

Without Magic

by karelia

The after-effects of the Final Battle are despair - especially when the magic disappears.

The Magic's Gone

Chapter 1 of 13

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Disclaimer: Still not mine, although I wish they were.

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Chapter I - The Magic's Gone

The feeling of euphoria that followed Voldemort's demise was short-lived. As the survivors counted the lives lost, the initial sense of relief that the side of Light was victorious diminished quickly. Professor McGonagall...victim of Avada Kedavra, casually thrown by Pettigrew seconds before The-Boy-Who-Should-Have-Lived delivered his Unforgivable to his best friend's former pet rat. Harry Potter...victim to the devious skills of Lucius Malfoy with not even a remote chance to come out alive. The entire Weasley family...Vanished by a group of Death Eaters who had long been planning to punish the blood-traitors. More than half of Harry Potter's sixth year classmates...killed by the rampaging followers of Voldemort.

Hermione Granger found some measure of solace in one fact...Professor Snape was, after all, on the side of the Light. She thought her heart would stop when, in the last breaths of what would soon become known as the Final Battle, she found herself face to face with him.

"Not a word, Miss Granger," he hissed in a low voice and then proceeded to cast deadly Unforgivables in quick succession on several Death Eaters who had been hiding nearby under concealment charms.

When Hermione came out of her shock-induced stupor, she witnessed her former professor being bound by Mad-Eye Moody and Tonks.

"Are you out of your mind?" she screamed at the two Aurors. "He just saved my life and killed probably more Death Eaters in one go than you two combined. What are you arresting him for?"

Moody and Tonks looked at her, dumbstruck. Moody turned his attention from Snape to the young witch.

"Miss Granger." He looked her up and down, as if assessing her suitability for being taken into the care of Aurors. "Have you forgotten that this is the man who killed Albus Dumbledore less than a year ago and then disappeared off the face of the earth?" he asked her in his typical growling manner.

Hermione glared at the Auror. "No, I have not forgotten. But, like everyone else, I only know Harry's point of view." She took a deep breath, hoping this would stop her from sobbing over the loss of her friend. Then, the young witch continued, her voice shaking slightly, "I do know from Harry that Professor Dumbledore trusted Snape implicitly. And I am sure you will agree that Professor Dumbledore was not only very powerful, but also very intelligent. I simply cannot imagine that he trusted Snape without a valid reason. And I *do* believe the law states that a man is innocent until proven guilty!" She held Moody's glare, unafraid and absolutely determined to do anything to keep

Snape out of Azkaban. Owing a life debt was not something she could take lightly.

Neither Moody nor Tonks found words to counter Hermione's. Snape, unable to speak due to the various restrictive spells the two Aurors had put on him, stared at her, the expression on his face full of surprise. *Does he think I'm going to deliver him to Azkaban personally after he just saved my life?* Hermione thought impatiently. Then, turning back to Moody again, she demanded, "At least give him the chance to explain his action. He has as much right to be treated fairly as the next person. And *you* are not above the rules, Mr Moody!"

Tonks whistled lowly in appreciation of Hermione's words. "Wow, Hermione. I didn't know your sense of justice went beyond house-elves...." She continued, smirking, "Or maybe you secretly have a soft spot for him, eh?"

Hermione rolled her eyes at her fellow Order member. "Don't you think you're wasting time here? Instead of dealing with him," she nodded in Snape's direction, "we should see if Madame Pomfrey needs help, or if we can find any more survivors on the grounds," she suggested. Her words drove home the fact that a vicious battle had just been fought, and there were more important things to do than shipping a Death Eater off to Azkaban, one whose crime was obscure and one whose most recent actions had not only saved a student's life, but also, in all likelihood, cut short the duration of the battle. The only Death Eaters who remained behind were all dead now.

"We'll leave him here bound and deal with him later," Moody growled, already on his way out and closely followed by Tonks, who was keen on finding her lover, Remus Lupin.

Hermione moved deliberately slowly, and when she was certain that neither Tonks nor Moody would look back at her, she turned to face her former professor and silently cast the spell to unbind him. Then she set off at a run, in the vain hope of finding some of her former classmates alive. *He doesn't have a wand, but at least he has a chance to get out and hide from them*, she thought as she ran towards Hogwarts' large entrance door.

The young witch combed through the grounds carefully, not wanting to miss anyone who might still be alive. She didn't know how long she had been searching when she heard a moan. Looking around wildly...and panicking that the sound was merely an illusion brought on by her desperate hope, even need, to find someone, anyone, alive...her heart skipped a beat. There, in a ditch on the edge of the Forbidden Forest, barely a stone's throw from Hagrid's garden where years ago giant pumpkins used to grow, lay a lone figure with dirty-streaked blonde hair and torn robes. Hermione hurried over to the ditch and recognised Pansy Parkinson.

"Pansy... Can you hear me?" Hermione asked urgently. She got another moan for an answer. The young witch fingered for her wand in her sleeve while keeping her eye on Pansy, grabbed it, and sent red sparks up to call for help. Then, she sat down next to the injured witch and started talking to her, all the while waiting for help to arrive. Pansy was unresponsive except for the occasional whimper. Hermione was about to give up waiting when Luna Lovegood arrived together with Colin Creevey.

"Oh, thank goodness! Another one who survived," Luna remarked. "I've been afraid that we have found all the survivors, and the hospital wing is nearly empty!" She evidently had not lost her ability to state the most uncomfortable truth.

"Luna, Colin, can you take her to Madame Pomfrey? I want to search some more. Finding Pansy made me hope for more people alive out here," Hermione said with a tone of urgency in her voice.

An hour or two later, she found Professor Sprout and Neville Longbottom huddled close together, both obviously injured, cold, miserable, and unable to move without wands. But thankfully, both were conscious.

Hermione sent red sparks into the sky, but it appeared that she was rapidly losing strength. The sparks that came out of her wand did not rise to their usual height, and the normally bright red had a decidedly tired shade to it.

"Hermione, you must be utterly exhausted. Give me your wand and I'll try," Professor Sprout said kindly.

Hermione handed her wand to the older witch who immediately cast the spell. Her action yielded the same result. Sprout sighed. "Oh, well. It was worth a try, but I guess sitting out here in the cold for hours and the injuries have weakened my magic as well...."

Hermione turned to Neville. "Do you want to have a go, Neville?" she asked. "I don't think anyone has seen our alert efforts...."

Neville took her wand from Professor Sprout's hand and attempted the alerting spell. The result was the same...tired, bland sparks that barely reached the height of a young tree.

They waited silently, each lost in their own thoughts. Hermione voiced her thoughts first after some time. "I don't think anyone saw our sparks, and it's getting dark now. I'll go up to the castle and send someone down to get you."

She got up with difficulty, exhausted and also stiff from sitting in the cold, and dragged her feet towards Hogwarts. The normally short walk seemed to take forever, but eventually, Hermione reached the front doors of the castle. Inside, she was greeted tiredly by a small group of people, Remus Lupin and Tonks amongst them, and, to her great joy, Seamus Finnegan. After exchanging emotional hugs with Seamus, she addressed the group, giving Professor Sprout and Neville's location. Tonks and Remus immediately left to bring the Herbology professor and her best student back to the castle, so Madame Pomfrey could take care of their injuries.

Hermione stayed inside with Seamus, Luna and Colin, too exhausted to engage in any more activities or even conversation. She was thankful that at least Luna and Colin were fit enough to conjure some mattresses and blankets, so nobody had to sleep on the bare, cold floor. They all fell asleep soon, right in the entrance hall, each one deadly tired, nobody wanting to talk as it would doubtlessly lead to the subject of the painful events of recent days.

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Hermione was rudely awakened by angry, thunderous yelling. "Where the hell is he? Someone must have unbound him! He didn't have a wand!" She recognised Mad-Eye Moody's voice, and the previous day's happenings entered her consciousness.

'Oh dear, he's discovered Snape's gone,' she thought and kept her eyes closed, pretending to still be asleep, not wanting to face reality nor the old Auror.

The young witch felt Moody's presence as he bent down to shake her awake. "Miss Granger," he growled, "did you unbind Snape?"

Hermione slowly opened her eyes and then yawned before looking at him, schooling her face into an innocent expression. "No, sir. I left at the same time as you and spent the rest of the day looking for survivors. Then, I came here and fell asleep. How could I have unbound him?"

His reaction, or rather lack of it, led her to conclude that either the paranoid retired Auror had been more severely affected by the latest events than was obvious, or that age and too long a career of hunting dark wizards and witches had finally caught up with him. He appeared to weigh her words carefully and then got up, mumbling, "How the hell did that traitor escape...."

Hermione briefly looked around her. Everyone but Tonks was still asleep, and there was no daylight yet. She turned over and fell asleep again, dreading to have to face the new day, to learn of more losses, to hear more devastating news.

When she woke up hours later, daylight flooded the entrance hall.

"Here. I've just been to the kitchen." Seamus handed her a steaming cup of coffee, which she gratefully accepted.

They drank their coffee in silence, looking at each other now and then, both too reluctant to bring back the dire reality with words.

Eventually, Hermione got up. "Do you want to go and check out Gryffindor Tower? Maybe it's still standing.... I'm dying for a long, hot shower!"

Seamus agreed, and the two set off to examine the state of their House. Everything appeared to be intact except one staircase, which was missing a few steps. The common room was cold and deserted, emitting a feel of neglect. Seamus walked straight to the fireplace and took his wand out. "A bit of heat wouldn't go amiss here," he murmured and cast the spell to start a fire. The fireplace remained cold. Seamus looked at Hermione and then cast the spell again. But no fire lit up.

Hermione sighed. "Here, let me try," she said, trying to hide her impatience at his lack of skill. The young witch took out her wand, pointed it at the fireplace and cast *Incendio*, like she had done so many times over the past seven years. However, this time, her spell yielded no result.

"Oh, Merlin!" Seamus exclaimed. "If I fail a spell, it's kind of normal, but *you*?"

Hermione looked at him thoughtfully. "You know," she said slowly, "I failed to send sparks up last night, and so did Professor Sprout and Neville. We all thought it was because we were so exhausted... But both you and I slept an entire night since. This can't be exhaustion...."

"But... But..." Seamus stuttered. "But last night, Luna and Colin conjured mattresses and blankets..."

They looked at each other, then exclaimed in unison, "Hospital Wing!"

"Yes, that's our best bet to find out what's happening, but I really do need a shower first," said Hermione. "Let's meet back here in twenty minutes."

They parted ways, Hermione heading towards the prefects' bathroom, whilst Seamus set off to the boys' communal showers.

The young witch enjoyed the stream of hot water that came shooting out of the shower. However, too soon it reduced to a trickle of cold, murky water. When she returned to the common room, not at all happy about the abruptly shortened shower, Seamus reported a complete lack of hot or clean water.

The two young people made their way across the castle to the Hospital Wing, hoping to resolve the problem with magic there. They were greeted by a gloomy looking Madam Pomfrey.

"We have a problem. There's less and less magic..." the matron stated, close to tears. "Poor Miss Parkinson. Without magic, there is nothing I can do for her."

"Are the potions ineffective now?" Hermione asked, bewildered.

"Some of the potions are working fine. Mr Longbottom responded well to the *Crucianesco*. But the rib-mending potion I used on Miss Parkinson for her broken ribs shows absolutely no result." The mediwitch sounded defeated.

