

Redefining Hermione

by snarkysagewitch

After more loss than she knows how to handle, Hermione is alone and scared. But after secrets from the past are revealed, Hermione loses what little she has left and ends up at Malfoy Manor, working with Draco Malfoy and Severus Snape as spies for the Order while struggling to decide who she really is.

Hermione Remembers

Chapter 1 of 6

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Hermione Granger sat on the hillside of Hogwarts' grounds that overlooked Hagrid's hut. It was from this very spot that she'd seen Buckbeak murdered before she and Harry had used the Time-Turner to save him. It was a bright April morning, filled with rays of sunshine, but Hermione's mood was anything but happy. Staring at the morning sky, Hermione thought back on just how much her life had changed since the past Christmas.

Hermione had been at home on Christmas Eve, drinking eggnog with her parents. Her father absolutely despised the taste of eggnog but drank it just to be with his wife and daughter. Though Hermione felt close to her parents in so many ways, Hermione told them near nothing of what happened in the wizarding world. They didn't know that the war between Harry and Voldemort was now at its peak, and that since he couldn't get to Harry, Voldemort was now taking out his frustrations on helpless Muggles. Professor Dumbledore had warned her that if any trouble arose over Christmas break, she would need to return to Hogwarts immediately.

She knew it was dangerous to be about, but all she wanted was a normal Christmas with her parents, as she hadn't been home since Christmas fourth-year. Hermione had been so sure that nothing bad would ever happen to her. However, she was about to be proven terribly wrong.

In the stillness of the night, the cracks signaling Apparation into her parents' home were clearly audible. Hermione had read in the Daily Prophet the story of a Muggle-born witch whose entire family was killed. In the few moments she had to think, Hermione was terrified thinking that her family would also be killed.

Hermione reached for her wand as a pair of strong arms from behind came around her waist, encircling her. She struggled as the man behind her pulled her into a closet. She pushed and shoved, and the closet door opened a crack. Yet, the sight she saw made her stop struggling and just stare, eyes wide, at the scene before her.

She counted seven masked figures forming a circle around her parents, who were already unconscious by stunners. Hermione stared in horror as she watched two identical shots of green light hit her parents' bodies. She felt something being pushed into her hands, but it didn't matter. She couldn't move, couldn't speak or breathe.

Even as she felt the familiar tug of the navel signaling her to a Portkey, her body refused to cooperate with her as she arrived at her destination. When her feet landed on a

hard floor, the arms that were holding her loosened, if only a bit.

"Uncle, quick!" shouted the voice attached to those arms. Hermione's eyes widened as she realized who that voice belonged to.

"Malfoy?" she asked wearily.

Her last memory was of a man in a cape walking towards them.

Hermione remembered waking up in a dark room. She was in a soft, comfortable bed. Feeling around for her wand, she found it on the bedside table. A quick Lumos revealed she was in her bed at number twelve Grimmauld Place.

Looking over at Ginny's bed, Hermione saw it full, not with Ginny, but instead with the sleeping form of Luna Lovegood.

Ginny, who was sitting in one of the chairs next to the beds, saw Hermione stir instantly. Seeing she was awake, she ran to her side and pulled her into a fierce bear hug.

"Luna," she called. "Luna, wake up!" To reinforce the message, she threw a pillow at the blonde's head. Luna sat up groggily, but upon seeing Hermione awake, leaped out of bed and rushed to her side, joining Ginny in the hug.

Hermione, wondering what caused their overfriendly gesture, thought back to the previous night. Suddenly, it hit her full force. She clutched to the two girls, desperately looking for some hope that last night was just a dream.

"My parents," moaned Hermione, as tears spilled over onto Luna's shirt.

"I'm so sorry, Hermione," whispered Ginny, pulling Hermione even closer.

"We're here for whatever you need," answered Luna.

Hermione thought back to the previous night and the man that had been behind her with sudden clarity.

"Gin... right before I blacked out, I thought I heard Malfoy's voice," stated Hermione. She had spoken so quietly that only Luna had heard her statement.

"We only listened to the Order's meeting through the Extendable Ears," answered Luna. "And all we could find out was that he Portkeyed you somewhere. We don't know what happened after that."

Hermione had been about to respond when a very disgruntled Harry, Ron, Fred, and George burst through the door.

"Oi, Ginny!" exclaimed Fred. "You were supposed to tell us when she woke up!" Ron, who had become her boyfriend only a week before, came to sit on the bed, pushing Luna to the floor in the process. Ignoring Ginny's cry of shock at his rudeness towards Luna, he pulled Hermione's arms into his lap so forcefully her head came down very uncomfortably on his chest. Pushing gently on her shoulders, forcing her to sit up and look at him, he gently kissed her forehead.

"All right, 'Mione?"

Hermione, not wanting to deal with Ron at the moment, pulled out of his grasp and scooted as far away from him as she could on the bed. On the other edge, she lay down and turned away from the other occupants of the room. Quietly, but very distinctly, Hermione heard Harry's voice.

"Come on, guys. Let's go. Gin, Luna, look after her." A moment later, she heard the door click, signaling their departure.

Scared and upset, Hermione's body started shaking as a river of tears ran down her face. She felt Luna's hand come up to stroke her hair and fell asleep, miserable.

A few days after Christmas, it was announced to the Order that Draco Malfoy and Narcissa Malfoy had chosen to turn their back on Voldemort and join the side of the light. Under an Unbreakable Vow with Dumbledore, the two agreed to become spies for the Order, just like Severus Snape.

No one had spoken to Hermione about what had actually happened the night her parents were killed, except to say they were sorry for her loss. She hadn't seen Malfoy at all, for which she was glad. After thinking about what really happened that night, Hermione knew she had heard Draco calling for his uncle. What Hermione didn't know was if his uncle was on the side of the dark or the light. If Malfoy's uncle had been a Death Eater, maybe Malfoy had taken her to him, and then when his uncle began to torture her, Draco showed remorse and got her out of there as quick as possible. Hermione was the first to admit she had no idea what had happened, and she wasn't so sure she wanted to know.

At their return to Hogwarts after break, everyone noticed the changes going through Hermione Granger. Though she still excelled in her classes, she no longer spent hours studying, nor did she raise her hand in class. Instead, Hermione tended to stare blankly out the windows that showed the lawns of Hogwarts. She only did the bare minimum work requirements.

While Hermione was still friendly with everyone, she barely ever talked. When she was with Harry and Ron, it was common for her to be caught not listening because she was in a daze. She saw it coming, but Hermione was unable to stop the deep depression slowly consuming her soul.

The one part of her life that remained tolerable was her friendship with Ginny and Luna. During her first year at Hogwarts, Hermione had realized she wasn't like other girls in her year. She didn't want female friends; Harry and Ron were the only people she even wanted to like her. Then, in her fifth year, during the DA meetings, Hermione had found true friends in both Ginny and Luna. Though Harry and Ron would forever be her best friends, she found that when she needed someone to talk to she would go to Ginny and Luna first.

Hermione had continued dating Ron. Though, she had to admit she wasn't dating him because she liked him romantically or just to have fun. She was really only dating him because everyone expected them to. She thought Ron got off on it, more than she ever could at least. He would hold her hand in public, but it was awkward because his palms were always sweaty. Hermione could count the number of times they'd kissed on one hand, and they had all happened when Ron knew there was an audience.

After one snogging incident outside the Great Hall, she'd run to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom in tears. Luna and Ginny had found Hermione gargling mouth wash just to get the taste of Ron's tongue out of her mouth. Myrtle had scolded Hermione, telling her no one could do better than Ronald Weasley...Myrtle had fancied him since their second year.

After that, Ginny had sat her down on the floor, and together, she and Luna had convinced her to break up with Ron. That night, Hermione had broken up with Ron in the common room after everyone else had gone to bed.

Hermione sighed as she stared at Hagrid's Hut. Breaking up with Ron and losing her parents had been terrible, but it had only gotten much worse. Looking at the Hut only made her sadder because it reminded her of the sacrifices everyone had made during the war.

The week following the breakup had been awkward at best. Ron avoided her the entire week, and Harry seemed to not know what to say. However, that all changed when, one day Ron came running into the common room and dragged Hermione out of the portrait hole by the wrist before she could object. The two of them jogged down to the Great Hall where Ron finally told her that Harry had another vision.

Harry had seen a large number of Death Eaters surrounding Voldemort just outside of Hogsmeade; they were ready to fight. The Order arrived quickly, and Dumbledore gave everybody instructions. Together, they formed a battle circle, much the same as Voldemort was hiding in. The only difference was that the light was relying on love by putting not only Harry in the center of the circle, but also Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Luna. Surrounding them were many people, including Arthur Weasley, Nymphadora Tonks, and Fleur Weasley, who was two months pregnant with Bill's child.

The battle was raging, and Hermione remembered everything that happened as if it were in slow motion. She saw Fleur go down and heard the shout of despair from her sister, Gabriella, whose moment of inattention cost her her life. Tonks' hair turned as green as the bolt of light that hit her before she collapsed to the ground, lifeless. She turned away at Ginny's high-pitched scream of "DADDY!" as they watched Arthur Weasley take his last breath.

When their group finally made it to the inside of the circle where Voldemort was supposed to be, they realized only too late that they had been duped. Standing in the center of the circle was not Voldemort, but Lucius Malfoy. Although stunned, the Order quickly figured out that Voldemort had placed false images in Harry's mind, making them think he would be there when in reality, he was safely in hiding.

In their moments of shock, Lucius managed to kill Minerva McGonagall, and Bellatrix Lestrange took out Hagrid. Though the light was down, they were not out, and their group kept on dueling, hoping to take out as many Death Eaters as possible. However, Crabbe and Goyle Seniors were much better duelers than their sons and took the opportunity to create Hermione's worst nightmare. Together, they killed off Ginny and Luna in quick succession. During the battle, Ron's rage built up to the point where he shouted, "*Avada Kedavra!*" effectively killing Lucius. Finally, the Order made a hasty retreat, well aware of their surmounting losses.

The battle of Hogsmeade, as it was termed, was a victory for the Death Eaters, but it only made the Order more determined to win the war.

Now, two months after the Battle of Hogsmeade, Hermione had not spoken a word yet. She barely acknowledged anyone, not even Harry or Ron. The only time she'd shown any sign of hearing what someone was saying was when Headmaster Dumbledore told her that Hogwarts was officially her new legal guardian.

Without Ginny and Luna, Hermione had forgotten her purpose in life. She still attended her classes, though she no longer did any work. As a result, her grades dropped to an all time low. The person who had once been Hermione Granger was now just an empty shell.

After feeling tears start to well up in her eyes, Hermione stood up, intending to go inside and lie down, but stopped when she saw the headmaster walking towards her. Once he was within earshot, he spoke.

"Miss Granger, if you would come with me to my office? There are some very important things we must discuss." Seeing the grave look on his face, Hermione's heart sank. She nodded and followed him, wondering what the bad news was this time.

Chapter two

Chapter 2 of 6

After more loss than she knows how to handle, Hermione is alone and scared. But after secrets from the past are revealed, Hermione loses what little she has left, and ends up at Malfoy Manor, working with Draco Malfoy and Severus Snape as spies for the Order while struggling to decide who she really is.

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Hermione followed the Headmaster up the winding stairs that led to his office. Upon arriving at the top, she stared blankly into his office; it had not changed a bit in the six years she'd attended Hogwarts, and she doubted it ever would. The Headmaster gestured her to one of two chairs. Hermione took the one on the right, noting that the one on the left was currently occupied by Mandy Brocklehurst, a Ravenclaw in her year.

"Hi, Hermione," said Mandy, though Hermione could tell the girl knew she would receive no response. Hermione's blank expression didn't change as she waited for the Headmaster to speak and start the meeting.

"Before we begin," said the Headmaster, "Miss Granger, I understand that being friends with Harry for the past six years has made you privy to much information regarding the Order of the Phoenix. That being said, I doubt you will be shocked by much of what I have to say. However, Miss Brocklehurst, in this conversation I am going to reveal a few well guarded secrets dealing with the Order. Before we go any further, I need your assurance that nothing we discuss today will leave this room."

Mandy's eyes sparkled just like the Headmaster's usually did when he was excited. She seemed both shocked and elated that he would be willing to reveal secrets to her. Hermione thought the girl was an idiot; the Headmaster was obviously only going to tell them whatever Order business related to the bad news he was about to share. Mandy, however oblivious, spoke with a steely determination.

"You have my word that whatever we discuss will be confidential, Headmaster."

"Excellent, then!" responded Dumbledore, a twinkle in his eyes.

Hermione watched as the Headmaster settled back in his chair. Noting his position, she shifted so that she was comfortable, as it appeared this would be a long conversation. With a small sigh, Hermione listened as Dumbledore began speaking.

"Miss Granger, Miss Brocklehurst, I don't know if either of you are aware of this, but this past January, Lucius Malfoy came before the Wizengamot with a rather peculiar proposal. He declared that as a concerned Pureblood he'd been researching the number of Squib births in the past ten years. Now of course, the Ministry's highest ranking researchers had already researched Squib births and discovered that Squib births are a by-product of Purebloods intermarrying."

