had spoken to her father a grand total of three times. She had no inclination to see or speak to him, and as harsh as that sounded, it was simply too difficult. It was like a stark reminder of what she had lost and what she could never have again... a family. So, as guilty as she felt, she shut him out. It was easier, and she rationalised it by telling herself that they were both better off that way.

So this was how Hermione found herself alone on the first day of the Christmas holidays, the only sixth year Gryffindor left. Even Harry had gone off to the Burrow, and while the invitation still stood, Hermione had no wish to be surrounded by a large happy family at such a time. She had no way of knowing that the two-week break would set in motion the events of the years to come.

Thanks for reading. Leave a review please! :)

Flowing Gems of Purity

Chapter 10 of 10

Hermione makes an interesting discovery.

Thank you to my wonderful beta, AmyLouise!

Disclaimer: I own nothing but the plot

The day started out blissfully quiet in the sixth-year girls' dormitory. For once, Hermione was free of the incessant chatter that spewed like an endless stream from the mouths of the other girls. Refreshed by this, Hermione went about with her usual morning routine and went for a quick jog before returning to shower. Once these morning rituals were over, she noticed it was already time for lunch and made her way down to the Great Hall. Upon entering, she couldn't help but notice the remarkably few number of students present for the holidays at Hogwarts this year. It seemed that Professor Dumbledore was of the same opinion and had decided to move all the house and staff tables, choosing instead to have one single table for all the students and teachers to share. It was strange to see the Great Hall so empty, occupied with nothing more than one large table and a Christmas tree. Hermione made her way over to the table slowly, noticing that it was already occupied by several students and teachers.

"Ah, Hermione, do come and join us for lunch, my dear," Professor Dumbledore exclaimed in a jovial manner.

"Thank you, Headmaster," she replied, nodding slightly at him.

As she went to take a seat she noticed that there was a rather large gap between the students and Professor Snape, while there was no such distance between any of the other teachers and students. Hermione decided that instead of squeezing between the other younger students or teachers, she could just as easily sit near the Potions master.

As she sat down, she received startled looks and curious glances from both the staff and students. The only people who did not seem surprised by her choice of seating were the Headmaster and Professor Snape himself. Nevertheless, lunch was a quiet affair. Most of the students remaining this year were in fourth year or below, with a few fifth, sixth and seventh years scattered in between. The students all seemed too nervous to talk as they normally would: likely a result of their close proximity to the professors. Granted, their strange silence could also be attributed to the harsh glares they were periodically receiving from Professor Snape. Hermione, however, was not fazed by sitting so near the staff, nor was she discomforted by her close proximity to the fearsome Potions master; in fact, she was quite pleased with the sudden and rare quiet that encompassed the Great Hall.

The meal passed in blissful silence, and the students scurried off as soon as was acceptable. Hermione found this amusing and thought reminiscently back to those blissful years when she too had naively idolized, worshipped, and even feared her beloved professors. Perhaps it was the odd feeling of being alone at Christmas that caused all of her recent nostalgia. It seemed as though the world had changed so drastically during those months she was gone, when in reality the world at large had not been altered at all... no, the change she felt came from within. It was as though the Death Eaters had, while sparing her life, killed the joyful, carefree spirit she once had, leaving behind an empty shell, one with no other goal than pure, sweet revenge.

Hermione spent the afternoon wandering along the hallways in a somewhat dazed manner. She was caught in a sudden bout of nostalgia and found herself reminiscing about all the relatively carefree times she had spent in the school while trying desperately not to let her thoughts drift to the darker recesses of her mind. She wandered aimlessly, letting her feet guide her, only to find herself some time later in strange hallway, deep in the depths of the school dungeons. Not entirely sure how she had come to be there, she decided to explore.

The corridor seemed long deserted, as if no one had ventured there in years. It was dark, like many of the underground tunnels of the school, but had an eerie glow that seemed to emanate from the walls, which were jagged and well worn, yet the stones below her feet were smooth, evenly cut, and polished like marble. The effect was interesting, like a cross between old and new.

There were no portraits adorning these halls, and upon looking up, she noticed strange patterns on the ceiling. There were intricate designs that vaguely resembled Celtic knots. In fact, upon closer inspection, she noticed that the walls did not exactly glow *per se* but had tiny well-like holes that were filled with some kind of glowing blue substance, enough to light the way in an eerie glow.