Hermione was thinking fast. She knew the *Crucianesco* potion contained Mandrake leaf as the main active ingredient. She also knew that in Muggle herbal wisdom, Mandrake leaf was typically used as a pain-numbing herb. The rib-mending potion was brewed just like any ordinary potion, but in order to make the potion effective, certain wand movements had to be used in the last stage of brewing, without which the potion would be completely ineffective. She wondered if somehow Voldemort's death had affected the magic.

"Yesterday, it was quite late, and we could not produce sparks with the wand outside on the grounds. But last night, in the entrance hall, Luna and Colin managed to conjure blankets..." Hermione paused, then turned to the mediwitch. "Madam Pomfrey, when did you start having trouble with magic?"

"Only this morning," Madam Pomfrey replied. "Yesterday, all the spells and potions worked fine. I had no trouble detecting anyone's injuries..." She paused and took a deep breath. "Now, I wish I had administered the rib-mending potion to Miss Parkinson last night...." The mediwitch sighed deeply.

Hermione voiced some more thoughts. "I think the magic might still be working in some places. It seems to me that the less magic was used in a place, the quicker it stopped working, such as outside on the grounds, an open area, where magic could disperse quickly. If we find a room within Hogwarts where a lot of spells were used, and where the magic can't escape easily, we could take Pansy there and try the potion again. It might be working with the lingering magic," she suggested.

"Your idea has merit," the mediwitch conceded. "Now, we just have to figure out which room has the greatest amount of magic... a room where more magic was used than here in the hospital wing..."

"What about the Charms or Transfigurations classroom?" Neville suggested timidly from his bed near Pansy's.

"Good point, Neville," Seamus praised his friend. "On the other hand, the lower years probably use much weaker magic... There must be somewhere here in the castle where the magic is stronger than any other room."

"You're right, Mr Finnegan," croaked Professor Sprout from her bed across the room. "What about the Room of Requirement?"

Hermione agreed immediately. The magic the DA had utilised back in her fifth year was likely more than any classroom had ever seen. "Yes, as long as it opens up for us, it's probably our best hope," she said, hoping fiercely that the door would show. She had never liked Pansy Parkinson, not so much because of the different House affiliation, but the young Slytherin witch was arrogant and downright nasty to anyone who was not a pureblood. Hermione had been at the receiving end of her nastiness more often than she could count. However, the Gryffindor was compassionate by nature and simply hated seeing anyone in pain or in a hopeless situation. And, she was willing to help putting a situation right, even more so as she owed her life to Pansy's former Head of House.

Madame Pomfrey briefly left the room to find a stretcher. It would have been pointless to try levitating the unconscious witch across the castle, and her serious injuries did not warrant carrying her. The mediwitch was rightly worried about the Slytherin's broken ribs, which were digging dangerously closer and closer toward her lungs.

Madame Pomfrey returned with a stretcher and, with Seamus' help, transferred Pansy onto it. Led by Hermione, the strange looking quartet carefully moved from the hospital wing to the wall behind which the Room of Requirement was hidden.

Hermione walked up and down the floor along the wall, wholly focusing on the need for the room. She had almost lost heart when, finally, the door appeared in the wall. The three let out a sigh of relief and entered. The mediwitch ignored the surroundings and dug the vial out of her pocket. While Hermione carefully held Pansy's head up, Madame Pomfrey administered the potion to the unconscious witch and gently massaged her throat to encourage swallowing.

"I just hope there is enough magic in here for it to work," Seamus said, looking around. Then he continued, "I would have thought the Room of Requirement might resemble a hospital now, or at least something different to this... long, deserted, library kind of room."

Hermione agreed, hoping ferociously that the look of the room was deceiving. It looked exactly as Harry had described it after he hid Snape's old Potions textbook in here. She decided to look for the old book. At least time would pass quicker that way, rather than simply sitting there waiting with bated breath for the potion to take or not take effect.

Seamus rolled his eyes, and even Madam Pomfrey grinned, when Hermione returned, happily holding the old sixth year Potions textbook in her hand.

"Only *you* would find an old textbook useful, Hermione," snickered Seamus. "It won't have any value at all if the magic disappears, you know."

The two witches looked at Seamus, shocked that he had so blatantly expressed their fears.

"What?" he asked defensively, "It's true, isn't it?" His words were met with silence.

Then Madame Pomfrey whispered, "Oh, Merlin. What *are* we going to do if the magic disappears entirely?"

"Then... We will have to get together with all the witches and wizards that are still around and find a way to bring the magic back," Hermione replied slowly. She paused, thinking of possible scenarios of the magic disappearing entirely or returning soon before voicing her favoured thought. "Maybe we'll wake up tomorrow and be able to use our wands again. The showers will work, the potions will be effective, and the disappearance of the magic will merely be a temporary side effect of Voldemort's fall."

"Yes, wouldn't that be nice," Madame Pomfrey said, the note of bitterness in her voice clearly showing a lack of hope for Hermione's vision.

They all turned their attention to Pansy who was stirring now. "Miss Parkinson, can you hear me?" Madame Pomfrey asked gently, hiding her desperation to help the young Slytherin witch be whole again.

Pansy opened her eyes slowly. "... Hurts..." she whimpered. "Need water."

Hermione took her wand out without thinking and cast *Aguamenti* as she picked up a goblet from a nearby shelf. The goblet filled with clear water, and she handed it to the mediwitch.

"So the magic is still working here!" Seamus exclaimed.

"So it is," Madame Pomfrey agreed. "Let's hope it'll stay this way."

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It was early afternoon when the witches and Seamus returned to the Hospital Wing. Pansy's health was by no means fully restored yet, but with the risk of her ribs puncturing her lungs gone, she had a fair chance of recovering swiftly and fully now, even without the use of magic.

Hermione and Seamus left the Hospital Wing to search for more pockets of magic within the castle. But even with the help of Colin, Luna and Remus Lupin, it proved to be a fruitless effort. None of the classrooms yielded any magic. All the showers, bathtubs and sinks only produced murky, dirty, and cold water. The few surviving house-elves were panicking; cooking without magic was unheard of amongst house-elves...they had only ever served pureblood wizard families who frowned on anything Muggle.

And, they were faced with even more challenges. When the small group of wizards and witches tried to enter the kitchen, the painting did not reveal the entrance, no matter how much the pear was being tickled.

"Oh, no!" Seamus groaned. "Don't tell me we can't even get into the kitchen now!"

"Got any idea how?" Remus asked. "Magic doesn't open it..."

Thankfully, their voices alerted some house-elves to their presence, and the portrait was opened from inside. The small group entered the kitchen one after the other and looked around, expecting to see the elves.

"Where are they?" Hermione wondered aloud.

Suddenly, Dobby appeared on top of the table in front of her. "Miss Hermione Granger! Harry Potter's best friend! You are alive!" He shouted, his speech interrupted by sobs. "You can't see the elves anymore; the magic is disappearing! It is only with combined effort between us that you can see and hear me, and I do not know how long it will last!"

"What do you mean, Dobby?" Colin asked in disbelief.

"I is speaking to Harry Potter's best friend," Dobby admonished him and turned back to face Hermione again.

"Miss Hermione, you must find the Potions master, the man who killed Headmaster Dumbledore, the man who saved your life! You must help make the magic potion that will restore the magic! He cannot do it alone," he told her urgently, and then gradually he faded out of sight, as if merging with the air in the room.

"What do you mean, the man who saved your life?" Colin asked her curiously. The others stared at her, too, wanting to know why Dobby had claimed that Snape had saved her life.

Hermione told them what had happened and closed with the words, "and the next morning he had disappeared, and Mr Moody accused me of unbinding him."

"And?" Remus asked. "Did you?"

"As I told Mr Moody, I couldn't have done it if I'd wanted to! I left with him and Tonks and didn't return to the castle until late in the evening," Hermione replied in her best goody-two-shoes manner. She was glad that Remus appeared to swallow her words as fact and without comment. She genuinely liked and trusted Remus, but she was not yet willing to divulge her secret of freeing Snape to anyone. Not that she had ever liked the Potions professor...she had had absolutely no reason to during the years he taught Potions...but he had saved her life and with that act unknowingly gained her absolute and unconditional loyalty.

In the evening, the few uninjured survivors met again in the entrance hall. Maybe it was a subconscious hope in each one to be the first to greet any unexpected survivor coming through the doors of Hogwarts; or maybe there was some unseen force directing each able witch and wizard to the front-most room of the castle.

Hermione shot a longing glance at Tonks who was thoroughly kissing Remus as if nothing else in the world mattered. *Why do they have to make such a display of snogging*, she thought nastily and was immediately shocked by the bout of envy she felt. Her Ron was Vanished to Merlin knew where...whether he was alive or not, whether she would ever see him again, she had no idea. But her own sad loss surely did not warrant everyone else to stop living...

Her reverie was interrupted by Remus, who sat down next to her and said quietly, "Hermione, are you considering what Dobby told you? Because if you are, it might be wise to go to the Room of Requirement now and try casting a tracking spell on Snape... *before* the magic disappears." He sighed heavily and then continued, "Although, to be honest, I could completely understand if you choose to ignore Dobby's advice. I know Snape's never had a friendly word for you, and if anyone ever found out you work with him, and voluntarily at that, they'll consider you a traitor most likely."

Hermione carefully weighed his words and then looked at him and smiled, her mind made up and morbid thoughts decisively pushed away. "You know... You're right! I don't have to find him, but if I decide to follow Dobby's advice, then at least I have a better chance with a tracking spell on him."

The two set off for the Room of Requirement, and Hermione declared the day a lucky one when the door obligingly appeared. Their combined efforts quickly found the location of the former Potions professor, which Hermione noted down in detail.

When Hermione tried to enter the Room of Requirement the next day in order to conjure some desperately needed clean water, the door did not show. The wall remained solid.

Remus and Tonks returned from Hogsmeade, looking despondent, and Tonks was uncharacteristically quiet.

"What's the matter with you two?" asked Seamus as the couple entered the castle.

"There... There's no one left in Hogsmeade," Tonks replied and burst into tears. Remus pulled her gently into his arms to comfort her and said over her head, "It looks like everyone who survived the battle has left. And a lot of the buildings have started to fall apart. There is no magic left."

Hermione nodded sadly. "The door to the Room of Requirement doesn't show anymore, either."

"Muggle world, here we come," sighed Luna. "I tried Apparating, and nothing happened. And Madame Pomfrey has been trying for days to Floo St Mungo's with no success."

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Two days later, a sad and gruff looking group of witches and wizards, some moving with difficulty because of recent injuries and all in need of clean water for both cleaning and drinking, left Hogwarts Castle reluctantly, none of them ready to face the challenges of living in a world without magic.

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A/N: I thank NotSoSaintly for beta-reading this story. Your encouragement means the world to me. :-)

As always, reviews feed my muse, so please let me know what you think of the story.

Summer Time - But The Living Ain't Easy

Chapter 2 of 13

Without magic, nothing is easy. Not even getting where you want to get. And once you're there, who said living was easy?

Disclaimer: Last time I checked, the characters were not mine. I only take them out to play and make them do things that JKR doesn't. Like Disappearing the magic. Or making Hermione fall in love with the greasy git of the dungeons. I solemnly swear to return the characters once I am done being up to no good.

* * *

Chapter II

Summertime ... But The Living Ain't Easy

None of the last of Hogwarts' residents were quite certain where to go, let alone what to do about surviving in a world without magic. Whilst Remus and Tonks were keen to return to number twelve, Grimmauld Place, they were also reluctant for fear that the former home of the Blacks and headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix had fallen apart, now that the magic had gone.