While Hermione was not surprised by any of the information on Squibs, as the findings had been reported in the Daily Prophet six months previous, she was curious as to what one Lucius Malfoy had to do with it. Feeling tired, she wished Dumbledore would just get onto the point so she could go lie down.

"So, obviously," continued Dumbledore, "the Wizengamot was unsurprised when Lucius stated that his conclusions matched exactly the conclusions the Ministry researchers had come up with. However, Lucius' answer to the problem of Squib births was most surprising. According to Lucius, all the wizarding world would need to do to prevent Squib births was introduce fresh blood lines into pureblood families. In other words, he wanted to ensure that Purebloods reproduce with Muggle-borns. That day, Lucius proposed a law that would force Muggle-borns to marry purebloods, against their will in some cases."

Looking at a mirror placed behind Dumbledore's desk, Hermione noted that all the blood had drained from her face, leaving it a sickly, pale, white colour. If Lucius got his hands on any muggle-born, that girl would be tortured, raped and dead within a week.

"Pardon me, sir," interrupted Mandy. "But Lucius Malfoy was proven to be a Death Eater. Why would he want to taint his lines with Muggle blood?"

"An excellent question, Miss Brocklehurst; you must keep in mind that Lucius wasn't a proven Death Eater until February at the battle of Hogsmeade. Back in January, he had to act like he was against Lord Voldemort. By creating this law, he made it seem like he was only interested in preventing Squib births, when in reality, he was trying to legally capture Muggle-borns for torture."

Mandy gasped as the realization of the purpose of the law finally hit her. Hermione rolled her eyes at Mandy's ignorance. While Hermione's grades had been suffering a great deal, she was proud to have the knowledge that she would never be as dim-witted as the girl she was currently sitting next to.

Noticing Mandy's distress, Dumbledore promptly tried to alleviate her fears.

"Don't worry, my dear. Now, as you both know, Lucius Malfoy was killed in the battle of Hogsmeade and obviously unable to see to it that the law was put into action."

Hermione heard Mandy sigh in relief at this statement and turned to glare in her direction. Weren't Ravenclaw's supposed to be smart? They couldn't be completely off the hook...if they were, Dumbledore wouldn't have needed to speak with them. Taking a deep breath, Dumbledore continued.

"Now girls, when Lucius Malfoy was in charge of the law, the requirements were as follows:*Any unwed male Pureblood between the ages of seventeen and forty may petition for the hand of any female Muggle-born between the ages of seventeen and thirty-five. Once a Muggle-born receives an offer, she has no choice but to accept the offer within a week's time. If a Muggle-born receives more than one petition for her hand, she may then choose between the petitioners. If, however, at the end of the week no petitioner has been chosen, the Muggle-born automatically goes to the first petitioner.*"

Hermione saw Mandy's face go white as she heard the specifications of the law. Hermione knew that even if Lucius Malfoy was dead, Dumbledore wouldn't be telling them this if it didn't have a purpose.

"Professor?" asked Mandy. "If Lucius Malfoy is dead, then what happened to the law?"

"Ah, yes, Miss Brocklehurst, I was getting to that. Well, for the first two weeks after Lucius' death, the law remained dormant in the Ministry. No one really knew what to do with it. As I am a member of the Wizengamot, I attempted to get the Minister to see reason. I told Cornelius that since Lucius Malfoy was a proven Death Eater, the law was obviously just a way to enslave Muggle-borns. I implored the Wizengamot to destroy the law."

Hermione stared unblinkingly at the Headmaster. She knew that if he had succeeded in destroying the law, then she and Mandy, the only female Muggle-borns in the school that were of age, would not currently be sitting in the Headmaster's office.

"Unfortunately," continued Dumbledore, "while Cornelius saw that the law would cause disaster among Muggle-borns, he also saw Lucius' research on the rising Squib births very clearly. The Wizengamot declared that the facts on which the law was made were indeed sound and that with some tweaking, the law could still hold some use in Wizarding society."

Mandy was visibly shaking now, and Hermione could barely contain a smirk at the girl's weakness.

"So, how did they tweak it?" asked Mandy.

"They tweaked it," stated Dumbledore, "by keeping the marriage law but shifting the power to the Muggle-borns. The new law states that every female Muggle-born that fits the age requirements I mentioned earlier has one week to petition for the hand of a Pureblood male between the ages I've already shared, who must accept a petition within one week of receiving the first one."

"So what you're saying," responded Mandy, voice shaking, "is that since Hermione and I are the only Muggle-borns in our year, we have to petition a Pureblood to be our husband?"

Dumbledore sighed heavily and looked between the two girls.

"Unfortunately, that is exactly what I'm saying."

Mandy's eyes finally spilled the tears she'd been holding back since Dumbledore started speaking. Hermione did not feel anger or resentment toward the girl at this time, as she herself was currently struggling to breathe. Mandy's cries continued for quite a few minutes, in which Dumbledore offered her his handkerchief. Only then, when her face was red and splotchy, did Mandy's voice come out in choked sobs.

"But I can't marry some prejudiced Pureblood! I'm in love with Terry!"

At the mention of Mandy's boyfriend of two years, Dumbledore's eyes began to twinkle in merriment. Hermione knew he must have been waiting for Mandy to bring up Terry.

"Ah, Mr. Boot," answered Dumbledore. "Tell me, Miss Brocklehurst, when is Mr. Boot's seventeenth birthday?"

"Tuesday," she responded, dabbing ferociously at her eyes with the handkerchief.

"Then I believe that is your answer." Dumbledore sat back in his chair, a slight smile on his face. When Mandy did not respond, he continued.

"The law was only made official this morning, and as you have one week in which to petition, I suggest that you wait until this Tuesday and then petition for Terry. Assuming he will accept, we can only cross our fingers and be happy that you have the opportunity to marry someone you love."

Out of the corner of her eye, Hermione saw Mandy visibly relax and then shift comfortably back into her seat. Mandy wiped the remaining tears off her red cheeks with the back of her hand and gave the handkerchief back to the headmaster.

"Thank you, Headmaster," she said quietly.

"You are quite welcome, Miss Brocklehurst. However, I would ask that for the sake of privacy you refrain from speaking to Mr. Boot on this subject until I can meet with you both. Would tomorrow afternoon be a convenient time to meet?"

"Yes, sir."

"Excellent!" spoke Dumbledore brightly. "Now, unlike you, Miss Brocklehurst, there are others whose decision is not quite as simple. If you would be so kind as to leave me to confer with Miss Granger."

Recognizing her cue to leave, Mandy got up and shot a sympathetic look to Hermione before exiting the room. Once the door was shut firmly behind her, Dumbledore spoke.

"It's nice to see that even with this law looming over her head, she still managed to come to a reasonable decision that will make her happy."

Hermione turned toward Dumbledore and scowled. She knew Dumbledore was going to try to get her to speak, but she didn't know if she was ready yet. When Dumbledore got no response, he continued.

"Miss Granger, one year ago, had you asked any staff member who the smartest, liveliest and most talkative student in the school was, the answer would have been unanimously you. Now I understand that this year has been tougher on you than on most people, and in most cases, I would just give the student time to work through their problems. However, as you are now under the guardianship of the school, I feel the need to intervene. It was brought to my attention about two weeks after the Battle that you had not spoken, to anyone's knowledge, and had been neglecting all your schoolwork. Now, nearly a month and a half after receiving that tip, you show no change."

As he spoke, Hermione's scowl deepened. She listened to the Headmaster, praying he wasn't going to tell her to just "get over it."

"Miss Granger," he continued. "Wars are hard on everyone and everyone changes during war times. However, it is simply not healthy for a young witch like yourself to completely cut herself off from the world. I'm not going to ask you to forget those that have passed or even to be happy; but what I am asking is not to bottle it all up and talk to someone. It doesn't even have to be me; it can be anyone you wish. I'll even bring someone to Hogwarts if you think it will help."

"For the next few hours, as we discuss your options regarding this law, I want you to speak your mind. Give me your opinion, tell me what you agree with, what you disagree with; just don't stare at me with that blank look you've had on your face for two months."

Dumbledore's voice was soft and pleading. When she looked up, she saw tears in his eyes. So he really does care about us, thought Hermione, surprised he thought of her as more than a weapon to be used in the war. Swallowing, Hermione stared at the Headmaster.

"Yes, sir," she said.

Dumbledore smiled brightly, a smile she had not seen since the start of their meeting.

"Now," he said, "I do believe we are getting somewhere."

"Alright, Professor," stated Hermione. "What are my options?"

"Well, my dear," he answered, a sad tint to his eyes, "you obviously have to get married. Tell me, Miss Granger, do you have any prospects?"

"None; I was dating Ron but we broke it off. I don't think I'd ever be able to tolerate being married to him." Hermione paused, considering her options. "Problem is, most of the purebloods in the school are Slytherin, and most of them are sons of Death Eaters."

After a moment of silence, Dumbledore pushed his half-moon spectacles up the bridge of his nose and spoke.

"Miss Granger, you are a brilliant young woman, one of the most brilliant Hogwarts has ever had. I should think that if we looked at the facts of the situation, a solution should present itself. Do you agree?"

"Yes, sir."

"The first fact is that you must marry a Pureblood of age. Now, here's where it gets tricky. To my knowledge there are no Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, or Ravenclaw Purebloods that are of age, so we must conclude that you will have to marry someone older. Do you agree so far?"

"Yes, sir."

"The second fact is that you must marry someone who does not wish to harm you, Harry or the Order. Tell me if you disagree, but it was my assumption that the next logical choice would be to marry someone in the Order." He paused, and when she stared blankly at him, he asked, "Do you agree?"

"I see how it's the logical choice, sir," answered Hermione. "But I barely know any of the Order members, besides the Weasleys. I wouldn't know who to choose."

"Well, my dear, that brings me to our third and final fact."

"Sir?" Hermione was extremely puzzled by Dumbledore's last statement. They knew they needed someone of the right age, alliances and bloodline. What else was there to talk about?

"Miss Granger, the third fact I wish for you to consider is your happiness." Upon seeing her face form another small frown, he pressed on.

"Now, before you scowl at me, I'd like for you to consider that you've not been happy since before this past Christmas. While no one expects you to be happy, as your legal guardian, I think it would be incredibly foolish of me to allow you to rush into a marriage with a random Order member you have nothing in common with and will eventually come to hate."

Dumbledore attempted to look into Hermione's eyes, but she had already turned to stare at the floor, a scowl on her face.

"Miss Granger, please look at me because I need you to understand this." She looked up, and he saw tears rolling down her cheeks. Happy he always thought to carry two handkerchiefs around, he handed her his spare. While she dabbed at her eyes, he continued.

"Miss Granger, there is no divorce in the wizarding world. As much as we dislike it, within two weeks you will be married. I must admit to you that I do not expect a happy marriage during the war. However, the war will end in time, and I warn you that though the chaos and danger that comes with wartime will vanish, your marriage will remain intact. After the war you will still be married, and I want you to be happy with the man you choose. Do you understand?"

Hermione spoke, in a voice so quiet he almost didn't hear her. "That's assuming I'll survive the war."

"Miss Granger," he answered sharply. "We mustn't think that way. We can only assume that we will live and that life will go on. Now, stop scowling at me; you know I speak the truth. I swear, right now you're tied with Severus Snape for the Scowl of the Year competition."

For the first time in months, Hermione snorted with laughter upon hearing a joke. For a moment, no matter how brief, Dumbledore watched as her face lit up and knew that there was a small modicum of the old Hermione Granger still present in the body before him.

"There we go," whispered Dumbledore. "Now do you see why your happiness is so important?" He watched as a few more tears slipped down Hermione's cheeks. She wiped them off reverently and nodded.

"It's just so unfair," she whispered. She took a moment to collect herself and then looked up and asked a question.

"But how do you suggest I find out which eligible man in the Order will make me the happiest?"

His eyes once again twinkling, Dumbledore leaned forward in his chair and responded.

"And this is where the conversation gets interesting."

"Sir?"

"Miss Granger, as we speak, nine Pureblood males are gathering in the Room of Requirement, which has transformed itself into a grand hotel. They are currently unaware of why they are there; I sent a note saying I'd stop by and explain later. I must ask you not to interrupt as I share with you my plan. Tomorrow evening, in the ballroom of the Grand Hotel, I will be holding what I call my Cinderella Masquerade Ball. However, instead of masks, like Muggle balls, each man will be wearing a glamour charm that will make them each appear exactly like the Prince Charming from the muggle fairytale Cinderella. You will not be able to recognize any of them, for they will look and sound exactly the same.

"Now, tomorrow morning, I want you to go find the most beautiful Muggle dress and buy it. Tomorrow evening at eight, I want you to show up ready for the ball. You will stay at the ball until you have spoken with each suitor and, preferably, danced with them.