Intrigued, Hermione continued down the hallway, which seemed to beckon her. The corridor appeared to stretch endlessly, and the patterns from the ceiling bled down over the walls the farther she walked along the hall. Hermione lightly trailed her finger tips along the wall, tracing the designs with her fingers as she walked. What she failed to notice, however, was that every time she touched a line, it would flare a brilliant emerald green, glowing much like the blue substance in the walls.

A little way down, Hermione stopped abruptly at the sight of a massive arch. It was here that she noticed the glowing green substance as the colour seeped in, filling the carvings and winding its way around the archway. Hermione stepped back in shock. The glow faded when it completed its course around the arch, only to flash silver. Then, like an overflowing river, molten silver poured from the carvings, coating the wall under the arch in shimmering silver fluid.

As if in a trance, Hermione reached her hand out towards the shimmering wall, throwing caution to the wind as she was lured towards the molten arch. The instant her fingers touched the silver, she pulled back, her fingertips coated in thick silver fluid, not unlike Unicorn blood. Though it looked like molten silver, in reality it was not hot at all; on the contrary, it was actually rather cool. She passed her hand along the wall again, relishing the feel of the smooth silver liquid. It was refreshing, much like a cool spray of water on a hot summer's day. Drawn to the arch, Hermione stepped closer, reaching out to the wall which seemed to call to her longingly. This time, when her fingers touched the liquid, they passed through, as though a passageway had opened behind the waterfall of liquid silver. Hesitantly, she passed her arm through the sheet of silver, a flicker of doubt passing through her mind for the first time. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes, plunging through it.

She stepped through and opened her eyes, only to find herself in an elaborate-looking circular room. The room was large, with a massive domed ceiling and floors of brilliant white marble with emerald green and sapphire blue swirls embedded in it. There were majestic columns entwined with lush green ivy lining the room.

Hermione turned to look behind her and saw that the passageway looked the same as it did from the other side. Satisfied that she could still get out, she started walking along the perimeter of the room. In one corner there was a long mirror which caught her eye. It was not the mirror itself that caught her attention, it was the reflection that met her eyes. There she stood, her reflection the same as it had always been, except she noticed that her hair was now coated in the thick silver at the ends. The droplets slid slowly down her shoulders, shimmering softly before disappearing. It cast a glow around her, giving her an ethereal appearance, purifying her in a way she had not felt for many months.

Tearing her glance away from the mirror, Hermione continued her explorations. There was not much in the room, but the designs from outside adorned these walls as well,

leading her to believe there could be more rooms and doors hidden amongst the carvings. Hermione was so entranced with her new discovery that she hardly noticed how much time had passed. Only the sudden pang from her stomach reminded her that perhaps she ought to leave her explorations for another day.

Sighing, she stepped back through the archway, retreating back along the way she came. The doorway disappeared after she walked away, the silver turning back into green and retracting as though it were following her. Upon reaching the beginning of the hallway, Hermione turned and looked back at the hall. Now it only had a faint blue glow to it, as though someone had lit their wand with a *lumos* at the end of the corridor. Turning once again, Hermione retraced her steps through the dungeons back to the main part of the castle, deep in thought.

So engrossed was she in her thoughts, she hardly noticed the looming figure of the Potions master, who was fast approaching her.

"Miss Granger," came the sharp voice of her professor.

"Hmm? What... Oh, good evening, Professor; how can I help you?" Hermione replied calmly.

He merely quirked an eyebrow at her, before enquiring accusingly where she had been at dinner.

"Is dinner over already? I'm afraid I lost track of time, sir," she replied coolly.

"Indeed. Do you have any idea what time it is, Miss Granger?" he asked, the smug demand clear in his tone.

"Seven, sir?" Hermione wagered casually, not having the slightest clue as to what time it was.

"Hardly. It might interest you to know that it is currently 12:30, over two hours past your curfew," he sneered.

"I beg your pardon, sir?" Hermione asked, shocked from her half-dazed state upon hearing the time.

"Twenty points from Gryffindor; get to your dormitory now before I remove any more," he barked.

"Yes, sir," she replied demurely, still surprised that so much time had passed without her noticing.

Had she been that preoccupied, that she failed to notice *ten hours* pass her by? That corridor had entranced her so much that the time literally flown by, yet she wasn't tired in the least. On the contrary, she felt energetic and oddly enough, peaceful for the first time in months.

Thoroughly astonished by the events of the day, Hermione returned to her tower, following the same route she had for the past five years. Upon reaching her room, she got ready for bed, feeling strangely relaxed. Not five minutes after she lay down, her eyes drifted closed, and she slipped away into a deep, peaceful, and blissfully dreamless sleep.

Thanks for reading. Leave a review please! :)