Pansy downright refused to even consider returning to her parents. She had received her injuries from Death Eaters and had no doubt it was because she had refused to take the Dark Mark. Her family, staunch followers of the Dark Lord, had been more than a little disgruntled with their daughter's disobedience.

Over the last few days, Seamus had developed a genuine liking for Pansy. The two had been spending much time talking while Pansy was recovering in the hospital wing. Both had been surprised to enjoy the other's company and were becoming inseparable.

Once the small group of witches and wizards had left Hogsmeade behind and found themselves in the Scottish countryside, one after the other slowed down until, eventually, everyone came to a halt.

"Dang!" Seamus exclaimed. "We don't have any Muggle money! How are we going to get anywhere?" He looked at a complete loss. Everyone stared at him in disbelief. None of the others had thought of the need for Muggle money. Without magic, Apparating, Floo, even brooms were unavailable for transport, and Muggle transport was unavailable without money.

Tonks said, "Great. Not that I'm sure where to go in the first place, but I have no way of getting there." She sighed deeply.

Hermione's face suddenly brightened. "I know what we can do! We'll walk to the next village, and I'll phone my parents. They'll help us out with money."

Everyone looked relieved, now that the money problem was to be solved. The next problem was to decide where to go.

Seamus had invited Pansy to go with him to stay with his parents until they found a solution to bring the magic back or until they had to integrate in the Muggle world if the magic stayed away. It was a thought neither was willing to entertain.

Remus and Tonks decided to return to London. Even if number twelve, Grimmauld Place, proved to be inaccessible, they were more likely to find other Order members there and hoped that among the brighter minds, they might find a way to bring the magic back into the wizarding world.

Hermione had decided to return home to her parents for a few days, hoping to recover from the trauma that had been the Final Battle. She was feeling tired and drained and in dire need of some peace and pampering. She hoped her parents could provide both. Then, she planned to go and find Snape. Maybe Dobby had spoken the truth... But even if he had not, Hermione figured she would never know unless she actually went to track down Snape.

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The young witch was almost certain that a lot of wizards and witches would go mental, succumb to illness, or even commit suicide if the magic stayed away. She, a Muggle-born witch, missed the magic dearly and could not even begin to imagine what great a loss it would be for someone who had been born into a wizarding family without ever having had much contact with Muggles. Soon, an entire world would be lost, unless its survivors started to work on finding a way to return the magic. Her mind made up, she started to speak.

"Right, people. It's going to be a couple of hours before my dad's money arrives. I think we should spend them constructively and formulate a strategy to get the magic back."

"Good idea," agreed Tonks. "First of all, we should exchange Muggle-style contact details, so we can communicate with each other. Somehow, I doubt that we'll find owls who deliver mail..."

"I will see if my dad continues publishing *The Quibbler*. He can run a classified section for people looking for someone from our world. Colin's mum has some contacts in

Muggle publishing ... maybe she'll help us. Then we might get an idea of the number of survivors." Luna sounded her usual serene self, as if the loss of magic was merely an inconvenience.

Pansy stated quietly, "I need to heal first before I can be of any use, but I'll gladly help if anyone knows how."

"You will heal soon," Seamus assured her, his voice filled with affection. He added, "Don't you worry, Pansy. Your family can't find you without magic, and with that threat gone, and a bit of loving care, you'll be well again in no time."

Pansy offered him a hesitant smile, which led Hermione to wonder just how much abuse the young witch had experienced by the hands of her pureblood family. She could not help but to feel admiration for the Slytherin witch for putting her conscience before the safety of her life.

"Any ideas how we can get the magic back?" Remus asked glumly. Everyone looked away, not knowing any answer but a brutal "No" and not willing to say it.

"I think," Hermione started slowly, "to get an idea of how to bring the magic back, we first of all have to look into how the magic disappeared. I find a problem is always easier to solve if the cause of it is known. If we can figure out what caused the magic to leave, we might even be able to reverse the process."

Professor Sprout nodded. "You have a point... I wonder if the forms of magic that Muggles use have disappeared, too. Is there a way we can find out?" She looked into the round questioning.

Tonks' tone was unbelieving. "What do you mean, Muggles use magic? It's all illusion stuff they do!"

Hermione shook her head. "No. There is a difference between a *magician* who *creates* illusions and a Muggle who practises magic," she explained.

"And exactly *what* kind of magic is it that Muggles practise?" Tonks sounded as mocking as Snape now, but her face carried an expectant look nevertheless.

"Some Muggles are adept in the healing arts, such as Reiki. Some, especially those who follow the Pagan ways of life, are capable of manipulating events, like say, bringing love to their lives or being offered a better job. They do this by way of rituals, and many of them have better knowledge of lunar influence on earth than witches or wizards do. Then, I know of Muggles who are capable of divination so correct it would make Trelawny turn green with envy. And then, there are those who communicate with the dead or with beings from higher dimensions," Hermione lectured.

Seamus nodded. "Yes, my dad used to visit a medium who channeled some high dimensional beings. It was fascinating stuff!"

"Really?" Pansy was astounded. "I'd love to meet someone who communicates with beings from a different dimension," she added, and her face took on a dreamy expression. "Just imagine... A being from a higher dimension might even know how we can get the magic back."

Hermione drew in her breath sharply. Who would have thought that Pansy Parkinson of all people might come up with a possible solution to their dilemma? "What a brilliant idea, Pansy," she praised the Slytherin. "You and Seamus could find that medium and see if he or she can help us!"

"Yeah, if that lady is still around, then I'm sure my dad will know about it. I'll let you know," Seamus agreed, putting his arm around Pansy's shoulder and giving her a look full of admiration.

"You do that," Remus agreed and, holding Tonks close to him, added, "Tonks and I will look for our kind in London and see what we can achieve there." He turned to face Hermione. "And what are you going to do?" he asked her.

She took a deep breath and answered, "I think the only idea I can come up with is to investigate Dobby's statement. I'm not sure if I want to see Snape again, but I will do anything to get the magic back. And if that means working with him..." She shrugged, sighed, and then shuddered at the mere thought of having to face Hogwarts' most hated former professor, a killer ... and her life saviour.

"It sounds worse than it's likely to be, Hermione," Pansy tried to comfort her. "I know everyone outside Slytherin hates him, but he really isn't bad at all. A lot of his persona was put on because he knew better than to assume the Dark Lord would not have others spy on him."

Tonks snorted. "Well, I'm glad you're not saying he's *nice* at least, Parkinson. The man killed Dumbledore!" Tonks made no secret of her dislike of the Slytherin witch or, in fact, of anyone Slytherin. Turning to Hermione, she remarked, "I don't know if it's a good idea to find him, Hermione. I wouldn't be comfortable around a killer."

Hermione rolled her eyes. *Someone remind me why I used to like her*, she thought.

"All we know for certain is that he killed Dumbledore. As to the why, we can only speculate until Snape tells his version. I thought him a murderer, too, until he saved my life by killing several Death Eaters. That, to me, means there has to be more to it than Harry knew. Snape had no reason to save me, and if he *truly* was on Voldemort's side, he wouldn't have done it," Hermione stated defensively.

Tonks' condemnation of Snape was getting on her nerves. *She has no idea what it's like to have someone save your life by killing others*, she thought bitterly. The knowledge of owing a life debt to someone she had disliked for years, to someone she had perceived as a murderer for the past year, weighed heavily on her.

Remus made an effort to calm the situation. "Come on, girls. We'll each do what each thinks is best. Our first and foremost goal is to find our magic again. Once we've achieved that, we can worry about Snape's motives." He cupped his lover's face in his hands. "I know how you feel about Severus. If it hadn't been for his constant mocking, Sirius would never have run to the Ministry of Magic that night. He might be still alive. That's what you think, isn't it?"

Tonks nodded sadly, the memory of losing one of her best friends welling up inside of her. "Yes, Remus. That's what I think."

Hermione voiced a new worry. "Please, people, let's put any differences we have aside for now. If we can show a united front to find the magic again, it'll be easier on everyone. We're more likely to be successful, rather than wasting our energies with arguing pointlessly," she pleaded.

"True," Remus agreed and added wistfully, "I'm sure if our world had been more united against Voldemort, we would have lost far fewer lives."

His daring statement hung uncomfortably in the air, and it was a while before anyone spoke again.

Pansy finally broke the silence. "The Dark Lord apparently used to get a kick out of the way the wizarding world was split over him. My parents used to snigger about the Ministry of Magic being so busy policing everyone that they had no time to concentrate on his defeat."

"I can imagine," Seamus commented dryly. "My dad always said that the Ministry of Magic was no different than the Muggle government, always busy finding new ways to curb people's freedom under the guise of crime and all that."

Hermione smirked. "Funny that! My parents shared that opinion when I told them about the toad and all the ridiculous decrees she imposed on us with the help of Fudge."

The group did manage to part on friendly terms. Even Tonks, although she had required a dose of calming and quietly stated reasoning from Remus, finally agreed to put all differences behind for now.

Neville remarked, "Hey, at least if we wait until we get the magic back, we can argue in style, with hexes and spells!" His comment left everyone amused.

After Hermione made another reverse charge call to her parents and visited a bank to get Muggle money, it was finally time to part company and face a world devoid of

magic. The good-byes were emotional, and the promises to communicate via Muggle means fervently spoken.

* * *

It had been one week since Hermione had arrived at her parents' home, and she felt increasingly restless. In the first couple of days, her parents had tried hard to make her as comfortable as possible, more so with little gestures and a decided lack of words beyond the mundane. But on the third day, the questions began, instigated by a concerned Mrs Granger whose medically-trained mind feared for her daughter's mental well-being if the trauma was not talked about.

All Mrs Granger knew was what had transpired in the first phone call from some small Highland village: *"Voldemort is gone, but so is the magic, and the few of us who have survived can't get anywhere..."* And even that had come secondhand from her husband who had taken the call.

No matter how hard Hermione's mother tried, no matter how cunningly she phrased her questions, the young witch refused to humour her mother. She was not ready to discuss the events with any Muggle. "Yes, Mum, Voldemort is gone. I don't know who did the act. A lot of witches and wizards died in the battle, and it finally ended when Snape killed a group of Death Eaters," she replied impatiently to her mother's careful prodding. "Look, Mum, I know you think it's important to talk about the whole mess. No disrespect, but you can't possibly have any idea how I feel. I mean, you've never known magic, so you don't know what it's like to suddenly be without it." She left the kitchen and a speechless Mrs Granger behind, retreating to her own room.

After more days of Grangeresque prodding, suggestions to take a job, and even the promise to finance her through university, Hermione knew she had to leave, or else her goal of finding a way to bring the magic back would fade out of existence. *"I cannot let the people down who introduced me to the wizarding world and nourished my magic. If I stay here any longer, I'll be half-comfortable amongst Muggles because that's how my own world was until I learned of Hogwarts, and it won't take long to get used to it. One day, I'll regret not looking for the magic, and then it'll be too late,"* she thought dejectedly.

Having decided that her best plan of action was still to go and find Snape, her next step would be to figure out what to do if she could not find him. Hermione could not be certain that he was still at Spinner's End, the location that the tracking charm had revealed when the Room of Requirement was still functional. It had been an entire week, and she had no idea how he was faring without magic. For all she knew, he might have been forced to take on any Muggle job in order to maintain himself. Or maybe his half-Muggle heritage had ensured that he kept some ties to the Muggle world, although she doubted it, given his obscure allegiance to Voldemort who had despised anything Muggle.