"At the end of the night you will come back here and tell me which suitor you felt most comfortable with. After that, I will reveal the identity of all the men. I suppose after that, you should go talk to the man you chose and get his take on the situation. You will still have a couple of days before you have to make a decision, but I believe that this course of action will help you make that decision in an unbiased way."

Dumbledore stopped speaking and looked at Hermione over his half-moon spectacles. He was pleased to see that instead of the blank, disbelieving look he expected, her brow was furrowed in concentration, and she looked thoughtful.

"I suppose you've already made up your mind on this, haven't you?" asked Hermione.

"On the basics, yes," he answered. "However, if you were to show me clear reasoning, I'd be willing to change some of the smaller details."

"I don't want to end up with some bloke I've never met before," responded Hermione.

Dumbledore had been planning on this condition. To assure her, he spoke.

"You have my assurance that you have spoken with each of these men at least once this past year. Do you have any other concerns?"

"Well," said Hermione. "I can't exactly go dress shopping with rogue Death Eaters on the loose."

"Excellent point," answered the Headmaster. "Harry and Ron will accompany you."

"Umm," started Hermione, uncomfortable, "can a female accompany me, in addition to Harry and Ron?"

"Would Mrs. Weasley be adequate?"

Hermione hesitated; after losing both her husband and only daughter in the battle, Mrs. Weasley had broken down. After that, she'd become every bit her normal self, acting like nothing was wrong. She seemed happy and cheery, but Hermione knew everyone had their breaking point. Making a decision, she spoke.

"Mrs. Weasley would be fine."

"Any more questions, then?" asked Dumbledore, leaning forward in his chair.

"Well, I haven't any money for a dress," answered Hermione.

"Well, as I am your legal guardian, I must insist you put the dress on my tab." Hermione nodded; some time ago, she would have felt awful taking money from a teacher, but now she was just grateful for all he could give her.

"One last thing," she said. "I don't want the whole school to know about this ball. I understand that once I marry it'll be all over the Prophet, but until then can it be a private affair?"

"Miss Granger, you have my word that the only ones that will be aware of this ball will be those in attendance. Now, it's getting late, and you need some sleep. You've got a big weekend ahead of you."

"Thank you, sir," answered Hermione as she left his office. As she walked down the corridor to Gryffindor tower, Hermione wondered briefly if this law would ruin her life. Well, I've got nothing to lose she thought. But then she thought of the night she'd just had. Albus Dumbledore had gotten her to speak for the first time in months. Perhaps not all hope was lost.

Thanks so much to my wonderful beta sequana

Chapter three

Chapter 3 of 6

After more loss than she knows how to handle, Hermione is alone and scared. But after secrets from the past are revealed, Hermione loses what little she has left, and ends up at Malfoy Manor, working with Draco Malfoy and Severus Snape as spies for the Order while struggling to decide who she really is.

Severus Snape, Potions master of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, stood leaning against the wall of the Room of Requirement, a dark scowl contorting his face. While it was not unusual for Snape to be scowling, it was not his usual scowl that was fixed on his face at that moment. Usually, Snape scowled because he was a generally unhappy man, and he felt that scowling at every creature that crossed his path gave him a victory over that creature. At this moment, however, he was not just

generally unhappy. No, he was confused. As a spy, Snape hated being confused.

Upon his arrival in the Room of Requirement ten minutes previous, he had noticed the odd décor immediately. The room, which altered itself to suit the user's needs, resembled that of a fancy Muggle hotel lobby. The high ceiling, which was enchanted just as that of the Great Hall, held a diamond chandelier that shimmered in the moonlight. Directly ahead of where he stood, there were two giant oak doors that rivalled the size of the Hogwarts gates. To his left, there was a long narrow hallway with five doors on each side, each labelled with a number one through ten. In the middle of the wall at the end of the hallway was another door, fancier than the others. On it was a lone yellow star.

While the room should have been perplexing to Snape, he had known Albus long enough to expect the unexpected when called to speak with him. No, it wasn't the room itself that confused Severus Snape but the people inhabiting the room.

Snape stared at the cluster of redheads standing in a circle on the opposite side of the room. Looking at the faces of past students Bill, Charlie, Percy, Fred and George Weasley, Snape's scowl deepened even further. The main door to the Room of Requirement opened a moment later, admitting Potter and the youngest Weasley boy. The two of them joined the large group of redheads.

Snape's gaze strayed from them to two other men standing to the right of the Weasleys. Remus Lupin and Sirius Black were standing in a secluded dark corner of the room, conversing quietly.

The spy in Snape couldn't stop thinking, and he continued to consider plausible reasons for why the Headmaster needed to speak to this large group of people all together. If it concerned the Order, why not just wait until the next meeting? It occurred to him that every person standing in the room hated him for their own reason. Was he just being paranoid, or was this meeting just a chance for each of the men to get their revenge?

That thought, however, dissolved as Draco Malfoy entered the room. Draco frowned as he spotted first the group of Weasleys and then the dog and the werewolf in deep conversation. His eyes drifted to Snape, and he walked over to stand beside him.

"Professor," he said by way of acknowledgement.

"Draco," Snape returned. "May I assume you got the same note as I, bidding you come here?"

"I got this," answered Draco, pulling a letter out of his pocket. He handed it to Snape, who noted the very familiar handwriting.

Mr. Malfoy,

It would seem that I am in need of your services this weekend. Please be so kind as to meet me in the Room of Requirement after dinner. Tell your housemates you'll be gone all weekend.

Albus Dumbledore

Snape looked up to find the youngest Weasley and Potter glaring daggers at him and Draco.

"Any idea what it's about?" asked Draco, referring to the letter.

"None," answered Snape. "But I think it's a safe assumption it's about the Golden Trio."

Hearing a noise, Snape turned around to face the narrow hallway only to find the Headmaster strolling out of it.

"Good evening, everyone," said Albus cheerily.

Snape scowled as they were gestured to a row of chairs so that the Headmaster could address them all about his latest asinine plan to protect the Boy Who Lived. But as Snape listened, he discovered that this latest plan was not designed to protect Potter or Weasley but rather the girl who held the brains of the Golden Trio. As he listened, Snape became more and more incensed. At the mention of suitors and a ball, Snape would have liked nothing more than to Avada Kedavra the old fool. Yet he stayed silent and waited for everyone's reactions as Dumbledore finished his speech.

"Does anyone have any questions?" the Headmaster finally asked when he was done.

"Yeah," said Ron Weasley, standing up and pointing at Snape and Draco. "What the bloody hell are they doing here?"

"I could ask you the same question," retorted Snape. "The last time I checked, neither you nor Potter were of age, and both of you are therefore ineligible to marry the girl."

"We're here because we're Hermione's best friends and only want what's best for her!" shouted Potter, also standing to face Snape.

"Best friends?" questioned Snape with a sneer. "The last I've seen and heard, Miss Granger hasn't uttered a word for two months. It would seem to me she doesn't want best friends."

This comment was met with an uproar of anger from every redhead present at the meeting. However, it was Fred Weasley who jumped up to confront Snape.

"Hermione's grieving in her own way just like we all are! Or did you forget we lost our father and only sister?"

Sitting next to Snape, Draco muttered, just loud enough to be heard, "Everyone's lost something in this war."

"What's that, Ferret Boy?" Ron wasted no time in pulling out Draco's most hated nickname. Draco's lack of response only further incensed Ron to continue his attack.

"Oh, Malfoy, still upset that I killed your dear Daddy of a Death Eater?"

Wasting no time, Snape lifted his wand and cast a Silencing Charm on Ron followed by a stinging hex to the knee. Shaking with rage, he turned his eyes on everyone else.

"Does anyone else have some smart comment?" When no one responded, Snape released Weasley's Silencing Charm. "I didn't think so."

"What if I do?" shouted Ron. "What're you going to do? Have your master kill me?"

"That's enough!" shouted Dumbledore, his voice amplified with a Sonorous Charm. Immediately the room fell silent. Snape and Ron were both shaking with their wands aimed at each other. After a few moments, the two lowered their wands and returned to their seats.

"Now Harry," said Dumbledore, "Severus and Draco are here for the same reason that all the Weasleys, your godfather and Remus are here for. They will both be suitors in tomorrow's ball."

"But, sir," said Ron, "how could Hermione possibly find happiness with one of them?"

"I believe, Mr. Weasley, that is for Hermione to decide. Severus, as for your comment about Miss Granger's speech habits since the battle, I think she will be willing to open up long enough for the ball to commence tomorrow. While I wouldn't call her happy, I sense a healing process has begun. Our best course of action is to continue and hope something good comes out of this." Dumbledore paused and allowed the men to process the information.

"So, if there are no further questions, I'd like for you each to come up and draw a number out of this hat at random." He pointed to what looked like the sorting hat, sitting in the corner.

"Please go to the room that corresponds with the number you were given, and you will find everything waiting for you."

After everyone else had picked their number, Snape approached the hat and took the last number. He decided a good night sleep would do him well. After all, whether he liked it or not, he had a ball to get ready for.

The next morning, Hermione woke up groggily and lay in bed, thinking about the night before. Thinking about her conversation with Dumbledore reminded her that she was to attend a ball that evening. And not just a ball, but a ball held in her honour. She resolved that this day would be her day for a fresh start. Although she still wasn't comfortable talking about everything that had happened, she decided to at least be sociable and calm for the remainder of the day. After all, this day marked the beginning of a new era in her life.

After showering and throwing on some wrinkled jeans and a jumper, Hermione made her way down to the Great Hall for breakfast. As she was buttering her toast, she noticed two figures standing beside her; it was Harry and Ron. As had been their custom since the battle, the boys sat on either side of her in silence. Every morning, Harry asked Hermione how she was feeling, not expecting the response it turned out she never gave. This morning, however, Harry and Ron sat down and didn't say a word. Harry was silent until Hermione was halfway through her eggs. Finally, he spoke.

"So, I suppose Dumbledore told you."

Hermione was silent for a moment, debating on whether or not to answer. She loved Harry and Ron, but she didn't want to respond to an innocent question and then have them bombard her with questions she wasn't ready to answer. However, remembering her promise to be social, she spoke.

"He did."

"Gods, Hermione, do you have any idea how good it is to hear your voice again?" asked Harry.

Ron mumbled something in agreement while his mouth was full of food. With nothing more to say, the three lapsed into silence as they finished eating. When they were done, Hermione stared at her plate and broke the silence again.

"Umm, did Dumbledore talk to you guys about going into Hogsmeade today?"

"Yeah," said Ron. "He said to wait for my Mum and then go with her."

Feeling a blush form on her face, Hermione mumbled, "You boys don't have to come with me if you don't want."

It was ridiculous to be embarrassed over dress shopping, Hermione knew, but she wasn't sure how comfortable she was with them looking her up and down as she tried on dress after dress that was bound to look misshaped and odd...at least on her figure.

"Mione," Harry reassured her, "we want to come with you. We want to be there and help you. We're just sorry that dress shopping seems to be the only thing we're good for in your situation." At his comment, Hermione gulped as apprehension of her entire situation formed in her mind.

"Besides," added Harry with a smirk, "you can't get rid of us that easily."

Together, the three of them left the Great Hall and made their way to the Entrance Hall to find Mrs. Weasley already waiting for them. Hermione took notice of the dark circles under the woman's eyes and noted that she'd also lost weight. Upon seeing Hermione, Mrs. Weasley rushed over and immediately engulfed her in a hug.

"Hermione, dear!" she said. "How are you coping? I tell you, this is just a terrible, terrible law. Why, if Arthur were still at the Ministry, I guarantee this never would have happened." She released Hermione and gave a brief hug to Harry before being encompassed in Ron's arms.

"Mum," Ron whispered, "Dad worked in the Muggle Artifacts Office, not the Wizengamot."

"Oh, I know, dear," she sighed. "I just know he would have done all that he could have to help Hermione."

"Thank you, Mrs. Weasley," Hermione responded gratefully. "I don't know if it could have been prevented, though. I just think we need to let things play out, and hopefully something good will come out of it."

"You got that line from Dumbledore," noted Harry. The four of them were now walking down the path that traveled between Hogwarts and Hogsmeade. Puzzled, Hermione looked to Harry.

"How'd you know I got that line from Dumbledore?"

"He used the same phrase when we met with him last night," answered Ron.

"But after Professor Dumbledore spoke with me last night he went to speak with the suitors," responded Hermione. Suddenly, with a moment of clarity, Hermione stopped dead in her tracks, a look of horror visible on her face. "Ron? You're not a suitor, are you?"

For a moment, Ron looked a little hurt at the look of incredulity on Hermione's face. Then his expression changed to one of amusement.

"Don't be ridiculous, Hermione. I don't come of age for three more weeks."

"Yeah," responded Harry. "Dumbledore just wanted us to come to help discuss your wellbeing."

Satisfied with Harry's response, Hermione decided to let the subject drop. They walked in silence for a few moments before Hermione spoke again.

"So ... what did you guys think of the suitors?"