Her thoughts about Snape made her feel uncomfortable. He had, after all, killed Dumbledore; there was no doubt about that. Tonks' words about not wanting to be around a killer rang in her mind, but Hermione gave herself a mental kick. *Get real, Granger. It was a war. Any soldier will kill in a war, so quit freaking about meeting the greasy git. He did save your life!*

She then concentrated at the task at hand ... work out the best plan of action if she could not locate Snape *I don't want to come back here. Mum and dad mean well, but I know they'll push me to get fully integrated in the Muggle world, as if the magic has gone for good.* The thought made her shudder. She knew she could easily live like a Muggle, but had no real desire to do so as long as there was hope to find the magic again. What about all the witches and wizards who likely were facing tremendous difficulties by not having magic?

It's probably best if I meet up with Remus and Tonks first. If number twelve, Grimmauld Place, is still there, I could probably use that as a base and stay there until... until whatever, her thought finished abruptly.

As uncomfortable as she felt about facing her former Potions professor, she absolutely did not want to think about the possibility of not being able to find him or what she would do if he was not at Spinner's End.

When Hermione heard the front door close and the voice of her father, she left the sanctuary of her room to talk to her parents. She hoped it would be a little easier if her father was present. He often saw reason in her actions where her mother did not.

And it was easier. "Honey, you do what you have to do. As much as I love having you here, I'm happier knowing you are happy. And if that means being somewhere else, then so be it. Your happiness is more important than us being selfish by wanting you home."

Hermione hugged him tightly. "Thanks, Dad," she choked, desperately trying to keep away the tears that were welling up inside of her.

Her mother sighed, "If that's what you want to do... I'll miss you, love." She was not happy about her daughter leaving so soon.

"I'll miss the two of you, too. And Mum, it's not really that I want to go and find Snape, but if it means finding the magic again, then it'll be worth it."

"We understand, honey," her father assured her.

When Hermione returned to her room, she let out a sigh of relief. The talk with her parents had gone far better than she had anticipated, and she was glad to be able to leave on friendly terms with the full support of her parents.

* * *

The next morning, the young witch headed for London and spent the entire train journey wondering whether number twelve, Grimmauld Place, was still standing, and if not, she hoped at least the Leaky Cauldron would still be there. *I'll bet number twelve is still functional. Otherwise Remus would have phoned or written to let me know his new location,* she thought, trying not to think of any what ifs.

When Hermione arrived at Grimmauld Place, she felt her spirits lift considerably. Not only was the house there ... the Fidelius Charm must have disappeared with the magic ... she also spotted Tonks opening a window on the first floor.

"Tonks!" Hermione called, waving at the witch.

Tonks waved back and yelled, "Come over. I'll open the door for you!" She disappeared from the window, and by the time Hermione had crossed the road, Tonks stood at the open front door, beaming.

"Isn't it great?" Tonks asked. "It's still standing, even without the magic! And it's still hell to keep clean," she added, laughing. "But at least all the magical pesty creatures are gone." She motioned for Hermione to go inside and closed the door. "Go through to the kitchen. It's still the cosiest place."

Hermione noticed that Tonks seemed to have lost all her clumsiness. Making and serving coffee was accomplished without any incidents.

"Remus should be back in a couple of hours," Tonks said and then offered more of an explanation. "We've been taking turns searching for magical folk, in case any Order members show up here."

"And?" Hermione asked expectantly. "Have you found anyone yet?"

Tonks let out a long sigh. "No... Yes. Remus found Mundungus Fletcher. Only... Dung didn't recognise him. He seems to have turned into a tramp, without any idea as to his identity or past." She looked down and studied the mug of coffee on the table, unhappy to report such a lack of progress. Then she went on, "And Kingsley came by very briefly. He's still working at the Muggle government place, and he said he wanted to talk to us. But he couldn't stay and promised to pop in again. He sounded... strange."

"What do you mean, strange?" Hermione inquired. Tonks' report did not seem encouraging.

"I'm not sure how to describe it." Tonks sounded hesitant. "He looked kind of haunted, as if he was paranoid that someone was following him or checking on him. And he... he sounded so... dejected; desperate to talk to us on one hand and afraid on the other. It was as if he was not himself," she finished.

Hermione remained silent for a while. There was nothing she could think of saying about such little and disheartening information.

Tonks said, as if trying to comfort herself as much as Hermione, "Of course, it's only been just over a week. We can't really expect to find everything to be all chipper so soon after the battle, even though the reptilian bastard finally *did* snuff it."

Hermione could not help grinning at Tonks' choice of words to describe Voldemort. "No, that's true. It's only been a week," she agreed and then continued, "I'm just so glad *this* house is still here. Surely any surviving Order members will pop in as soon as they can."

"Oh, absolutely," Tonks replied, filling their mugs with more coffee. "Moody shows up every other day to exchange any information we might have of others. He hasn't had any luck so far, either. I have a suspicion, though, that he might try and corner Kingsley. You know how paranoid Moody is ... he reckons in all seriousness that the Muggle government has made the magic disappear with their ultra-advanced technology..." She sighed as memories of various scenes starring Moody's paranoia entered her mind unbidden.

"So, the loss of magic hasn't changed *that* trait of his?" Hermione enquired, grinning.

"Nah. He's too old to change, I think," Tonks replied matter-of-factly.

"Who is too old?" Remus' voice startled the two young women. Neither of them had heard him enter.

"You're back early," Tonks commented as she stood up to kiss him in greeting. "Is that a good or a bad sign?" She looked at him expectantly.

Remus teased her by pretending to ignore his lover and, instead, greeted Hermione.

"I didn't think of telephoning you to let you know that we're staying here! I'm having a bit of trouble with this concept of using a telephone instead of an owl," he admitted, a little embarrassed.

"I know what you mean, Remus," Hermione offered. "I keep catching myself using my wand and only remember when nothing happens. And I spent my first eleven years as a Muggle," she added.

"Oh! But... You know, we *should* make an effort and continue using wands! Even if only for a few minutes every day. But that way we'll keep in practice and know exactly *when* the magic comes back," Remus commented. Then, he corrected himself hesitantly, "If the magic comes back."

Tonks evidently had enough of her lover ignoring her. "Oi!" she exclaimed. "You do have some news; it's written on your forehead! And it better be good news, or else I'll punish you for averting my question," she threatened.

Remus grinned and took her into a fierce hug. "You know me too well, woman," he stated, still grinning.

Then his face took on a somber expression. "Let's say, if every day from now on will be as rewarding as today, I'll gladly live for another hundred years." He smirked. "I... Merlin, it's been an amazing morning." He took a sideways glance at Tonks and took a deep breath. "Love, let me quickly reiterate, so Hermione knows what's been happening here. I trust you already told her about Dung and Kingsley?"

"Yes, Remus! And Moody. That's how far I got. Now, get on with it," Tonks demanded.

Remus turned to face Hermione. "You see, up until yesterday, the Leaky Cauldron was closed. The building's there, but it's been locked up. A few wizards and witches turned up whenever I was hanging around there, but nobody I knew. Well, when I got there this morning, it was open and Tom was inside. He had some news and the evidence to prove it."

The two witches looked at him expectantly. "Right now, the body of Fenrir Greyback is residing in one of the spare rooms of the Leaky Cauldron until the weekend. Tom said that if it doesn't get picked up by then, he'll have the Muggle authorities dispose of it."

His voice had turned forceful as he reported the events, but when he continued, it had a wistful quality to it. "Just imagine. Kids will be safe again... None of the young ones will have to suffer *that* particular fate..." He shuddered, and Tonks wrapped her arms around him, offering comfort.

"Oh, Merlin. Remus, that is the best news I could hope for! Greyback dead! Did Tom know anything about how he died?" asked his lover.

"Yes..." Remus was fidgeting. "I... spoke to the one who killed him." He allowed a sigh to escape but continued talking, "Hagrid. He gave me a detailed account of it, but quite frankly, I have no interest in recalling it. Let's just say I feel I owe him something equivalent to a life debt..."

Both witches gasped. Hermione was the first to find words. "Remus! Hagrid loved all of you Marauders! He surely did that one act to avenge the Marauders, not just you as an individual. It was his way of avenging you, James and Sirius."

"You're probably right," Remus admitted. "He was mumbling something about Harry having done the deed with Wormtail, but he did not go into any details." He glanced at Hermione, looking hopeful.

"Wormtail struck down McGonagall, and Harry went after him and knocked him down with the Killing Curse," Hermione recalled softly. "Just before Lucius got him..." She felt her eyes well up.

Both Tonks and Remus jumped up instantly to comfort her. "Oh, goddess, Hermione, why didn't you tell anyone?" Tonks asked, hugging her tightly.

Hermione had no answer. All she could do was sob, crying her heart out. She thought for a moment how she had been unable to collapse like that in the safety of her parents' home, the place she'd known as home as long as she could remember. Why did she break down like that now in this still uncomfortable place, still not clean, still not cosy, except maybe for that long kitchen table and the crackling fire nearby?

"I don't know," Hermione choked. "I didn't feel comfortable talking to my parents about all that happened. I didn't think they'd understand... They wouldn't have understood..."

She continued crying. Now that the tears were flowing, they seemed unstoppable. She cried for Harry, whose life had never been easy and then cut short so cruelly. For McGonagall, who had spent decades looking after her Gryffindors only to die trying to protect her charges. For Pansy Parkinson, who had survived, but the scars, both physical and emotional, would remain with her for the rest of her life. For Ron and his family, who had been Vanished to Merlin knew where.

And finally, she cried for herself. For losing the first love of her life with whom she had planned a future together. For being forced to rethink her entire future when she should be having the time of her life, enjoying this short span of time during which she wasn't a child anymore but not yet seriously considered an adult, enjoying not having school to worry about, enjoying the occasional anticipation of starting her future as an adult and an apprenticeship in Transfiguration with McGonagall. And for having to face Snape again.

Eventually, Hermione was all cried out. Tonks got up slowly, and Hermione realised at that moment that she had been holding onto *her* and sobbing into *her* shoulder. "Sorry, Tonks," she murmured, uncomfortably aware that, for once, she had been the one in need of comfort rather than being on the giving end. She was also startled by the fact that she did not care who it was that was comforting her.

"Don't be daft!" Tonks replied while busying herself making fresh coffee.

"Tonks is right, Hermione," Remus commented before Hermione had a chance to say anything. He continued, "We spent our first few days here just arguing and crying because of all that happened and the uncertainty of a magical future. I dare say it's a normal reaction."

Hermione considered his words and nodded hesitantly. "I guess..." she allowed lamely, not quite able to label her outburst as yet into any particular emotional drawer.

Remus wasted no time diverting her thoughts away from her misery. He said briskly, "Anyway, I have more news. I spoke to Mr Lovegood today. There is a phone booth on the Muggle side of the Leaky Cauldron from which one can make calls for free at present. I don't know if it's bewitched with lingering magic or simply in need of repair, but honestly, I don't care." He grinned wryly before continuing. "The more I'm confronted with Muggle things, the more I want the magic back. To me, it's just plain wrong to have to pay lots in order to communicate with someone. A token payment, like we do ... *did* ... at any owlery, I don't have a problem with, but it can't be that costly to maintain phone booths to justify charging the earth," he finished.

Hermione nodded in sympathy, and Tonks gave him an adoring look

"Anyway," Remus continued, "I'm making use of it for as long as it's there... Mr Lovegood told me he had been given a donation with the request to publish *The Quibbler* in the Muggle world. He said he had planned on doing so in any case, especially after Luna and Colin talked to him, but it would have taken him a while, given how much money one needs to publish a magazine in the Muggle world. Now, with the donation, he can do so right away, and he reckons that the first issue will be in print and in the shops within two months."

"Who donated that much money to him?" Hermione asked suspiciously. She did not know much about publishing, but had enough experience living in the Muggle world to take an educated guess about the cost of getting a brand new magazine published. As far as the Muggle world was concerned, *The Quibbler* was brand new. It would take tens of thousands of pounds if not more.

"Funny you should ask," Remus smirked. "The donor remained anonymous!"

Both Hermione and Tonks gasped. It had to be a wizard; there was no doubt about that. The vast majority of Muggles was not even aware that there was a magical world. But most well-to-do wizarding families were, if not openly on Voldemort's side, at least insistent that anything Muggle was looked upon disdainfully. Who would have donated such a huge amount of money?

Remus had not quite finished his day's news. "I also received a letter from Seamus Finnegan. He evidently thought sending Muggle mail to me via the Leaky Cauldron was safer than sending it here." He sounded amused.

"Oh!" Hermione exclaimed, surprised at both Seamus' choice of address and the fact that after an entire week of barely anything worthy of reporting, a mere morning produced more results of news than the previous eight days. "Of course! It makes sense! If this place had been inaccessible, his letter wouldn't have reached you. He figured you were more likely to visit the Leaky Cauldron frequently, what with looking for survivors," she added. "So, what did Seamus have to say?"

Remus fished the letter out of his pocket and handed it to her. She moved over to sit next to Tonks, so both could read it at the same time.

Hi Remus, hi Tonks,

My dad arranged for Pansy and me to meet with Valanga, the medium I mentioned he used to visit. We went to see her yesterday, and Pansy is there again right now. It was wicked!!!

Valanga channels a being from some higher dimension by the name of Red Cloud. When she channels him, her voice becomes much deeper, and the room feels warmer, kind of more cosy even. Red Cloud seems to be very wise, and he knows a lot. Valanga had the brilliant idea to tape the entire session, so we have a record of everything that was said. I'm listening to the tape now and write, below, all the quotes that might be relevant to our task to get the magic back.

Red Cloud seems to know about the Muggle world as well as ours. He instructed Valanga not to charge us because "there are things more important at stake than money ... an entire world is in danger of being lost." I'm grateful that Valanga was happy to go along with it. She even invited Pansy to come back today!

Anyways, here are the bits Red Cloud said. Some of them sounded more like riddles to me, but maybe they make more sense to you.

- "The safe place where the couple is staying remains safe. We will ensure that."

- "The dark-skinned one who works as a civil servant is in danger. He must go to the safe place and stay there for a while until the magic returns, which is a task all of you have to pursue."

- "You need to help making the healing sanctuary safe ... it is endangered at present, but so is most of the Earth."

Red Cloud said much more, but a lot was said to Pansy directly. If you have a tape player, let me know, and I'll send you a copy of the tape.

So, now you have our news, and if more comes out in Pansy's session today, I'll write again tomorrow. How are you and Tonks doing? And have you heard from Hermione? Let me know how things are.

Speak to you soon,

Seamus

The two witches looked at each other and then at Remus. "Any idea what this Red Cloud is on about, Love?" Tonks asked him.

"Oh, it sort of makes sense to me," Remus replied. "I presume he means you and me when he says *couple*, and the *safe place* is presumably here, number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

"I don't have a clue what *civil servant* means, but the only dark-skinned wizard I know is Kingsley."

"He would be considered a civil servant, working for the government," Hermione chimed in. "And from what Tonks was saying earlier, it sounds like *he* thinks he's in danger, too. Whatever the reason is..."

"Ah. Let's hope, then, that Moody succeeds in what we suspect he's trying to do." Remus grinned wryly and added, "Maybe that paranoia of his will finally come in handy!"

Both witches giggled, recalling their earlier conversation about Mad-Eye Moody and his notorious paranoia.

Remus interrupted them. "As to the last quote, I can only assume that the healing sanctuary Red Cloud refers to is the one that Pomona Sprout's sister runs. There is no other one I know of."

"I don't know of any others, either," Tonks replied.

Hermione merely shook her head. "I guess we'll have to wait for Seamus' tape to arrive, or maybe Pansy will have more information from her session. I have a small tape player in my luggage," she added, seeing two pairs of confused eyes staring at her. "Although, I have no idea how we can make the sanctuary safe..."

The ring of the bell suddenly interrupted the short silence that followed her words.

"It's probably Moody," Tonks sighed.

Hermione swiftly passed through the corridor and opened the door. Her mouth opened, and her eyes widened as she recognised the two ragged and worn-out looking youngest members of the Weasley family.

* * *

A/N

Big thanks to NSS for betaing.

Reviews are love.

Follow Your Heart

Chapter 3 of 13

Hermione stays with Remus and Tonks for a few days before moving on to find Snape. Surprising events happen.

Disclaimer: The characters are still not mine *deep_sigh*, no matter how much I'm willing them to be mine. The utterly other-worldly plot, however, is mine and mine alone, whether you call it other-worldly or delusional, it's mine, and don't even think about questioning it. And of course I'll return the characters when I'm done playing. After all, I don't want a mob after me because Book Seven is delayed due to my extensive playing with the characters.

* * *

Chapter III

Follow Your Heart

It was late afternoon, even without the news the day had brought, by the time Remus, Tonks, and Hermione had reiterated the events since the Weasleys' Vanishing for Ron's and Ginny's benefit. Tears spilled again over Harry's demise and the many other lives lost in the Final Battle.

Ginny put on a brave face. There would be time for mourning Harry, but now was not it. "So... what can we do to help get the magic back?" she asked. "Blimey, we thought the Vanishing had turned us into Squibs. In a way, I'm glad that's not the case, no matter how sad it is to think of the magic gone."

Tonks nodded emphatically. "Can't blame you," she said. "We probably would have thought the same if we hadn't witnessed the magic fading gradually over a couple of days."

Hermione admitted, "I thought it was simple exhaustion when I couldn't cast the spell to call for help. And then, Professor Sprout and Neville tried and put it down to exhaustion and their injuries. It was only when the Gryffindor showers produced cold and murky water that I realised there was a problem with the magic itself."

Ron put his arm around her, and she leaned into him. "That must have been awful... to watch the magic seep away," he said quietly.

"It wasn't pleasant," Remus admitted. "But what about you two? Where have you been, and how did you find your way back?" he asked.

"Yes, do tell!" Hermione urged her boyfriend. "I thought I had lost you for Merlin knows how long, you know." She snuggled up closer to him, treasuring the glimpse of happiness she felt by being close to him again, an intimate gesture so familiar, and for the first time since the battle, she genuinely hoped that everything would eventually turn out alright. Those who had lost their lives would always be remembered, but at least with Ron at her side, time would heal wounds, and she could hope to be happy.

Ginny and Ron grinned wryly at each other, and Ron said encouragingly, "Go on, young Ginny *you* tell!"

Ginny snorted at him and moved her eyes from Tonks to Hermione to Remus. Then, she let out a deep breath. "Okay... Where to start? The last thing I remember of Hogwarts is all of us in the Great Hall at lunch, and suddenly, those Death Eaters appeared. Before I could draw my wand, I felt myself floating... and I... I thought I had died, but I felt kind of alive. I could see that my body was still there, so I figured I hadn't died. Then, I saw Mum and Dad nearby, and we kind of floated towards each other. We couldn't talk, or rather, there was absolute silence, no sound at all. We could mouth words but couldn't hear them. And then..."

A small groan escaped Ginny as she recalled the memory, but she continued immediately. "Then, I don't know how to describe this. *I felt* Mum's words. And I knew she felt mine, too, because when I *thought* my answer, she immediately looked relieved. She'd asked if I was okay, and I said I think so," she added in explanation.

Hermione had the impression the recent experience was overwhelming her friend and was only beginning to sink in fully now.

Ron commented, "And if you think what you've heard so far sounds weird, just wait."

"You look as if you're in a different world," Hermione commented softly as she observed Ron's far-away expression.

Ginny snorted. "Funny, your choice of wording, Hermione... I'm quite convinced that *wewere* in a different world... I cannot think of any other explanation."

Ron nodded wistfully. "You're right, Gin," he admitted. "I can't think of any other, either."

"Go on. What happened then?" Tonks asked. "It sounds a great deal more interesting than witnessing the magic disappear!"

"Oh, I have no doubt it was," Ginny replied. "It's just... I can't make head or tail of it, not yet anyway. It's not nightmarish, by any means," she added, "but it surely is the kind of experience, which, were you to tell it to anyone, they'd send you straight to the mental ward at St. Mungo's."

"Oh, I don't know," said Hermione. "Seamus and Pansy talking to some being from a different dimension who knows a lot about us... I don't think there's much that can surprise me after this week," she added wryly.

"Yeah, well, after a while, all of us were together again ... my parents, Ginny, me, the twins, Bill, Charlie. Bill was so beside himself with worry about Fleur, I doubt he noticed much about our surroundings," Ron continued.

"Or rather, lack of surroundings," Ginny corrected. "And we were all together when we saw those... lights... moving rapidly towards us. I was just watching them, kind of idly. I wasn't afraid, only curious. I knew instinctively there was no reason to be afraid, but I could tell Mum and Dad thought differently." She took another deep breath, overwhelmed by the recent events and reliving them while telling.

Ron chuckled softly as he caressed Hermione's shoulder. "Go on, young Ginny, continue; you're doing well!"

She glared at him. "Ronald, don't mock me, or else you'll suffer the consequences once we get the magic back! Just because Red Cloud called me that doesn't mean you have a right to! *You* couldn't even hear him!"

"Red Cloud?" three voices asked in unison.

"You've heard of Red Cloud?" Ron asked incredulously.

Remus, Tonks and Hermione looked at each other, and Hermione started, "Umh... That medium I mentioned? The one Seamus and Pansy have met, well, Red Cloud speaks through her."

Ginny nudged Ron roughly. "See, you dolt? I wasn't nutters! *You* just don't trust your instincts!" She gave her brother a look of annoyance that matched her tone, and turning to face the other three, she added caustically, "You see, my *brother* here," pointing at him with her head, "told me I'm crazy, that I was hearing voices, because ~~he~~ was unable to communicate with *any* of those beings."

Ron's face had turned bright red in embarrassment at her words. "It's not like any of the others could ~~communicate~~ with Red Cloud," he argued defensively. "And the only other one able to hear them speak was Charlie! Neither Mum nor dad nor the twins could!"

"That's right, but at least *they* didn't make fun of me like you've been doing!" Ginny stated hotly.

"All right, you two!" Remus admonished the fighting siblings. "Fight all you want later, but tell us what happened first," he demanded. "I have a feeling that this is not coincidence, Red Cloud appearing to more than one person, people who are connected through magic, I might add."

"The very first thing Red Cloud taught me was that coincidences do not exist," Ginny reported, her face taking on a smug expression as she glanced sideways at Ron.

"I could agree with that," Hermione stated. "In fact, I've always wondered why the wizarding world held such a *Muggle* view of life..." Her thoughts drifted off to the many conversations she had had with her father who had always shown an interest in the supernatural, despite his earthly profession. His interest increased further once Hermione had received her Hogwarts letter. Three sets of eyes looked at her blankly; only Ginny's face expressed understanding.

"What do you mean, Hermione?" Remus asked.

Hermione thought for a long moment, trying to find a way to explain her view. "It's kind of hard to explain," she sighed, "but I'll try anyway... Aside from the ability to use a wand for magic, there are other differences between the Muggle and wizarding world. I'd say the majority of Muggles live an everyday struggle to have enough to be comfortable, whereas we have ... or had ... far fewer problems with at least making ends meet. If we want something in particular, we are creative. With the ability to utilise magic, we can generally *create* that something, possibly out of something else that we no longer have use for or want. By utilising magic, we have more time for ordinary things like cooking and cleaning."