"I think," said Harry after a long pause, "that you'll at least find contentment, if not happiness, with who you choose to be with."

Letting the subject drop once again, Hermione followed Mrs. Weasley into the Hogsmeade branch of Madame Malkin's. Although Madame Malkin's main branch was located in Diagon Alley, this new Hogsmeade branch had opened up a year before to tend to the wishes of the Hogwarts students.

Once inside the shop, the four of them walked past all of the wizarding robes and into the back room where the Muggle dresses were kept. The store clerk joined them to help search for the dress, as they were her only customers. The five of them looked through the seemingly endless racks of dresses and met back in the middle with their findings.

Though Hermione tried on each one, she couldn't help but laugh at how ridiculous some of the dresses were. The dresses Mrs. Weasley had picked out for her were made just so that Hermione could be certain that not one inch of skin was revealed while she inhabited them. All of the dresses Mrs. Weasley picked had long sleeves and a high neckline...one even had trousers to go underneath the dress.

Ron's choices were the funniest, however, mostly because they were all pink and with an abundance of lace, despite the fact that she'd told Ron she hated pink. The store clerk didn't fare much better, as all the dresses she picked out were poufy, and Hermione couldn't walk in them.

Surprisingly though, Harry's dress choices were very sensible. His dresses were simple with not much more than a tiny fringe or a few sequins. After about eight dresses of his pick, Hermione finally figured out her fit. She eventually settled on a beautiful olive green dress with a silvery tint. It was strapless, and the corset of the dress had a few sequins. Beneath it was an ivory slip that hung about an inch below the hemline of the dress.

When Hermione came out of the dressing room to show the boys, they looked stunned. Ron's mouth was hanging open like a gaping fish, and Harry looked as though he was struggling to breathe. Ron, however, recovered first.

"Blimey, Hermione. You look stunning."

With their approval, Hermione bought the dress. At the counter, the store clerk threw in a pair of silver shoes for free in order to help advertise the Muggle look. During these times, Muggle dresses weren't very popular, as people were scared they'd be ambushed by Death Eaters just for possessing Muggle apparel.

It was nearly four in the afternoon by the time they reached the castle. Mrs. Weasley immediately rushed Hermione into the Room of Requirement, effectively cutting her off from the boys. After all, she had to be prepared if she was going to be ready by eight.

At 6:30, Hermione had bathed, dressed and was nearly ready for the ball to begin. Sitting in front of the vanity mirror with Mrs. Weasley behind her trying to charm her hair into ringlets as opposed to the lump of bushiness it usually resembled, Hermione couldn't help but think she looked quite pretty. Honestly, she didn't know if that was because she hadn't cared about her appearance since the battle and often neglected to even brush her hair and this look was such a stunning contrast, or if she really did look quite pretty.

"Almost done, dear," said Mrs. Weasley. It was the third time she'd said it in the past hour.

"It shouldn't take this long to look nice," grumbled Hermione.

"Just be grateful you can still look nice, dear."

Finally, half an hour later, Mrs. Weasley finished. She came around to sit beside Hermione, holding a velvet box in her lap.

"Hermione, I just wanted to let you know how proud I am of you. You know," she hesitated, a dark look shadowing her face, "ever since we met you, Arthur and I have just felt drawn to you and your parents...Arthur especially. He was so very fascinated by the muggle world, and you were his peephole into it."

Hermione blushed. Not once in the six years that she'd known him had she considered that, by answering his inane questions about the muggle world (like why there was a mouse attached to a computer, and why you didn't have to scream when speaking to someone on a telephone), she was furthering his passion for the topic by giving him more information than any wizard could. Hermione looked down to her lap and noticed Mrs. Weasley fidgeting with the velvet box. Finally, after a few minutes of silence, the older woman spoke.

"I was going to give this to Ginny on her wedding day." She paused as a lump formed in her throat and tears welled in her eyes, one spilling onto her cheek. "But, unfortunately, that day will never come. I've decided that as mine and Arthur's second daughter, one who's given us so much joy, I want you to have it." She opened the box, revealing an exquisite diamond tiara with several small emeralds outlining the stone.

"Oh, Mrs. Weasley!" exclaimed Hermione, tears threatening to spill from her own eyes. "I can't accept this. It's so lovely; it must be a family heirloom."

"It is," confirmed Mrs. Weasley. "It's been in my family for seven generations. But, Hermione, it would mean so much to me if you would wear it."

Hermione, still shocked by the tiara's beauty, merely nodded her consent. Reverently, Mrs. Weasley placed the accessory atop Hermione's head. Looking back in the mirror, all fleeting thoughts about her looks abandoned her instantaneously. Hermione knew she had looked pretty the night of the Yule Ball--she had thought she looked pretty while Mrs. Weasley was doing her hair--but the person now looking back at her in the mirror looked beautiful.

With tears threatening to spill, Hermione leaned forward and embraced Mrs. Weasley with all her strength. She felt Mrs. Weasley shaking in her arms and knew that she was sobbing. She was sobbing for her lost daughter and husband, neither of which was here to witness the moment. Hermione knew, right then, that Mrs. Weasley had taken the first steps toward healing. Instead of hiding and pretending like nothing was wrong, like she'd been doing the past few months, Mrs. Weasley was now ready to face the world and to begin moving on with her sons.

After holding Mrs. Weasley in her arms for another half hour, the two women roused when a knock sounded at the door. Mrs. Weasley got up first and opened the door to admit Harry and Ron. Ron, taking in his mother's tear-splotched face, embraced her and pulled her into the corner to speak quietly. After making sure Mrs. Weasley was okay, Harry joined Hermione in the seat Mrs. Weasley had just vacated.

"Wow, Hermione," he breathed. "You are a vision of beauty tonight." He took her hands out of her lap and squeezed them tightly as reassurance before hugging her briefly.

"Are you ready for this?" he asked.

"I suppose I have to be," she murmured back. As they spoke, Ron and Mrs. Weasley joined them once again.

"It was really fun hanging out with you today, Mione," said Ron. "Even if we were dress shopping." Hermione laughed a small, but cheerful, laugh.

"It's so good to hear your laugh again," answered Harry. As an awkward moment passed over the two, Harry paused, as if unsure of what to say. "Hermione, promise me that after tonight you'll still act the same way you have all day. We all want the real Hermione, not the silent one."

"I promise."

Harry nodded and wordlessly offered his arm. She took it and allowed herself to follow Ron, who was escorting his mother up to the big oak doors. Once she stepped inside, it would be time to decide her future.

chapter four

After more loss than she knows how to handle, Hermione is alone and scared. But after secrets from the past are revealed, Hermione loses what little she has left and ends up at Malfoy Manor, working with Draco Malfoy and Severus Snape as spies for the Order while struggling to decide who she really is.

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Hermione watched, eyes wide, as the doors opened, admitting the four of them into the Grand Ballroom. Upon entering, Ron's shabby robes instantly became debonair burgundy dress robes. His hair, which had grown longer in the past months, was now tied back with a gold ribbon. Mrs. Weasley's grey and dirty robes were Transfigured into extravagant blue dress robes. As she and Harry entered, Hermione noted that his robes transformed into robes similar to Ron's, only his were green to match her dress.

As she approached the dance floor, Hermione forgot to breathe while taking in her surroundings. She was standing at the top of a staircase that looked down into the ballroom. The railing was beautifully carved to resemble a vine growing off of a tree. As she and Harry walked down the stairs, she noted the marble pillars, the torches adorning the walls and the stone floor, which shone so brightly she could see her face in it. What amazed Hermione most, though, was the ceiling, which, like the Great Hall, was bewitched to look like the night sky. On this particular night there were no clouds, only a crescent shaped moon and a million dazzling stars.

The stairs Hermione was descending ended on a landing that was still twenty feet off the ground. Wearing bright yellow dress robes, Professor Dumbledore stood on the landing waiting for Hermione so he could escort her down the remaining stairs onto the dance floor. With a smile on his face and a twinkle in his eyes, Professor Dumbledore offered his hand to her.

Hermione felt Harry release his arm from her grip, and she promptly grasped Professor Dumbledore's hand. Looking over the edge of the landing with the Headmaster, Hermione saw the nine suitors standing in a line looking up at her. Each man looked exactly alike with short brown hair, green eyes and the same build. They each wore a tight fitting white shirt and black trousers. She noted that each man looked about a foot taller than she. Next to her, Professor Dumbledore was applying a Sonorus Charm to himself. After a moment, he spoke.

"Prospective suitors, the witch of honour has arrived. The Cinderella Masquerade Ball has begun." That having been said, the Headmaster escorted Hermione down the remaining stairs. Upon reaching the dance floor, he spoke to her.

"Miss Granger, would you care to indulge an old man with a dance to start the ball?"

"I'd be delighted, sir," she responded with fake excitement. Though she was receiving the royal treatment, Hermione's stomach was in knots, terrified about what the night might bring.

Professor Dumbledore took her hands in his own and nodded to Ron, who was operating the phonograph. Ron tapped his wand to it, and a waltz began.

"Miss Granger, you look lovely tonight." After the compliment Professor Dumbledore chuckled. "I can only hope my Gringotts account has not suffered too big a loss."

"Oh, no, sir!" responded Hermione apprehensively. "I only bought the dress; the shoes were free."

"My dear, it's quite alright. I'm glad you had a day out to go shopping. From what Harry said, it sounded as if you quite enjoyed yourself."

"I did," answered Hermione, smiling. "Sir, the room looks wonderful; you really didn't have to do all this."

"My dear, I did nothing but get each of the suitors into this room. The Room of Requirement did everything else."

"But didn't you charm the men and all their outfits to look the same?" questioned Hermione.

"Well, I may have had something to do with that," answered the Headmaster, eyes twinkling.

As their dance ended, the two came to a halt. Professor Dumbledore bent down and placed a kiss on her hand.

"Enjoy your evening, Miss Granger. And remember to pick someone you can be happy with." With that, he walked away to converse with Mrs. Weasley.

For a moment Hermione stood there, contemplating what to do. Should she ask a suitor to dance or wait for one to approach her? Before she could make her decision, however, suitor number one approached her.

"Hermione?" he asked, bowing low. "Would you like to dance?"

"Like I have a choice," she muttered under her breath. Now that she was faced with a suitor, Hermione's anxiety overwhelmed her and came out of her disguised as bitterness.

"What was that?" he asked.

"Nothing," she responded with false cheer. To reassure him, she grasped his hands and waited for the music to start.

Once they started dancing, Hermione noted how tightly the suitor grasped her hands. He was squeezing so tightly she was sure her hands would have bruises the next morning. When she took notice of his dancing style, she didn't feel like they were dancing at all but that he was pushing her across the dance floor.

"You look lovely, Hermione," he commented.

"Thank you," she responded.

While Hermione had not expected fireworks with any of the suitors she met that night, she knew that this man was certainly not what she had expected. He was too rough with her, which made her wonder if he could be gentle; he had barely spoken since the dance began so she had no idea how to know anything of his personality. While she sensed this suitor had the best intentions, it was obvious that without the Glamour Charm he was big and burly and probably too rough for her. Hermione could tell this suitor was trying to make her feel comfortable, but it was clear that he didn't know how to go about it.

At the end of the dance, the suitor bowed slightly and bid Hermione good luck before walking away. It wasn't long before suitor number two approached her and asked to dance. With her expectations taken down a notch, Hermione accepted his dance immediately.

Unlike suitor number one, who didn't really dance but merely walked around the dance floor, suitor number two tried to dance very well. The fact that he was too uncoordinated to dance well was quite amusing to Hermione. While she could tell he knew the steps to the dance, it was clear this suitor had no sense of rhythm as he always moved a beat after his cue, causing himself to trip over his own feet. Like the first suitor, this one also commented on her appearance with approval. When their dance ended, Hermione asked for another dance just for a laugh. It wasn't that she was attracted to the suitor but that she found his inability to dance rather cute. This time, as they danced, they conversed.

"So, Hermione, how's school going this year?"

"Well, it was going great," she responded. "My grades were the top of the class for the first half of the year."

"Only the first half?" he questioned.

"Well, yes," answered Hermione, a lump catching in her throat. "It's just that after Christmas and ... my parents ... and then Hogsmeade. Well, school just doesn't seem to be much of a priority anymore."

Though he tried to conceal it, Hermione caught the disapproving look on her suitor's face. Upon seeing it, she immediately stiffened. If she were going to be with whichever man she chose for the rest of her life, she would require his support in both good times and bad. This suitor very clearly disapproved of her letting her grades drop in times of hardship. Hermione didn't think she could be with someone who only approved of her whenever she fit his definition of appropriate. After the second dance, suitor number two abruptly walked away without a word, leaving time for suitor number three to approach her.