Hermione paused, again having difficulty putting her thoughts into words. The expectant looks on the faces of her audience, however, encouraged her to try. "So, really, not having to struggle so much, we have *more* quality time to ourselves than most Muggles could ever hope for. And yet ... I know a few Muggles who ponder... the deeper questions of life, so to speak, whereas I don't know of *any* witches or wizards with an interest in... esoterics." The last word came out hesitantly, as if she was afraid that using such a cliché term would be met with disdain.

"I think," Tonks started slowly, "one reason that we appear to hold such a view is that we are born with a certain amount of knowledge." She breathed in slowly, evidently finding it as difficult as Hermione to word her thoughts.

Ginny seemed to understand perfectly well. "Yes, and because that knowledge is already within us, we take it for granted, and most of us don't bother learning more," she offered matter-of-factly.

Hermione could not help but admire her younger friend, who seemed to have matured incredibly over the course of one week.

Ginny then continued, "Red Cloud told me of at least one known wizard with extensive esoteric knowledge, but unfortunately, he didn't give a name." She sighed, but straightened up to continue her report of the Death Eaters' failed Vanishing.

"I spent quite a long time talking to Red Cloud. He is very wise, and he has a wonderful way of making me feel comfortable..." Her face took on an expression of contemplation.

"Umh, Ginny, didn't you say Red Cloud was merely a light? How is it possible for a light to not only contain wisdom, but also teach and invoke comfort?" Remus' expression showed just how much at a loss he was.

"I know it's hard to imagine," Ginny replied. "I had ... still have ... trouble comprehending it all, at least on a rational level.

"Imagine how huge the universe is, and then compare the relatively small size of the earth to it. It kind of makes sense that there are likely many different life forms, probably quite a number of different ones on each inhabited planet. Earth, as big as she appears to *us*, with her many different life forms, a number of continents and so on, is all but a twinkle when compared to the universe." She stopped, and a giggle escaped her. "I'd never have thought I'd remember that much of what Red Cloud told me."

Hermione was intrigued. Much of what Ginny had just said was echoing her father's view. He once told her when they were discussing the possibility of alien ~~Honey~~, *we'd have to be extremely arrogant to assume humans are the only intelligent life in the world. Our planet is tiny, compared to some, so why shouldn't there be other intelligent races ... even more intelligent than we are?* She had just returned from Hogwarts for her first summer holiday as a witch, and his serious contemplation had never completely left her mind since.

Another thought came unbidden to Hermione's mind. "Ginny," she started, "would it be possible that you were channelling Red Cloud just now?"

Ginny immediately shook her head. "No. Red Cloud told me he would never *speaktthrough* or to me directly, and I have no reason to doubt his words. He explained the different ways of communication with people. Some people, very few by the way, *channel* him. That means, basically, their own consciousness goes to sleep, literally, and he uses their body, or throat rather, to communicate with whomever is there that needs comfort or advice.

"Then there is one human whom he guides throughout that one's life and communicates with directly. Although, he did say that his charge is hard of hearing at times where communication is concerned ... I'm not quite sure what he meant by that. And then, there are a few people with whom he communicates only for a certain amount of time, when someone is in need of his particular skills. There is a lot more he explained, and he's not the only one in his dimension doing that kind of work. He's part of a larger group, all of them doing what he does, all of them very wise, just like he is. And each one of them has one particular skill that stands out. Like Red Cloud is able to offer comfort like no other. Another one has a particular flavour of humour that tends to make people feel good. And so on..." Ginny paused again.

Hermione pondered over Ginny's words and asked, "How did these light beings rescue you? And where are your parents and brothers?"

"Red Cloud and a few others apparently noted a sudden, untypical drop in the frequency that Earth vibrates on. So they investigated, found us being Vanished and decided to interfere. They cut the Vanishing short, and instead of us floating between dimensions for the remainder of our lives, we were taken to their dimension where they could help us return to our own. And the reason we took over a week to return is that in their dimension, time doesn't exist. Or at least not in the same way as here. Also, Red Cloud said that the Vanishing had done some damage to our DNA, and we all needed healing to get our DNA back intact, and that took a while.

"Well, we're all back here in this dimension, and we're all healthy. It seems that Red Cloud was right when he told me that we'd each go where we feel we have to go once we return. Mum and Dad went to join the Sprout healing sanctuary. The twins went to see if they can find the Lovegoods. Bill went straight to France to be with Fleur. And Charlie set off to Hogwarts, following Red Cloud's advice. None of their choices made sense to me, except Bill wanting to be with Fleur, but after what you've told us, the pieces are beginning to fall into place," Ginny finished.

"And you two decided to come here," Tonks observed.

"Yeah," Ginny said softly. "Ron thought Hermione would be here, or at least you would know where she is, and I... I was hoping to find Harry." Her eyes filled with tears, and for the second time in a day, it was up to Remus and Tonks to provide comfort to someone going through the experience of trauma and the realisation of the loss of a loved one.

Ginny's violent sobs carried through the kitchen, but Hermione felt unable to help, unable to give comfort to the young witch. Her own breakdown, which had followed a week of suppressed emotions, was far too recent for her to be in any position to offer comfort. She shuddered at the prospect of Ron needing her, like she had needed Remus and Tonks, over losing his best friend, the fact that he was not there for Harry in his last moments, his own trauma of being Vanished, and her eyes filled with tears again.

But this time, she managed to pull herself together, albeit with great effort, and wiped them away impatiently. *It's time to move on*, she thought determinedly. *If I give in to crying my eyes out at every opportunity, I might as well return to my parents and start living like a Mugglenow.*

Hermione was grateful that Ron was too busy watching his younger sister with concerned eyes to notice her momentary relapse. "Ron," she whispered, "don't worry ... she'll be alright. Remus and Tonks are really good at comforting someone. Believe me, I'm speaking from experience," she added wryly.

Ron looked at her in surprise. "Bloody hell, Hermione, *you* must have gone through hell in all this!" He tightened his hold on her, which made her shiver in a pleasant way.

"Yeah, well, I've had better weeks... But haven't we all..." she remarked ruefully.

The silence that followed was now only occasionally interrupted by Ginny's sobs and hiccups, but the youngest Weasley was calming down quickly. Her sobbing soon stopped completely, and she took a deep breath.

Tonks slowly untangled her arms from the embrace she had offered Ginny who had grabbed it like a lifeline. Her face took on a stern expression, and she ordered, "Don't even *think* of apologising, Ginny Weasley! As we've recently learned the hard way, shit happens, and believe me, each and every one of us has been in need of comfort at one time or another over the past few days."

Ginny managed a grin at Tonks' words and murmured, "Thanks."

"You're welcome. Now, you could give me a hand with preparing dinner," Tonks suggested, looking from Ginny to Hermione. As if in need to explain her request, she continued, "I'm sorry, but all these ready meals taste like cardboard, are loaded with poisons and contain no nutrients worth mentioning. And unfortunately, I'm having immense trouble chopping vegetables the Muggle way!"

Hermione could not help grinning. The vision of Tonks fighting onions and garlic in the kitchen, Muggle style, did amuse her.

Ginny smiled hesitantly and said, "I'll help, although I doubt I'll be useful. It's not a skill I've ever learned."

Tonks turned to Hermione, smiling. "You probably can do it, maybe you can teach us," she suggested. Turning to Remus, she said, "Why don't you and Ron open up the front room; I bet Mad-Eye will turn up any moment, and I honestly don't need three guys looking over my shoulder while I'm cooking."

Tonks sounded like a practical housewife, and only her lover marvelled at her being able to act more Slytherin than the purest Dark Arts following pureblood. Remus knew what Ron's likely reaction would be if he learned in casual conversation of his girlfriend's plan to find Snape. It was, indeed, better for everyone involved if he was told specifically and in the gentlest manner possible. Remus only hoped that Moody would take his time getting to Grimmauld Place. He motioned for Ron to join him, and the two exited the kitchen.

Despite the excellent meal the three witches had created from raw ingredients in combined effort, dinner was a subdued affair. Ginny had been far more understanding of Hermione's self-imposed task of finding Snape than her brother, it turned out. Tonks, having overcome her stropiness towards the idea, helped Hermione state her reasons while the Muggle-born witch gave the other two lessons in basic Muggle cookery.

Hermione breathed an inaudible sigh of relief at her friends' support. "I guess I can't hope for Ron's support in this." She sighed.

"No," both witches replied as one, and Ginny added dryly, "but he'll come around eventually, you know that. Don't worry, Hermione. Males tend to take longer to see our point, which usually turns out the correct point of view."

"Oh, I don't know," Tonks commented wistfully. "With *us*, it's usually the other way 'round."

"I know what you mean," Ginny readily agreed, and Hermione nodded. "Remus is one in a million. But you knew that, anyway."

Tonks grinned. "You're absolutely right," she agreed, looking almost obscenely happy for a moment.

Moody turned up just in time for dinner. If he was surprised to see Hermione and the two youngest Weasleys there, he did not show it. He seemed very much preoccupied but did not take long to share the reason for it. "I think Kingsley is in trouble," he grumbled. "I've been following him from a distance for two days now, and I bet you he's being tracked by at least two people at all times." He looked at his watch nervously before continuing. "I know he is going to a pub tonight, so I'll be there and try to catch him. Maybe I can corner him and get to the cause of his strange behaviour. I have no doubt he knows that he's being tracked. And I can smell his fear," he added with a growl.

Hermione looked at Remus questioningly. *Should they tell Moody about Seamus' letter? Or might that only fuel Moody's ever evident paranoia?* Remus nodded at her imperceptibly and turned to face the older wizard.

"Alastor, there is not enough time to tell you all of today's findings and events, but considering your task ahead, have a read of this." Remus pulled the letter out of his pocket and handed it to Moody.

The old Auror handed it back after reading it, looking thoughtful.

"I've had a feeling some Muggle scumbags are giving him hell," he growled and then turned his concentration on the food in front of him.

Nobody spoke for a while, each one occupied with eating and their own thoughts of the mystery that shrouded Kingsley Shacklebolt.

Moody stood up abruptly, startling everyone. "I better be off," he said. "Thanks for the meal. Good food."

Remus stood up to take him to the door. "Do let us know about Kingsley as soon as possible," he urged the old Auror. Then he added, "Try and convince him to come and stay here. This looks like the safest place for him."

"I'll be back ... if not tonight, then soon, anyway. I want to hear your news, too." That said, he exited number twelve and disappeared into the now rapidly fading twilight.

The moment Moody left, Ron turned towards Hermione. "Why do you feel you have to find Snape? I don't get it! The guy is a murderer," he accused.

'Here we go...' Hermione sighed inwardly. She was getting tired of having to justify her plan of action at each and every turn. She was surprised to hear Tonks speak up for her before anyone else had a chance.

"He *killed* Dumbledore, Ron. Whether it was murder or not is anyone's guess. We don't know his motives. And then, there is the fact that he not only saved your mate's life, but he also cut short the Final Battle by killing several Death Eaters. Who knows how it would have ended if he had not stepped in to kill the final ones remaining..." Tonks regarded him seriously before she continued, "Add to that what Dobby told Hermione, and I daresay our best shot to get the magic back is her plan to find Snape, murderer or not"

Ron still looked mutinous. Hermione knew she had not heard the end of it, but at least he let it go for now. The silence that followed Tonks' words became palpably uncomfortable. Looking at Tonks, Hermione stood up and started to clear the table.

She was immediately joined by Ginny and Tonks, who sighed, "I wish we had the magic back. How do Muggles cope with all this housework?..."

Remus moved to the sink, started filling it with water, and between the four of them, the kitchen was quickly returned to its usual, perfectly clean condition. *That wasn't too bad,* Hermione thought. She knew of a number of Muggle families where only the woman of the house ever did the housework, where it never occurred to the male members of the household to contribute to such mundane tasks.

Ron had been sitting at the table sulking, and Hermione sat down next to him, resting her hand on his arm. "Ron," she started softly, "can we, today, just enjoy being together again? It's been one hell of a week for both of us, and right now, I'm just not ready to argue about anything..."

She was met with a glare. "Oh. You want me forget for now that you're going after Snape? SNAPE! How can you expect me to do that, Hermione? He killed Dumbledore! Whether he is a murderer or not, he killed who we thought was the only person he respected! How could you expect me to forget that, even for one minute, especially after we spent more than a week apart, neither of us knowing what had become of the other. How could you even begin to think I wouldn't stop you from seeing him, Hermione?" Her shoulders slumped in defeat, but he continued regardless. "We've just lost our best friend. We've lost most of our friends. We've lost a whole world, what with the magic gone! I feel that all I have left that is worth living for is you. And you want to go off to someone who we've been convinced has been on the Dark side for over a year, ever since he killed Dumbledore? Hermione... please..."

Rationally, she could see his point. It made sense to her, just like any magical theory, be it Potions or Arithmancy related, had always made sense to her. She fully comprehended what he was saying. And yet... She suddenly felt doubts stir within her. It was not rational, by any means. But something inside told her to put her foot down about her plan to find Snape.

"Ron, please," she whispered. "Just today, let's put any differences out of the way." Then she pleaded, suddenly tired beyond belief, "Please?"

"All right, love," he replied tiredly. "Let's just go to sleep, and tomorrow will be another day."

* * *

As the days moved on, Hermione felt more and more desperate to fulfil her self-imposed task. She knew she needed to get away from Ron for a while. Not that she did not feel love for him still, but getting the magic back was at the forefront of her mind, and at the moment, Ron was proving to be too much of a distraction. The initial happiness to have her boyfriend back was beginning to wear thin with all his instigated quarrelling about her wanting to find Snape.

Remus and Tonks had urged Hermione to stay at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, at least until they heard more about Seamus and Pansy's sessions with the medium and Moody's report on Kingsley Shacklebolt. She agreed, if only in the hope of gaining some kind of insight as to the state of the wizarding world. Maybe Moody would get it out of Kingsley. She dared not hope that they would find the cause of the disappearance of magic.

Hermione's patience with Ron's constant whining was fading more with each day she stayed at Grimmauld Place. It was only Tonks' and Ginny's frequent admonishing that gave her some desperately needed breathing space and with it, peace for herself. Eventually, even that was insufficient, and she blew up at him.

"Ronald Weasley!" she said, barely containing her anger. "I don't care what you think on this particular subject. *You* should know, just like everyone else from the wizarding world, that we need the magic back in order to preserve our world! And if I don't give it a shot to do my bit, I'll regret it. I know I will, especially *if* the magic won't come back!"

"But to go to Snape?! Do anything you like about finding the magic again, but DON'T GO AFTER HIM!!! I don't care what Tonks and Remus say, as far as I'm concerned, the guy is a murderer!... And a DEATH EATER!" Ron yelled at her. Then he looked at her, his face full of despair. "Hermione, love, please! What if he's still a Death Eater? What if he sets a trap for you? *You* know better than anyone else that he's never liked you. How can you risk your life like that?"

Hermione turned away from him. Studying the pattern on the floor, she said tonelessly, "The guy you call a murderer saved my life. He *did* not have to kill several Death Eaters, his *friends*, or at least *former* friends, in order to save one Muggle-born witch. His action, and his action alone, ensured *that* we won. If he hadn't killed them, they would have caused further rampage, no doubt taking even more lives with them in the process."

Ron gave her a calculating look. "Is that why you want to find him? Because you owe him your life? Do you feel that you have to be with him, to comfort him? Maybe offer him some pleasure, too, whilst you're at it, out of sheer gratitude for saving your life? Is that why?"

Hermione stared at him in complete shock from his implied accusations. *'I don't believe this. This can't be happening.'* she thought, feeling almost detached from the entire situation.

With great effort, she pulled herself together. "I don't quite know where this comes from, Ron, but if nothing else, grant me some taste. If I didn't think it futile, I'd list the various reasons for my wanting to find him yet again. As it is, you don't have a hope in hell of understanding. Because you don't *want* to understand." She stood up and moved towards the door.

"How am I supposed to take this?" Ron asked her, confusion spreading across his face over her words. "Look, 'Mione," he stuttered, "if I... if I hurt you, I'm sorry. I... I didn't mean to."

Hermione glared at him. "Don't call me *that!*" she hissed. "As to how you take this ... as one famous Muggle book character stated, '*Quite frankly, I don't give a damn!*'" That said, she exited the room.

"Don't worry, Hermione, he'll come around eventually," Remus assured her later, once again there for her, once again offering comfort. "It took Tonks a few days, too. All that has happened, it has had a different effect on each individual, and each one of us tries to cope in a different way. And don't forget," he added with a grin that definitely resembled mischief, "males generally take a wee bit longer." She had to laugh at that, especially coming from Remus, who had, somewhere on the path that was life, acquired more wisdom than the present three female inhabitants of number twelve, Grimmauld Place combined.

"Oh, Remus, can't you give him some training? Sometimes I wish he was a bit more mature. And less hurtful," Hermione pleaded, only half-jokingly.

"I'll see what I can do," Remus replied noncommittally, regarding her with a serious expression. "Don't let these quarrels get to you, Hermione. You're both young, and it's bad enough that most of your teenage years were spent fighting against Voldemort in one way or another, directly or indirectly. Find something, or even *someone* you can truly enjoy. You owe it to yourselves, after all the recent events. And whatever you decide to do, you know you'll be fine as long as you follow your heart."

Hermione realised the value of Remus' advice more instinctively than rationally. *Follow your heart* became her motto, her mantra. From that moment on, whenever she was not certain as to which direction to take, she consciously listened to her heart ... and was not particularly surprised that life suddenly seemed somewhat... easier.

She was not surprised either when, a day later, a visibly embarrassed and depressed Ron approached her to apologise for his harsh words. Hermione accepted his apology, albeit cautiously, reasoning, "Your words hurt me, Ron. I need some space at the moment to... to *file* everything away, and I can't do that until I make sense of it. There's just so much that has happened lately!" He neither argued nor tried to convince her otherwise, but the entire six feet of Weasley resembling pure dejection told her enough. Hermione sighed inwardly, feeling sorry for both him as well as herself. Then, she pulled herself together. *Time to start the future... now ... as in NOW*, she shouted to herself.

The arrival of Pansy's letter a couple of days later instigated Hermione's imminent departure. The content of Pansy's letter only hurried it.

Dear Hermione,

I know Seamus has written to Remus already, about our first session with Red Cloud. I went to see Valanga again this afternoon, upon Red Cloud's invitation. He told me a lot, through her, of course, and he urged me to write to you a.s.a.p. So that's what I'm doing. Everything below was said by Red Cloud - I took notes this time.

The first message was to let the 'Young Redhead' know that he IS watching over her and to assure her that she will be fine. (It was kind of strange being corrected in my writing by a spirit, I can tell you! I have written it exactly as Red Cloud told me to!)

The next messages pertain to you ... well, I'm assuming it is you. He did not state specific names, but he said "the young witch who saved your life", and since nobody else saved my life, except for Seamus maybe ... he definitely saved my sanity, for sure, and he's not a witch but a wizard ... I concluded that Red Cloud was talking of you. In fact, the more he went on, the more convinced I became that it was you.

The most vital advice is to FOLLOW YOUR HEART. Red Cloud told this to me, but also said to tell you, in case you didn't know yet. It is absolutely vital that we follow our hearts. As he explained further, if something we set out to do does not feel completely right, then we must not do it. At least not until we are clear about it, and it does feel right. He gave the example of me not following my parents' orders to join the Dark Lord (He actually said "Dark Lord!") ... of course, otherwise I'd never gotten close to Seamus, and I am very happy that I followed my heart on that particular occasion.

Read about Wilhelm Reich. Some Muggle, I presume, but Red Cloud stressed that. He said it will come in very handy when you work with the wizard who did not want to kill. And keep an open mind about the whole subject. Look at it from a spiritual perspective rather than a scientific one.

And hurry to get to your new destination. Return to your friends on weekends, by all means, but get there. Time is of essence in this world, and you need your magic back sooner rather than later. And please bring your favourite weed with you; it is needed.

Those were the words of Red Cloud, and I can't say they make a lot of sense to me. But he makes me feel wonderful, and I trust him, so I've passed the messages on to you.

I hope you're doing well, Hermione. Please let me know. I will never forget what you did for me, and I hope that one day I can return that to you. Or maybe not. I don't ever wish for anyone to be in such a state as I was when you found me. But please, if there is anything I can do for you, just let me know, and I'll try my utmost best, no matter what.

I'm going to "see" Red Cloud again in a couple of days. I'm rather looking forward to it. He's so wise, and I feel so cosy when he's around, maybe you could come here sometime to experience that feeling for yourself. It's incredible and... well... out of this world.

Seamus says hi.

Love,

Pansy

The good-byes between Hermione and those staying behind were emotional. Over the past few days, she had come to highly value her friendship with both Remus and Tonks and knew that she would miss both. Since her quarrels with Ron, she had also spent more time with Ginny and came to respect her even more than before. She wistfully wished that she, too, could have a dose of the wisdom and the comfort Red Cloud had offered Ginny, who utilised everything the spirit had offered to gain more spiritual insight for herself ... and for others' benefit as well.

Parting with her boyfriend was hardest, though. "Is there going to be a future, Hermione? Is there going to be an 'us'?" he asked her with a choked voice.

Hermione gave him an incredulous look and snorted. "If you think that one single argument is all it takes to break us apart, then I'm very sorry, Ron. Gain some confidence, please! One fight doesn't stop me from loving you, you know."

One last kiss, one last hug, one final wave back to the front door where the others had assembled to see her off, and then she made her way to the train station, ready for her next journey, the outcome of which was highly uncertain. At least after what had transpired from Pansy's letter, she felt more hopeful about finding Snape.

After the most uneventful journey, during which Hermione started reading up on Wilhelm Reich with the only book she had managed to find in a hurry, and which left her

feeling lost as she had no clue as to why she was supposed to be researching that particular character, she arrived at her destination: a small, drab Midlands town, which had an air of abandon, even despair, to it. The young witch shuddered at the prospect of having to spend the next few weeks, or even months, in such a depressing location. *There might as well be Dementors here*, she thought dejectedly, her mind half playing with the notion to forget all about Snape and return to at least some measure of happiness that could be found at number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

Then she snorted. *Get a grip, Granger. The feel of this place is by no means as difficult as being around the greasy git is going to be. Might as well get used to coping right now*, she admonished herself and straightened up as a wave of determination swept through her. She exited the station, only briefly stopping to ask for directions to Spinner's End. Although the street was at the opposite end of town, the local assured her that it was barely a twenty-minute walk away.