Suitor number three came seemingly out of thin air. Without asking her permission, he took her arms and held them in the traditional waltzing pose. When the music began, the suitor exaggerated his movements, leading her about the dance floor at a swift pace. Unlike the other two suitors, who had confined themselves to dancing in the center of the dance floor, this suitor took her to each corner of the room and back again, smiling the whole time. He was so lively and so fast that Hermione felt like she was running to catch up with him. Unlike suitor number one, this suitor's grip was loose, and yet he still commanded the lead in their dance. He was strong, yet gentle, which persuaded Hermione to ask him for another dance. As they were swinging through their second dance, Hermione spoke to him for the first time.

"Are you always this jumpy?"

"Whatever do you mean?" he asked, flashing a dazzling smile.

"I mean," she said, pausing to catch her breath, "are you always this awake and energetic?"

His face took on a look of mock thought for a moment before he answered.

"I suppose so. I don't recall ever shutting down. But that's a good thing, isn't it? It means I'll always be awake to be there for you."

He flashed his brilliant smile once again, and Hermione felt herself go weak in the knees.

Snap out of it, Hermione! she told herself. *It's not like you can really base your decision on his smile. Don't forget he's wearing a Glamour Charm and that they all have the same smile.*

By the end of their second dance Hermione was gasping for breath. After the suitor walked away, Hermione reflected that it had been a wonderful two dances; the man had so much energy! While she enjoyed that energy once in a while, she wasn't sure she'd be able to handle it long-term. If she married him, she was sure she'd be exhausted within a few days. Still, he was an option if no one better came along.

Hermione leaned with her back to a wall, panting in a futile effort to breathe again. Her eyes slipped closed for a moment before she heard the voice of suitor number four.

"Need to catch your breath after that marathon jog?" he asked sardonically. Hermione nodded as her suitor chuckled and urged her to sit on the bench that had appeared in front of them. She sat, and after a few moments, so did he. They shared a companionable silence for a few minutes, and Hermione couldn't help but notice how kind and considerate this suitor was. He had seen she was exhausted and then asked the room to provide a bench for her to rest on. Flattered by his action, Hermione stood and extended her hand.

"Would you like to dance?"

"Why, Hermione, I'd be delighted," he answered, taking her outstretched hand.

As they began dancing, he allowed one hand to rest on her lower back while his other hand held her own.

"You know," he said, "I was a little surprised by your outfit choice."

"How so?" she questioned.

"Well, I was expecting something a little more ... Gryffindor," he explained. "And your dress just screams Slytherin."

"Well, it is a Muggle dress," answered Hermione. "Unlike Wizarding robes, Muggle dresses can't be altered by magic. If I used magic to change the colour, it wouldn't be a Muggle dress anymore."

"I see," he responded. "So you may not have had any choice in the colour of your dress, but I'm guessing you did have a colour choice for your undergarments."

"I suppose," replied Hermione. She didn't like the sly grin on his face or the fact that his hand was moving slowly down her back. He leaned forward so that his lips touched her ear. The action sent an uncomfortable chill down her spine.

"Tell me, Hermione," he whispered as his hand moved to grope her arse. "What colour knickers are you wearing?"

Seething with anger, Hermione's hand made contact with the suitor's face so fast she didn't even know if it had happened. The pain in her hand, however, told her differently. She was shocked to see that her slap had been delivered with so much force that the suitor had fallen backwards and was now rubbing his reddened cheek while on the ground. Harry, who had been watching their dance rather intently, was upon them in an instant.

"You guys alright?" he asked.

"Just bloody fine," snapped Hermione, who was glaring daggers at the suitor.

Harry urged the man to his feet and walked away with him, but Hermione was sure she heard the suitor murmur "bloody bitch" as he departed.

Hermione closed her eyes and tried to take a deep breath to calm down. As she heard suitor number five approaching, she set a firm scowl on her face and turned towards him. Without saying a word, he simply held his arms out. Sighing, Hermione grasped his hands and waited for the music to start. They started dancing, and her scowl only deepened further as he spoke.

"You know you can't walk through life stuck in grief."

"And who are you? My counsellor?" she snapped.

Ignoring her comment, he continued.

"You can't be unhappy just for the sake of being unhappy."

"And why not?" asked Hermione. Things were not looking good for this suitor, who was obviously just trying to upset her mood even more.

"Look," he said, his grip on her hands unconsciously tightening. "We've all lost someone in this war. We all handle loss differently. And quite honestly, you're handling it poorly. While the rest of us are still fighting, trying to make sure those lives weren't lost in vain, you're acting like your loss was greater than the rest of ours and that you

deserve to just sit and mope for months. The rest of us are still fighting; you're just losing it."

"I am still fighting," she argued. "And I am not losing it."

"You are losing it, Hermione. Otherwise you wouldn't have slapped that last suitor. And how are you fighting? What have you done since the Battle of Hogsmeade?"

"Just to clarify," said Hermione, voice raised, "I didn't slap suitor number four because I'm 'losing' it, as you say. I slapped him because he's a pig. And you want to know how I'm fighting? I'm here at this ball, trying to pick a suitable husband when what I really want to do is run away and be with Ginny, Luna and my parents. That's right, I'm fighting with the urge to kill myself! How's that for you?"

"That's not fighting, that's giving up."

"Whatever you say." Angrily, Hermione released herself from his grasp and stormed away from him. She couldn't believe the audacity of the man. Telling her she was hurting the war effort by grieving. She needed to calm down and decided that sitting was probably the best way to go about it. Instantly, another bench appeared before her. Uneasily, she sat. She placed her head in her hands and fumed at what bad luck she was having. Hermione couldn't believe she was halfway through her suitors and hadn't found anyone she could see herself married to. Suddenly, she felt a presence next to her and lifted her head to stare at suitor number six.

"May I?" he asked, gesturing to the spot next to her on the bench.

"Go ahead," responded Hermione. Though she did not look at him, but kept her eyes on her hands in her lap, she could feel his silent but insistent stare.

"You know," he finally said, "I haven't seen you smile all night."

"Does that surprise you?" she asked bitterly.

"Well, yes and no," he answered. "No, because I wouldn't expect you to smile after all you've been through, and if you did smile, it would probably just be artificial. But who wants to see a fake smile anyway? I certainly don't." He paused, and Hermione contemplated how different he was from every other man at the ball. Everyone, even the Headmaster, wanted her to act happy even if she really wasn't. Yet this suitor didn't want her to be anything but genuine. He didn't want her to act differently than she felt; the sentiment nearly warmed her heart. She gestured for him to continue his explanation.

"And yes, I would have thought you'd be smiling because one would think that after being named the guest of honour at a ball like this, you'd feel like Cinderella."

"More like Prince Charming," she muttered under her breath.

"Care to explain?" he asked. "I'm afraid I'm not quite as knowledgeable in Muggle fairytales as I'd like to be."

Hermione looked at him dubiously and saw in his eyes that he was truly interested in what she had to say. *So he likes knowledge, she thought; this could work.*

"Okay," she started. "Well, in the story, the ball is thrown for Prince Charming because his Father insists he find a wife. Yet the Prince is incapable of choosing, so he must dance with every woman in the country before he can decide which girl to marry."

"I see," said the suitor. "Then why do they call it Cinderella?"

"Cinderella is just one of the girls who goes to the ball," answered Hermione. "In the end, she's the one the Prince picks."

"So what you're saying," clarified the suitor, "is that you're the unhappy Prince Charming who's being forced into marriage and whichever suitor you pick is Cinderella?"

"Exactly," she answered.

"Would you care to dance?" he asked, standing and offering his hand to Hermione.

"I'd love to," she replied, actually smiling. While they were dancing, he took her hands tenderly in his own. He was an impeccable dancer. He led her without being too pushy and without wearing her out.

"So, how's your hand feel?" he asked.

"Pardon me?" questioned Hermione, confused.

"That was a pretty hard slap you gave suitor number four," he commented. "Seems to me your hand would hurt after that."

"Oh ... that." Hermione blushed upon realizing that everyone had witnessed her little moment from earlier.

"So, how's your hand feel?" he asked again.

"It did hurt," she responded. "But I think it's better now."

"That's good." He chuckled then. "Because I heard you deliver a powerful punch."

"What have you heard?" she asked mock-accusingly.

"Oh, you know," he answered coyly. "Just a little tale about you and Draco Malfoy in your third year."

"Oh ... yeah." She blushed once again. "Well, he made me angry."

"So you punched him?" The suitor eyed her suspiciously.

"Fine. He made me really angry."

Upon hearing her response, the suitor laughed. In spite of herself, Hermione joined in and laughed with him. It was ridiculous, really. In her third year, her biggest trouble had been Draco Malfoy taunting her with meaningless words. Now her biggest trouble was getting out of the war alive. After a moment where they were both lost in thought, the suitor spoke again.

"So did it feel good? Punching him, I mean."

"Malfoy or the suitor?"

"Either one," he offered.

"It felt great," answered Hermione. "Just like a release of tension."

As the song came to a close, Hermione could feel the suitor's grip loosen on her hands. She wanted to ask him for another dance, but in all honesty, she was getting tired. Before he released her, however, he took her right hand and brushed a kiss over her knuckles.

"In hope that your hand makes a full recovery, I must bid you farewell." With that, he walked away, leaving Hermione speechless. She had no idea who this suitor was, but to her, it felt as if she had just talked to a long lost friend. Out of all the suitors so far, she could definitely see herself with him.

She only had a moment to bask in her happiness, though. Before she knew it, she was pulled into another suitor's arms. This suitor held her in a loose grip. He stood far enough away that she didn't feel crowded, but close enough to make her feel safe.

"Do you want a laugh?" he asked.

"Why not?" responded Hermione lightly. Her spirits had been raised immensely from her dance with the last suitor. She now felt that she could take on anyone.

Suitor number seven took out his wand and pointed it in the direction of the phonograph that had been playing a slow, quiet ballad. Once he flicked his wand, the music became the loud, annoying, screaming music of the Weird Sisters, Hermione's least favorite band. Everyone in the room jumped at the disturbance in the music, and Hermione covered her ears to block it out; it was giving her a headache. Her suitor laughed at his joke, not noticing Hermione's discomfort, and started jumping to the music. In her discomfort, Hermione shrieked.

"Please turn it off!"

Seeing her distress, he flicked his wand, and the ballad began playing once again.

"Sorry," he muttered. "I thought all witches liked the Weird Sisters."

Well, at least he apologized, thought Hermione. It showed he wasn't afraid to admit he'd made a mistake.

"May I try to make you laugh again?" he asked.

"Go ahead," sighed Hermione. This time when he flicked his wand no crazy music played. Hermione let her gaze travel the room and spotted that Ron's dress robes had been Transfigured into a dress much like the one she was wearing. Ron gasped and had to fumble for his wand to change it back. Harry, who had been leaning on the wall next to Ron, nearly collapsed with laughter. If the wall hadn't been holding him up, Harry would have been rolling on the floor.

Hermione hid her smile behind her hand as she watched Ron right himself back into his robes. It really was a funny joke ... and that's when it hit her: Weasley Twins! How could she have missed that?

"Pretty good," responded Hermione, in reference to Ron's robes. "Maybe you should go into the fashion business, George." As she spoke his name, George's eyes bugged out of his head.

"I don't think...but you didn't...how did you?" Finally, he gave up his attempts at incoherent stammering.

"Bloody hell, Hermione, how did you know?"

Hermione laughed at his befuddlement. "Who else would walk up to me and ask 'want a joke?' Really, George, it had to be you or Fred, and I guessed you."

"Oh ... well do you want me to go?" he asked.

"No, stay," she answered. "We should finish our dance. Besides, it's nice to know I've got a friend here."

Together they finished the dance in silence. George was still stunned that she'd figured out his identity, and Hermione needed the time to think. George was a great man, and she loved all the time she spent with him at the Burrow, but she wasn't sure she could tolerate his jokes every day for the rest of her life. George needed someone who loved humour as much as he did, and lately, that just wasn't her. At the end of the dance, she thanked George, and he leaned down to kiss her cheek. She smiled warmly at him; he would always be a good friend.

Up next was suitor number eight. He bowed and asked her permission to dance, which she readily gave. She noticed, thankfully, that Ron had picked another slow ballad, because she was getting tired from dancing.

"Are you alright?" the suitor asked.

"I'm fine," she answered. "Just a little sleepy. It's been a long day."

"I'll bet," he responded. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really," came her reply.

"You sure?" he persisted. "Talking generally helps people that are in pain."

"I'm not in pain," snapped Hermione. She knew it was a lie, but he didn't seem to get the hint that she didn't want to talk about it.

"You obviously are in pain," he countered. "Your violent behaviour earlier proved that."

"Why is everyone bringing that up?" questioned Hermione. "I slapped him because he tried to grope me!"

"I still think you need to talk to someone about what you're feeling," he responded.

"What makes you think you're the one I would choose to talk to?" cried Hermione.

"Well, sometimes it helps to talk to someone that's not too closely involved. I figured since you don't know who I am ... "

"That I'd just share all my innermost thoughts and feelings with you?" accused Hermione. "You do realize Professor Dumbledore will tell me who you are later. Then what? I'm completely mortified because I realize I shared all my thoughts with you?"

Without finishing their dance, Hermione pulled away and walked off the dance floor. She stepped over to the wall and rested her forehead against the cool stone. She closed her eyes, wanting nothing more than for the day to end. The entire ball had been a nightmare with people trying to get her to talk about things she tried never to think about. All of the suitors were judging her, and she was sick of it. She just wanted to crawl into bed until all of this madness was over. But she couldn't do that; she still had to dance with one other suitor. She looked up when she felt the suitor in question tapping her on the shoulder.

"I do believe it is my turn," he said clearly.

"Fine," she grumbled and accepted his proffered hand. He pulled her closer to him as the ballad began and placed one hand on her hip while holding her other hand. Hermione looked up, expecting to find him staring at her. Instead, his eyes were fixated on a spot just above her head.

"Well?" she asked sardonically. "Aren't you going to say anything? Try to win me over with your charm?"

"I'll do no such thing," he answered matter-of-factly. "It seems to me that you are tired of inadequate men pestering you. It was my intention to give you a break from that." After he finished speaking, his eyes found that spot just above her head once again. He did not look at her, did not speak.

"Thank you," she whispered, unconsciously scooting closer to him while they danced. She had tears in her eyes, and they weren't the unhappy tears she'd had since the Battle of Hogsmeade. Her tears were happy because this man was considerate and put her at ease with just a few words.

During the dance, neither she nor he seemed to notice that their bodies continually gravitated towards each other. It wasn't until Hermione was close enough to rest her head on his shoulder that she noticed their proximity, and at that point, she was too tired to care. As she laid her head on his shoulder, she felt him stiffen for a moment but then relax and entwine his arms around her waist. A moment later, she felt him give in again and rest his head atop her own.

It felt nice, she decided. He held her in such an intimate way, yet it didn't make her feel as if he would try anything inappropriate. The intimacy of the dance offered comfort she hadn't received in a long time. For the entire dance, Hermione couldn't shake the feeling that she was safe as long as she remained in his arms. Unfortunately, the dance which she had been so eager to evade ended, and Hermione couldn't help but feel a sense of loss as he released her and took a step back.

"Goodnight, Hermione. You look beautiful," he complimented before walking away. Hermione stood in awe of this man for a long time.

Finally, she walked over to Harry, Ron and Mrs. Weasley.

"Albus just left, dear," Mrs. Weasley informed her. "He said you'll be spending the night in Room Ten. He wants you to change into something comfortable and then walk into the room with a star on it. It leads to his office."

"Thanks, Mrs. Weasley," responded Hermione, giving her a brief hug.

Harry and Ron both smiled and embraced Hermione in a three-way hug.

"Good luck, Mione," she heard Harry whisper.

"Thanks, guys." She squeezed them both tighter to her and then released them without another word.

Still a little scared of what the future might bring, Hermione left the ballroom to change in her room.

Thanks so much to my wonderful beta, sequana

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 6

After more loss than she knows how to handle, Hermione is alone and scared. But after secrets from the past are revealed, Hermione loses what little she has left and ends up at Malfoy Manor, working with Draco Malfoy and Severus Snape as spies for the Order while struggling to decide who she really is.

Once she arrived at her room, Hermione was pleased to find that her school trunk had been packed and delivered to the room. She quickly donned a pair of blue jeans, a grey jumper, and an outer robe. Comfortable, she quietly slipped out of her room and walked down the hall to the Headmaster's office. She found him, as usual, sitting at his desk going over paperwork.

As she entered, he looked up and smiled.

"Ah, Miss Granger, how good of you to join me. I trust your evening was pleasant."

"Hardly," scowled Hermione as she took her seat in front of the Headmaster's desk. Though the evening had ended well, Hermione could not forget what a nightmare the ball had been in general.

"Well then," said the Headmaster, still smiling, "shall we take a look at your options?" At her nod, he continued. "Now, I'll read out the number of a suitor, and you tell me your thoughts concerning him." Hermione nodded her agreement.

"Very well, then," answered Professor Dumbledore. "What did you think of suitor number one?"

"He was pretty rough with me," responded Hermione. "It was like he didn't know how to be gentle."

After hearing her pronouncement, Professor Dumbledore conjured a small chalk board to sit next to his desk. With a wave of his wand the words *suitor one* appeared, followed by suitors two through nine.

"So you will not be choosing suitor number one?" clarified the Headmaster.

"No, I will not."

Promptly, Professor Dumbledore crossed suitor number one off the list.

"What did you think of suitor number two? I noticed he received two dances."

Hermione laughed at the Headmaster's hopeful expression. "That's only because I thought it was adorable how he felt the need to dance perfectly. But he was definitely disappointed when I told him my grades had been slipping. I couldn't be with someone who doesn't support me even when I'm down."

"Very well, then," responded the Headmaster, crossing number two off the list. "What about suitor number three? He also got two dances."

Hermione thought about him for a moment. Suitor number three had been nice enough. "He was wonderful. He was energetic and made me laugh, but part of me says that he was too energetic."

Without a word, that suitor was also crossed off the list.

"What exactly are your feelings toward suitor number four?" questioned the Headmaster.

"Professor, did you see me slap him?" The Headmaster nodded, barely containing a smile of mirth at the thought of the suitor on the ground after the encounter.

"Then I believe you have your answer," responded Hermione cheekily. Number four was quickly crossed off the list.

"What did you think about suitor number five?"

Hermione scowled. "He only said hurtful things and made me feel bad. I can't be with someone who makes me feel worse about myself." Within a moment, he too was crossed off the list.

"What was your opinion of suitor number six?"

After thinking for a moment, Hermione responded. "Number six was ... lovely. I truly enjoyed talking to him, and while I don't know if we'd ever develop romantic feelings for each other, I definitely felt a friendship with him."

"So what you're saying," pressed the Headmaster, "is that number six is a possibility?" Hermione nodded, and Professor Dumbledore circled suitor number six.

"What were your feelings toward suitor number seven?"

"He was George Weasley, Professor. And as much as I love him, he's too much like a brother to ever be anything more."

"Very well," responded the Headmaster, crossing off suitor number seven. "What about suitor number eight?"

"He was too pushy," answered Hermione, not revealing that the main reason she didn't like him was because she still wasn't ready to talk about everything that had happened since Christmas.

After crossing number eight off, Professor Dumbledore looked back at her. "And last but not least, what did you think of suitor number nine?"

"Out of all the suitors, he was the only one to consider my feelings. He didn't push me or anything. He let me be silent, which is what I really wanted. He didn't give me useless words, but he gave me comfort. I don't know if our personalities match, but he made me feel safe. He was definitely a possibility." The Headmaster took a moment and circled number nine, just as he had done with number six.

"Well, Miss Granger, it seems you have two different options. Would you care to learn the identity of these men?"

Anxiously, Hermione nodded her head. She was about to discover whether or not the evening had been a complete disaster after all. With a flick of his wand, the Headmaster made it appear so that the name of each of the men appeared next to what number suitor he was. She scanned the list first, and then reread it thoroughly.

Her first discovery was that Charlie Weasley was number one. *Makes sense*, thought Hermione, *he works with dragons. Probably doesn't really know how to be gentle*. Looking on, she discovered the identity of number two was Percy Weasley. *The prat*, she thought. Number three was none other than Fred Weasley, and Hermione smiled as she remembered how much energy he had.

She had been dreading discovering who number four was, afraid of who she had slapped. She was not disappointed; Hermione let out a small squeak when she realized that suitor number four was none other than Harry's Godfather, Sirius Black. Number five, she was surprised to see, was Bill Weasley. Immediately, she felt a small bit of remorse for speaking so harshly to him. Bill had lost the love of his life, Fleur, and their unborn child in the war. He was grieving just like she, yet he was handling it much more maturely.

Hermione closed her eyes before glancing at the identity of number six, one of her two options. When she opened her eyes, her jaw dropped as she saw the name Draco Malfoy staring back at her. *What the bloody hell?* thought Hermione. She hadn't talked to Draco since before Christmas Eve. Come to think of it, he hadn't teased her, Ron or Harry since before Christmas Break. How she would ever face him again she did not know.

Skipping over number seven, whom she knew to be George, Hermione fixed her gaze on the identity of number eight...Remus Lupin. Poor Remus! She had acted a fright towards him. He truly wanted to help her, but her pride had gotten in the way, and she had thrown his help back in his face.

She closed her eyes once again before looking at the identity of suitor number nine, her only other option. If she didn't want to end up with Malfoy, the name of this suitor better be good. Taking a deep breath, Hermione fixed her eyes on the name. Truth be told, if her jaw had dropped when she discovered the identity of number six was Draco Malfoy, it positively fell off when she saw the name Severus Snape next to suitor number nine. Eyes wide and mouth gaping open, she fixed her gaze back on the Headmaster. He looked at her encouragingly for a few minutes until she was ready to speak.

What a nightmare! Out of nine men, the only two she felt any real companionship with were the two men that were directly involved with the night her parents were murdered! While she knew Draco had gotten her to safety, she recalled Luna telling her that it was Professor Snape that had delivered her to Grimmauld Place. In her own grief, she had not sought out the rest of the story as to what had happened that night, but with the options she was looking at right now, she had a feeling she was about to find out.

"But Pr ... Prof ... Professor Dumbledore," stammered Hermione, "I can't marry Malfoy! He's just ... he's so ... he's just not an option."

"Then how about Professor Snape?" questioned the Headmaster.

"He's my professor!" shrieked Hermione, refusing to tell Dumbledore the real reason she didn't want to marry him was because of the part he had played the past Christmas Eve.

At her outburst, the Headmaster gave Hermione a knowing look. "Miss Granger, I think it's obvious that the results of this evening have proven that you need some facts cleared up about your past. I must admit I never wanted to fill you in on the details because I believed it was Severus' and Mister Malfoy's place to do so. It seems, however, that if you are to marry either of them in the near future, they need to tell you the details and answer any of your questions. My advice would be to go and speak with both of them at the same time. The three of you have much to discuss."

"What do I say to them?" asked Hermione, scared and confused.

"My dear, say whatever you want. But in the end, make sure the crucial questions I have no doubt are buzzing in your mind, are answered."

Hermione nodded, noticing a subtle shift in the Headmaster's posture. Taking that as her queue to leave, Hermione stood and returned to the Room of Requirement, where a certain snarky Professor and a blond-haired ferret were sure to give her no end of grief.

As she stepped out of the Headmaster's office, Hermione felt her hands trembling. She knew she was expected to speak with Professor Snape and Malfoy, but her Gryffindor courage failed her. A part of her wanted to knock on the door to Room Seven and hang out with George for the rest of the night. She wanted to avoid the whole Marriage Law ordeal. The rational part of her brain, however, told her that this confrontation with Draco and her Potions master had been a long time coming.

She approached the door to Room Nine and lifted her hand to knock but stopped short. Taking a deep breath, she thought, *I must be insane* before bringing her hand down to knock on the door. She closed her eyes, praying he wouldn't answer, but she had no such luck. Her eyes snapped back to the door as she heard it unlock and then open.

As Professor Snape spotted her standing in the doorway, his usual frown contorted into a mild look of surprise, a change so slight Hermione almost didn't catch it.

"Miss Granger?" he asked. "What are you..."

"Hello, Professor Snape," Hermione cut him off, worried that if she didn't get this over with, she might very well pass out. "Sir, if you would be so kind as to follow me." She made to walk away but stopped when she realized her professor had no intent to follow her anywhere. Summoning whatever ounce of courage she still possessed, Hermione sighed, grabbed his larger hand in hers, and pulled him out of his doorway and through the hallway to Room Six. Without hesitation, Hermione lifted her arm and knocked on the door three times.

Professor Snape, who had been shocked at her bold action, immediately disentangled his hand from hers.

"Miss Granger, I don't know what you think you're doing, but I assure you..."

He was cut off by Draco opening the door to his room.

"Uncle?" asked Draco, clearly confused at the sight of Severus and Hermione standing in his doorway.

Upon hearing this, Hermione's heart stopped. By saying this, Draco had taken Hermione back to the night of her parents' death, a night she distinctly recalled him calling out for his uncle in desperation. He had taken her to Professor Snape? What had happened after that?

"Hermione?" asked Draco, a small smile on his face. "What are you doing here?"

"Hello, Draco," she responded uncomfortably. "Do you mind if Professor Snape and I come in?"

"Of course not," answered Draco, pushing his door open even more. Tentatively, Hermione walked into his room. She noted as she entered that his room consisted of two armchairs and a bed, all of which were a dark shade of navy blue. She sat down in the chair on the right, motioning for Professor Snape to take the other, while Draco chose to lounge on the bed. Looking at the two men, Hermione saw that the professor had changed back into his foreboding black robes while Draco wore a grey jumper and jeans.

Hermione sighed as they looked at her expectantly. She dropped her head into her hands, resting her elbows on her knees. She couldn't believe the Headmaster had sent her to talk to both of these men about her parents' death, a subject she clearly wasn't ready to discuss. She felt the eyes of both the men watching her silently as she brooded over her options. Finally, she spoke.

"Do you ever feel like Professor Dumbledore is a puppet master? Just pulling the strings on everybody's lives?" She heard a snort come from the direction of Professor Snape and fixed her gaze on him.

"I feel that way every bloody day of my life," he responded.

"I feel that way right now, Professor," answered Hermione, offering a small smile.

"Call me Severus. If this is about what I think it is, then it's only right you call me by my name."

"What are you here for, Hermione?" questioned Draco. Severus rolled his eyes at Draco's interruption.

"It's a wonder you made it into Slytherin at all, Draco. You have no sense of subtlety."

"Little touchy tonight, aren't we, uncle?" bit back Draco, a smirk playing on his face. Hermione smiled at Draco's attempt to lighten the mood.

"Draco," said Severus, "how many times do I have to tell you not to call me uncle? I am not your uncle, and I never will be."

"I don't know," responded Draco. "I think you'll just have to accept that I'm going to call you that until it gets boring." Severus was glaring at Draco with a high amount of distaste while Draco met his glare with a sloppy grin. Annoyed, Severus turned his attention back to Hermione.

"I apologize, Hermione; please continue."

"Okay," said Hermione quietly. "Well, after the ball tonight, I went to speak with Professor Dumbledore to tell him my top choices." She paused as both men were now watching her intently.

"And surprisingly," she continued, "the only men I would even consider out of the group are the two of you." Hermione watched as Draco's mouth gaped open for a moment and then formed a pleased smile. Severus, after all his years of spying, however, managed to keep his features in an undistinguishable expression. When neither made any move to speak, she continued.

"The Headmaster told me I should speak to the two of you together. He said I would know what to ask."

"And do you?" asked Severus, his tone barely a whisper. He seemed reluctant to speak, as if speaking would break the peace the three had tentatively formed.

"I think so," she answered, once again placing her head in her hands. *I can do this*, she told herself. Looking back up at the two men, she spoke.

"I want you each to tell me, in your own words, what happened the night my parents were murdered."

Upon hearing this, Draco's grin turned into a stony expression full of resignation. Though Severus' face did not change, Hermione noticed he looked a bit paler than usual. There was silence in the room for a few minutes as Hermione waited for them to begin their tale. The problem was that neither of the men seemed sure what to say.

"I suppose I'll start," said Severus. "Mine and Draco's versions of the story fit together like a puzzle." He paused, and Hermione motioned for him to continue. "I was in my small home on Christmas Eve, alone, when my Dark Mark started to burn. I immediately Apparated to the Dark Lord and found about ten other masked figures had also been called. I know Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy were two of them, but the others' identities I do not know. We Apparated to a small area of woods I'm sure you're well acquainted with, about a mile outside your home.

"The Dark Lord stood before us and went over the details of his plan. He wanted all of us to Apparate into your home, quickly dispose of your parents and then capture you. He wanted us to bring you to him so that he could torture you for information and then give the rest of us a chance to rape you."

Hermione's eyes widened in shock; she had never thought she was the main target of the Death Eater attack, merely that Voldemort wanted to kill her parents to upset her and, by extension, Harry.

"After that, he wanted us to kill you," continued Severus. "Once I heard his plan, I waited for my turn to speak. When the Dark Lord motioned for me to talk, I told him that if I were to join the mission, I would be compromising my post at Hogwarts as Dumbledore's spy. After a moment of thought, the Dark Lord gave in and excused me from the mission.

"Hermione," he said, looking directly into her eyes, "I need you to understand that my intention upon leaving the woods was to get to the Order's Headquarters and warn Dumbledore he needed to save you and your parents. I couldn't do it myself, lest the Dark Lord discover my treachery." Hermione nodded; she knew he was telling her the truth.

"However," said Severus, "the Dark Lord, always hesitant to trust anyone, wasn't willing to take any chances of his plan failing. Now that I knew his plan, he needed someone to watch me to be sure I wouldn't ruin it. He ordered Lucius and Narcissa to escort me home. After taking us there, Lucius apparated back to the Dark Lord. Narcissa remained to keep an eye on me until the mission was complete. I thought about simply Apparating away, but I could feel that Lucius had placed anti-Apparition wards on my home. So unfortunately, all I could do was wait in my home with Narcissa."

There was silence as Hermione digested this information. She could practically feel the sadness emanating off of this man in waves. Severus truly had wanted to save her parents and was deeply regretful that he had failed in his mission.

Hermione saw Draco looking at her and nodded for him to begin his part of the story.

"Well, I don't know if you're aware, but I came of age last September. Since then, Father has..."

"Stop," said Hermione, cutting Draco off. "For my sake, can you call him Lucius?" Her voice had a slight waver, and Draco simply nodded his agreement before continuing.

"After I came of age, Lucius insisted I accompany him to Death Eater meetings. I wasn't allowed to take the mark as I'm still in school and couldn't take the risk of Dumbledore finding out. Hermione, to comprehend this story, I need you to understand that when I first attended these meetings, I truly believed that what the Dark Lord did was right. I had all the same thoughts about Muggle-borns as he did, and I truly enjoyed watching him torture a defenceless Muggle." Hermione's eyes widened at Draco's proclamation. She'd always known he was cruel, but to enjoy watching torture was such a despicable thing to even admit to. Draco continued on with his story.

"Early last December, Lucius took me to another meeting. This time around, I was supposed to watch a middle-aged Muggle man be tortured. At that point, I'd watched so many other tortures that the man's screams didn't faze me. What did faze me was when the man started pleading for his life. He said he couldn't die; his eldest daughter was getting married and needed him to walk her down the aisle. Then he told us his wife had just found out she was pregnant and he couldn't leave her. The man begged for mercy, and then Lucius killed him.

"It was the first time I realized that these victims weren't just drones we were poking fun at. These were actually people with real lives outside of the torture chambers. That man had friends and family who lost a brother, a husband and a father when he was killed."

Hermione looked at Draco only to see his eyes filled with unshed tears. Touching her hands to her cheeks, she noticed she was crying as well.

"After that meeting, Severus came and spoke to me in private. He had noticed during the meeting just how uncomfortable I was and pulled me aside to remind me that all the victims I had watched be tortured, raped and killed had families who would never see their loved one again.

"A week later I was walking through the corridors here at school, and I noticed you, Ginny Weasley and that Lovegood girl all walking to dinner. You all seemed so happy, and I wondered how anyone could be happy with the state of the world being what it was. Severus saw me watching you and came up and reminded me that you three all had amazing worth and that, because of your connection to Potter, you were also big targets to the Dark Lord.

"Gods, Hermione, it made me sick to think of any of you being tortured the same as that Muggle man."

Hermione was openly crying now. Needing comfort, but also wanting to give comfort, she got up and sat next to Draco on the bed. She took his hands in her own and squeezed reassuringly. Draco, surprised, but also comforted, squeezed back; he continued speaking.

"By the time Christmas Break came around, I was seriously having doubts about the Death Eaters. I wasn't called for any meetings, but Lucius was; he had a meeting every night. On Christmas Eve Lucius was called to the Dark Lord for an all day meeting. My mother was expecting to be called later that evening but was told I should stay home.

"That day my mother sat me down and asked me if I was having any doubts. I know I probably shouldn't have, but I broke down and told my mum everything I was scared and worried about. People are actually being killed out there, and no one seemed to care. Seeing me so upset, my mum told me she'd been regretting her choice to join the Death Eaters for a while too.

"So my mum, being brilliant as she is, concocted a plan. She said that when she was called to the Dark Lord that night she would Disillusion me and take me with her. If I chose that I really wanted nothing to do with the Death Eaters, I could follow her and save whoever they were attacking. She warned me that it wouldn't be easy turning my back against the Dark Lord but that she believed Dumbledore would help us. Hermione, I have to admit that I was still reluctant to turn to the side of the light. Mostly because the trait I lack most is courage; that's a Gryffindor thing.

"My mum gave me a Portkey that would take me to Severus in an emergency. She said if I managed to save anyone, I should go to him and that he would help me. The two of us waited in apprehension for hours that day. Finally, around dusk, she was called. She Disillusioned me and took me with her.

"In the shadows of the meeting, I watched and listened to the Dark Lord's plan. Hermione, please know that as soon as your name was mentioned, I had made up my mind; I had to save you. I know I've never been nice to you, and to be honest, I've never wanted to be nice. But I have to admit that I've always felt some weird kinship with you. You're the only person who's ever challenged me. We all know you're top of the class, but did you know I'm second? Hermione, I couldn't let you die; I had to save you."

Looking at the sincerity in Draco's eyes, Hermione started crying even harder. She felt her shoulder being nudged and saw Severus offering her a handkerchief. She took it gratefully and turned back to Draco.

"When I heard the Dark Lord say that Mother had to escort Severus to his home, I panicked. I had no idea what to do, but I knew I had to try. I suppose you know what happened next, Hermione. I Apparated into your home, dragged you into a closet and Portkeyed us to Severus."

Draco's tale had warmed Hermione's heart more than words could say. To think that she had played a role in Draco's decision to join the light was incredible. Sighing, she turned toward Severus, wanting the tale to be finished.

"What happened next, Severus?"

"When Narcissa escorted me back to my home, she called me out on everything. She said she knew I was a spy for the Order but that she wouldn't turn me in. She then told me that after the Dark Lord was defeated by Potter the first time, she knew she could never really be a faithful servant if he ever came back. She then told me of the conversation she'd had with Draco earlier in the day. We knew that his actions that night would tell us of his true allegiances. If he brought you back safely, I would take them both to Dumbledore as reformed Death Eaters. If not, I would only take Narcissa.

"It was a great surprise later when I heard Draco scream 'uncle.' I ran to help the two of you, but you were unharmed, but unconscious. We weren't quite out of the woods yet, however, as none of us could leave my house without being detected. We had to hide you and Draco, since neither of you was supposed to be there. We put you in my bed, Hermione, and pulled the covers up over your head; Draco hid in my potions closet. When Lucius came to pick up Narcissa, he inspected the house to make sure no one else was there. He didn't find either of you. He then released the wards on my house and took Narcissa with him back to the Manor.

"As soon as they were gone, I picked you up and Apparated you to Grimmauld Place. The Weasley and Lovegood girls were walking up the stairs, on their way to bed, I presume, when I got there. As I have no desire to stay in that house longer than absolutely necessary, I deposited you in their care and asked Ginevra to tell her mother to call an emergency Order meeting."

"What happened in the meeting?" asked Hermione, who was now shaking violently as her sobs took over.

"I basically told them what Draco and I have just told you," responded Severus. "Then Dumbledore made Draco and Narcissa spies for the Order."

Hermione closed her eyes as the last of the story digested in her mind. She'd needed to hear all that, but that fact didn't make hearing it any easier. As she cried, she felt

Draco's arms come around her shoulders. She leaned her head on his arm and cried for a while longer. Finally, as her cries began to dissipate, Hermione fell into a deep sleep, leaning heavily on Draco.

"Alright, I think she's asleep," whispered Draco as he stepped away from the bed.

"Good," responded Severus. "She must to be exhausted."

"So who do you think she's going to pick?" asked Draco.

Severus snorted loudly. "I hardly think she's going to marry the man who failed to save her parents."

"She knows you tried," answered Draco. "So what do you think it would be like to be married to her?"

Severus sneered. "I suppose the two of you will fall madly in love and live happily ever after like all fairy tales."

"No, I don't think we'd ever fall in love, at least not romantically. I could see us as friends but never lovers."

Severus raised an eyebrow at Draco's confession. The thought of the young man being married and not taking the opportunity to shag his wife whenever he felt the need was preposterous. There was a long pause in which neither man spoke. After a while, Severus broke the silence.

"You know ... we should probably ... braid her hair."

Draco's eyes couldn't have widened any further after hearing the Potions master's statement.

"Are you serious?"

"With hair like that, I'd assume she does it every night," was Severus' response. "If she woke up to find we'd braided her hair, she might feel more at ease around us."

"Just one problem," said Draco. "I have no idea how to braid hair."

Severus looked undecided for a moment. Though he wanted to do something nice for the girl, he'd rather it wasn't him actually doing the nice thing. *What the hell*, he finally decided.

"If you hold her up, I'll do the braiding," he suggested.

Draco immediately agreed to this idea and lifted her up so that Severus was facing her back. Immediately, Severus began weaving his hands through her hair, which was silkier than he'd thought it would be. He found himself unconsciously leaning forward to smell the flowery scent left by her shampoo.

"So how did you learn to braid, uncle?" Draco had an incredulous look on his face; he never would have guessed Severus possessed such a talent. He looked in awe as he saw a faint blush forming on the older man's cheeks. Reluctantly, Severus answered the question.

"Your aunt had me braid her hair when we attended school."

"Ahh, the mysterious romance between the Potions master and aunt Bella." Draco's eyes were glimmering with glee at the opportunity to tease Severus.

"So you seriously braided my aunt's hair every night? Uncle, you must have been such a tosser."

"Tosser, I was not," snapped Severus. "But coward, I was." Severus finished the braid that now went down Hermione's back and tied it off with a Slytherin green ribbon.

"I suppose we should both stay here until she wakes up," commented Draco.

"It would seem so," answered Severus, settling back in his chair.

As the two men prepared to relax, however, they had no way of knowing that a very distraught Narcissa Malfoy was making her way up from the Hogwarts gates, intent on speaking with the Headmaster.

Chapter Six

Chapter 6 of 6

After more loss than she knows how to handle, Hermione is alone and scared. But after secrets from the past are revealed, Hermione loses what little she has left and ends up at Malfoy Manor, working with Draco Malfoy and Severus Snape as spies for the Order while struggling to decide who she really is.

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Severus Snape was sitting, lost in thought, in the corner armchair in Room Six of the Room of Requirement's Grand Hotel. After Hermione had fallen asleep on Draco's shoulder three hours previously, he and Draco had talked about the events of the night for another hour. Retelling the happenings of Christmas Eve had taken a lot out of them both, especially Draco. After they had talked, Draco had fallen asleep at the foot of the bed on top of the covers so as not to disturb Hermione, who was tucked in at the head of the bed.

That night was implanted in his mind as one of the hardest, emotionally, in all Severus' years of spying. While he had never enjoyed torturing defenceless Muggles, he had done what was required of him in order to remain a spy. The screams of the lives lost at his hands haunted his dreams at night, but the fact was that he could handle them. Surprisingly enough, Severus had never encountered a situation where his path crossed that of one of his students. He had never been forced to participate in or even watch the torture of a Hogwarts student, though he knew that such things happened. On Christmas Eve, however, Severus had been asked to destroy the life of not only one of his students but the most brilliant girl to attend Hogwarts in a century. Upon discovering the plan, he had known he couldn't participate. He had to keep his spying and his teaching separate. Otherwise, he'd never live with himself.

Severus didn't know what it was about this girl, Hermione Granger, that inspired loyalty in the coldest of Slytherins. Unlike the two of them, she possessed some modicum of common sense. While she accompanied them on many of their harebrained schemes, she always tried to follow the rules. She was innocent in many ways, but why would that affect him? It was possible, he supposed, that her loyalty to her friends and to the light inspired others. Loyalty was a Gryffindor trait

that most Slytherins shied away from, but nonetheless, Hermione inspired it in both himself and Draco. Severus knew that if it had been any other Muggle-born the Dark Lord had chosen to kill that night, Draco would not have risked as much as he had for Hermione. While Severus firmly believed that Draco would have turned against the Dark Lord no matter what happened, he knew Draco would not have risked his life for just anyone.

On Christmas Eve, when he had carried the girl to Grimmauld Place, he had had the chance to view another side of her...one he never saw as her professor. As her professor, Severus saw an annoying know-it-all waving her overeager hand in the air and hoping to be called on. He saw her essays, which made him cringe as they were always longer than regulation. He would never admit, not even to Dumbledore, that he was secretly pleased by her essays, which provided unique insight; some of her points he had not considered himself. But as the bastard he was, he had to find something to criticize in her work. Generally, his comments on her papers were things like, *Write bigger. I will not continue to squint just to finish your paper.* When she had started to write bigger, Severus had no choice but to start taking off points for things like misplaced commas. As her potions were always perfect, he tried to ignore her in class. He only ever spoke to her when he was berating Potter or Weasley and she just happened to get in the way.

But that night, when he had carried her unconscious form into Grimmauld Place, she wasn't the perfect know-it-all who excelled at everything she tried. Instead, she was fragile Hermione Granger, who was weak and scared. Severus had known that night that Hermione was going to need a lot of support if she was going to get past her parents' deaths; he had only hoped that her friends would be enough. Severus knew even then that he and Draco would have to do whatever they could to make Hermione feel more at ease, even though their actions had to be done from afar.

Though their actions were small, Severus hoped they offered some small amount of comfort. On Draco's part, Severus noticed that when they got back from Christmas holidays, Draco no longer baited the Golden Trio. Though the blonde was now on the side of the light, Severus knew there was still quite a bit of animosity between Potter and Draco. Yet to spare Hermione any more distress, Draco had not approached the three Gryffindors. As for Severus, as soon as he had heard from Albus that Hermione's grades were slipping, he had started assigning less work. It wasn't much less...he only cancelled one out of four essays a week...but he hoped it helped in some way. He also started assigning easier potions during class. They were mostly review potions that most students had not done well on in their O.W.L.s. Of course, Hermione had passed her O.W.L.s with flying colours, so to her, the potions were quite easy.

Much to his surprise, Severus noticed that the more attention he paid to her, the more he discovered about her that he liked. She was so different from all the other dunderheads he was forced to teach. Hermione, as a Muggle-born, understood that her magic was a gift. As such, she didn't take her education for granted like all the privileged purebloods. With her head in her books, she didn't get involved in petty matters like most teenagers. Aside from her short-lived relationship with the Weasley boy, Hermione had always made learning her top priority. Her eagerness to learn was a trait Severus found most admirable, if not endearing. When she was younger, Severus had always thought she was just showing off to her peers by flaunting her knowledge. It was only now that he found her thirst for information to be endearing. People like the Weasleys, having grown up with magic, never took their education seriously, figuring that magic would always be there. But Hermione, having only discovered her magic at the age of eleven, studied hard and never took anything for granted. His musings were interrupted as there was a sharp, insistent knock at the door. As he got up to answer the door, Draco began to stir at the foot of the bed.

"What's going on?" Draco asked, sitting up groggily. Severus ignored him and opened the door to a distraught looking Headmaster.

Severus had only seen that incredibly troubled look on the Headmaster's face twice in all his years of knowing him: when the Dark Lord had returned in Potter's fourth year and just before the Battle of Hogsmeade.

"Severus," said the old man solemnly, "would you please wake Mister Malfoy and Miss Granger and then accompany them to my office?" Upon making his request, the Headmaster walked away without another word.

Draco was now on the other side of the bed, gently nudging Hermione awake. Her eyes immediately shot wide open with comprehension as she recognized the two men.

"What's happening?" she asked, jumping out of bed.

"We are to report to the Headmaster's office immediately," Severus answered, helping the girl wrap up in her outer robe. Severus and Draco watched as Hermione switched into panic mode.

"But I haven't decided between you two! We didn't even talk about the law! I can't possibly..."

Hermione had been waving her hands frantically in the air until Draco grabbed one of them in his own, stilling her movement and her words.

"Don't worry," he said comfortingly. "It will be okay." He squeezed her hand for even more assurance, and she smiled, albeit weakly. Silently, the three of them left Draco's room and headed to the Headmaster's office, Draco still holding Hermione's hand.

Draco's hand in hers gave Hermione all the comfort she could have asked for. However, he immediately removed his hand from hers when they spotted his mother sitting in front of the fireplace.

"Mother!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing here?" He ran over to kneel in front of where she was sitting, and Hermione noticed his mother's distressed expression; it matched the one Dumbledore wore.

"Draco, dear, please sit down," said Narcissa, wearily. Hermione noted there were dark circles under Narcissa's eyes, as if the woman hadn't slept in days. The dark circles did not diminish the porcelain beauty Narcissa carried, but the flaw to her face certainly marred her beauty in a way Hermione had not suspected was possible for a Malfoy. While Hermione had certainly disliked Lucius, she had never really gotten to know Draco's mum. The one time she had met Narcissa was at the Quidditch World Cup with Harry and Ron, and Narcissa hadn't said a word.

"Severus, Hermione, you two should sit down as well," urged Dumbledore. The three of them sat down in the chairs provided and looked between Narcissa and Dumbledore.

"Now," began the Headmaster, "this very evening, just after I dismissed Hermione, Narcissa came to me with a revelation that will change each of your lives very drastically. Narcissa, would you tell them your revelation?"

"Yes, Albus," she responded in a measured tone. Hermione saw Narcissa take a deep breath and then close her pale blue eyes before she began.

"Eighteen years ago, I was pregnant with Draco. I will spare you the details, but know that I have distinct recollections of giving birth. I must say, however, that I have always had a strong feeling that something else happened the night Draco was born...something I can't remember. It's a feeling I have never been able to explain, but I have always known that Draco's birth had more meaning than I have accredited it."

"Well, thanks for that," Draco muttered sarcastically. Narcissa ignored him and continued.

"Ever since the Battle of Hogsmeade, when Lucius died, missing memories of my pregnancy and giving birth have been appearing at the oddest times. At first I assumed that Lucius had placed a Memory Charm on me long ago, but if that were the case, the memories would have all returned the moment he died. Instead, they have been returning slowly and sporadically."

Here Narcissa paused, giving the other three time to process the information. Hermione wracked her brain for anything she had read of that would cause memories to

spontaneously reappear but thought of nothing. Draco was the first to respond.

"What happened in your recovered memories, mother?" He moved into a kneeling position in front of his mother and grasped her hands in much the same way he had done with Hermione earlier in the evening. With Draco's encouragement, Narcissa went on with her story.

"Draco, I wasn't pregnant with only you. I was pregnant with twins." At this statement, Draco's jaw dropped.

"So I had a brother or sister?" asked Draco, astonished. "Did my twin die?"

From Hermione's position, she could see Narcissa stiffen and move her hand to lie atop Draco's head.

"No, my son. Please go and sit down with Hermione and Severus. You all need to hear this." Draco heeded his mother's words and went to sit on Hermione's right; Severus was on her left. Once he was seated, Narcissa continued again.

"As more and more memories started coming back, I understood much more clearly. Draco, two hours after you were born, I gave birth to your sister."

Hermione's mouth gaped in what she was sure was an unflattering expression, but as understanding dawned, she couldn't care less. Slowly, Hermione turned back to Narcissa.

"But w-why?" she stammered.

"Hermione, have you ever read a book on fairies?" Narcissa had a small, knowing smile on her face.

"Only a few," answered Hermione.

"Well, have you ever heard of the Sidhee?" pressed Narcissa.

Hermione searched through the vast knowledge in her mind to determine if she had ever read anything on the Sidhee. Finally, she responded.

"The Sidhee are fairies who live in the hills of Scotland. In its lifetime, a Sidhee must align itself to a human or otherwise be cursed in the afterlife. In the past, they've scouted witches and wizards to align to because we are more understanding than Muggles. Once a human is aligned to a Sidhee, they agree to obey the Sidhee in all they do. The Sidhee can see into the future and even change the past. So if the Sidhee offers to change the past to something that will ultimately benefit the human, the human has no choice but to obey."

Hermione looked up after her speech to find Narcissa holding back a laugh, Dumbledore's eyes twinkling, Draco smiling, and Severus giving her what she interpreted as an amused look.

"A very fine answer, indeed," responded Narcissa, issuing a faint laugh. Hermione blushed at everyone's enjoyment at her expense.

"Don't be embarrassed, Hermione," said Dumbledore. "It's nice to know that the bookworm who can read and recite texts still exists in you."

"So what do the Sidhee have to do with Draco's twin?" asked Hermione, her natural curiosity getting the better of her.

"Well, Hermione," answered Narcissa, "the night my two children were born, the Sidhee that aligned itself to me when I was a teenager appeared before me. She came into my birthing chamber despite my protests that it was improper. She then blessed each twin and proceeded to give me a message. In wizarding language, her message would be the equivalent of a prophecy, but a Sidhee's message is much more straightforward. She said, and these are her words exactly, *'the two which lie before you now hold power beyond measure in their fingertips. As war will surely rage, loyalties may waver. Together, their bond will form an immunity which will only be bestowed when all the forces of nature deem in right.'*

"I thought that was it, but then she spoke again. She said, *'Narcissa Malfoy, your daughter is vastly powerful in a great many ways. Though she will live to someday fulfil her destiny with her brother, she has another fate that must first come to pass. Narcissa, for this to occur, your daughter cannot remain in your care. You must give her up and allow her to be raised by someone else. She will return to you, but before then, she must fulfil her initial purpose.'*

"I couldn't understand why the Sidhee would want to take my beautiful daughter away from me, but I had agreed to obey the Sidhee in everything. I had no choice; I had to give up my baby girl.

"The Sidhee then Apparated me to a Muggle hospital and told me to pick a family to raise my little girl. After observing all my options, I settled on giving her to a Muggle couple who'd suffered the miscarriage of their own little girl."

"Who were the Muggles, Mother?" asked Draco, who looked thoroughly bewildered.

Narcissa, never letting her gaze leave Hermione's, wiped a tear off her cheek and whispered her answer.

"Michael and Jean Granger."

Hermione had known it was coming; she had figured it out when she remembered Draco had said he came of age last September. But knowing beforehand didn't save Hermione Granger the shock of realizing that she was actually a Malfoy: Draco Malfoy's twin sister. Hermione heard nothing more as the world around her faded to black, and she passed out.

AN: Thanks so much to my wonderful beta sequana for helping me get through this chapter.