It was not just the *air* of abandon, Hermione noticed. Many houses looked as if they had not been occupied in a great many years. When she finally reached the street that was Spinner's End, a slight sigh of relief escaped her, which was almost instantly cut short when a *déjà-vu* came down upon her. Something reminded her of something else, and it took her minutes to put a meaning to it.

The air of abandon that had prevailed for the entire time it took her to walk from the railway station was no longer evident, despite some houses obviously lacking occupants here, too.

It was magic, she thought, startled at the realisation. The magic that had flavoured the air at Hogwarts, in Hogsmeade, and in Diagon Alley, was present here. Not strong, she noticed, but sufficiently present for her to recognise. Suddenly excited, Hermione fished for her wand in her luggage and pointed it at a lone leaf on the ground. "*Wingardium Leviosa*," she murmured almost reverently and stood back to observe the leaf. It refused to rise, but *it did* stir, albeit barely.

The young witch tried again, this time with intent and determination. The leaf was lifted maybe half an inch before gravity regained power and pushed it back on the ground.

It took Hermione some time before she gained composure enough to finally complete her journey. She stood there, stunned and wondering how she had managed to discover one place where magic was still evident, even though only weakly, at this particular location.

Fancy that ... magic near the former resident bat of Hogwarts' dungeons when it's nowhere else to be found, she thought wryly and then sighed. *Time to face the snake's lair. Better get a move on!* With that thought, she pulled herself together, straightened up and walked towards the last house on the street.

As she reached the small gate to the front garden, her ears perked up. Someone inside was playing the piano. Or rather, someone was playing a recording of Rubinstein or some such renowned pianist. She stopped for a moment, recognising one of Beethoven's Sonatas and appreciating the beautiful sounds the artist was coaxing out of a piano, or more likely grand-piano. Then, she determinedly opened the gate, walked to the front door of the house, noting on the way that the house appeared inhabited and its front garden well looked after, and rang the bell.

Nothing could have prepared Hermione for the surprise that met her as the door was opened from inside. "Hermione," Parvati Patil said, her face beaming. "We've been wondering whether it would be you and when you'd turn up!" She opened the door further and stepped aside, inviting Hermione to enter.

"Parvati," Hermione acknowledged weakly as she entered the house. "What on earth are *you* doing here... Isn't this where Snape lives? Or at least where he was residing until a couple of weeks ago?"

"What I'm doing here ... long story. But yes, this is Severus' home," Parvati confirmed, in her usually cheerful and polite manner that was familiar to Hermione. Her eyes widened considerably when Parvati so casually called Snape by his first name. "He should have gathered enough magic soon, and then you can talk to him," she added. Noting Hermione's confusion, she explained, "The only way we can maintain magic here is for Severus to play the piano for a few hours every day. That way, at least he can concoct the healing potions Draco needs, and occasionally it's sufficient for some cleaning tasks and a bit of cooking, too."

Hermione looked at her incredulously. "That's *him* playing the piano? Oh, Merlin, I thought it was a recording of Rubinstein or someone like that when I heard it outside!" she exclaimed.

What was going on? Magic found in the vicinity of Snape's home, the git himself turning out to be a gifted pianist, and right now probably the only wizard being able to maintain some measure of magic; Parvati, a fellow Gryffindor, living in his home and evidently comfortable being around the most Slytherin of all Slytherins? *This can't be real. I must be dreaming*, Hermione thought, completely dazed.

She would have expected anything ... *anything* unpleasant where Snape was concerned ... but to associate him with anything as highly pleasant and creative as playing the piano like a virtuoso astounded her as much as being met by a fellow Gryffindor at his home. The shocked young witch gratefully accepted the seat Parvati offered, her knees feeling rather weak.

"What... what are *you* doing here?" Hermione asked, rather bluntly, trying to regain her composure at the same time. Then she added curiously, "And what is it with the magic? I felt it as soon as I turned into this street. I couldn't believe it! There's no magic left anywhere I know of!"

"I know..." Parvati sighed. Then she started to explain while Hermione listened raptly. "Where to start... Oh well, I guess the beginning *would* be a good starting point." She laughed, but quickly sobered to tell her story.

"To know the reason for Severus' actions where I'm concerned, I need to tell you that my dad was a couple of years ahead of Severus when he went to Hogwarts ... he was in Ravenclaw ... and once came to Severus'... help when Sirius Black and James Potter bullied him. That was about Severus' third or fourth year, Dad doesn't remember exactly. After Dad left Hogwarts, they didn't stay in contact, but apparently, Severus never forgot. When, a couple of months after my parents had taken us out of Hogwarts, he learned that a couple of Death Eaters were contemplating kidnapping us, for sheer sport ... it didn't even have anything to do with Voldemort," she shuddered, as did Hermione at the thought of falling into the hands of Death Eaters, "anyway, Severus came to our home to warn my parents not to let us out without proper protection. Mum and Dad immediately decided that a prolonged visit to India was in order, and Padma was quite happy to tag along. But I wasn't. I know my heritage is Indian, but my life is *here*, and I really couldn't stand the thought of being cooped up with my family over there for an indefinite amount of time. So I said I wouldn't go to my dad's dismay." She stopped for a moment, as if unused to speaking more than a few syllables at once.

"I can imagine," Hermione said softly. "I only spent a week with my parents after Voldemort's demise, and that was hard enough. To think of being sent to a country you're not that familiar with and not knowing how long for... I would refuse to do that, too."

"Thanks... I couldn't bear the thought. At the time, I felt I'd rather risked hiding here in England and being found by Death Eaters... And then, the big surprise came. Severus suggested that I could stay with him. He said he was doing some ongoing Potions project, and that with my interest in cosmetics, I might make an *adequate assistant*. You can imagine the way he said it, sneers and all." Parvati smirked, and Hermione laughed outright at her words.

"Anyway, what came as an even bigger surprise to me was that my dad actually agreed. Mum didn't want me to stay behind, even less so staying with ~~a~~ *Death Eater*, but Dad put his foot down. He said he knew Severus to be trustworthy, and what with the wizard debt he likely felt he owed, he was probably going to guard my well-being with his own life." Parvati took a deep breath and then finished, "So, that's how I came here. About three months ago."

"Wow..." Hermione was lost for words. Fascinated by Parvati's story, she never noticed that the music had stopped.

She startled when a silky voice drawled, "Wow. Isn't that a rather *common* way of expressing awe?"

* * *

A/N

Big thank you to NSS who has been doing an absolute fantastic job cleaning up my English. You rock!

I know, I know *sigh*. I promised in my A/N in the previous chapter to bring Snape back in this one and managed it only barely...

I have written some additional thoughts/Author Notes about this particular chapter, with regard to the subject of channelling, in my livejournal, http://www.livejournal.com/users/lady_karelia/51240.html#cutid1 if you're interested.

Now, I can confidently promise that we'll see a lot of Severus in the next chapter.

As always, reviews are love.

Red Cloud Speaks

Chapter 4 of 13

Hermione settles in, and Red Cloud appears occasionally.

Disclaimer: The characters are the property of JKR and whomever else she's willing to share with. Not me, in any case. However, the plot is mine. And I solemnly swear I'll return the characters in good condition and all the richer with experience when I'm done playing with them.

* * *

Chapter IV

Red Cloud Speaks

Hermione gaped at Snape, again shocked.

"Come on, Severus, be nice!" Parvati admonished him mildly and added, "Hermione didn't expect magic here, nor had she expected to find you turned into a musician."

He quirked his eyebrow at her and quipped, his manner not unfriendly and the former trademark sneer entirely absent, "Me and *music* do not go together as you should know."

Before Parvati had a chance to say anything, he turned to face Hermione and offered, in a somewhat more sardonic manner that reminded Hermione uncomfortably of just *why* she had been so reluctant to face him again, "My apologies, Miss Granger, if I fail to meet your expectations."

"Oh, no, everything so far would have by far exceeded any expectations, had I had any," she assured him quickly, not quite certain what to make of *this* Snape who had already turned back to Parvati.

"Have you checked on Draco? I take it he is sleeping again?" His face had taken on a concerned expression.

"Yes and yes," confirmed Parvati. "It's a shame you don't have any woodruff left! He was definitely improving with that one potion you gave him ... he almost returned to a normal sleeping pattern. And now, he's back to spending most days asleep," she finished sadly.

'Woodruff?' Hermione thought. *I can help with that.* She was about to speak up when Snape turned to her again.

"Miss Granger, you didn't, by any chance, raid your parents' garden and bring some woodruff with you?" enquired Snape. And then more to himself, he murmured, barely audibly, "Maybe he didn't get a chance to let her know."

All Hermione could do was shake her head dumbly, and not having the courage to ask *how* he knew about her parents' herb garden, she offered, "I can phone my parents and ask them to send some."

Hermione's mother loved gardening, and her father loved to study ways to utilise the natural forces to work in his favour. It had been thus that her parents' herb garden was born. An ever ongoing project for the couple, which not only offered a welcome contrast to a busy working day but also inevitably led to appreciating both culinary delights and medicinal uses of the produce, the garden offered an abundance.

Old time, non-hybrid roses were grown along with lavender in order to keep away the pests that in many a year affected roses all over England while calendula kept the carrots company, making sure there were no carrot fly infestations. The lush green of parsley was comfortably sat beside the jasmine bushes, and not only was it a visual feast but the jasmine had survived many winters with temperatures below freezing, and the parsley leaves had decorated many holiday dinners, providing much welcomed nutrients to their bodies at the same time. The very beneficial side effect of companion gardening was that there was no need for artificial fertilisers, and keeping to a lunar watering schedule not only saved water, but weeds were appearing so rarely that each discovery was worthy of being marked in the calendar.

"If you wouldn't mind, Miss Granger. Parvati can show you the house while I tend to Draco." Snape turned away from her and nodded at Parvati as he exited the room.

Glancing at Hermione's travel bag, Parvati asked, "You're here to stay, right? Come on, let me show you where everything is, and let's get your bag out of the way. Severus doesn't like clutter."

Hermione let herself fall on the sofa. Some of her tension had diffused with Snape leaving the room, but she felt as if she had entered some bizarre movie scene. "Parvati," Hermione pleaded, "would you mind explaining all this?" She gestured at the house and let her hands fall helplessly down to her sides again.

Parvati gave her a look of understanding. "I know what you mean, Hermione. I was quite surprised to find Severus to be very different from what I remembered from Hogwarts. I'd always expected him to be the *bastard Snape*, know what I mean?" Hermione nodded. "He is... not quite the bastard, although he's definitely still sarcastic when he's in the mood for it. And when he's in one of his broody moods, I stay away from him," Parvati finished.

"So what is it with Draco?" Hermione asked curiously.

"Draco hasn't quite been himself since Professor Dumbledore's death. Severus told me that first he was completely shaken, and when he learned of the Unbreakable Vow that his mother had made with Severus, something in him kind of clicked. He's convinced that it's his fault that Severus killed Dumbledore, no matter how much explaining he has done to convince Draco otherwise. I don't know any details of that. Draco is suffering from severe depression. And the only potion Severus has come up with that really helped was one that had Sweet Woodruff and St. John's Wort as the main ingredients. St. John's Wort grows in Severus' garden. I've searched high and low for a Muggle source that offers Sweet Woodruff, but I haven't had any luck so far."

"So how did he know that my parents grow it in the garden?" Hermione asked, only to be disappointed.

"Ah," Parvati smirked, "that is for Severus to tell. Come on, I'll show you around. I'm sure we'll have time later to talk about everything," she added and got up.

Hermione threw her travel bag over her shoulder and followed Parvati out of the front room into a surprisingly spacious, semicircular, well-lit corridor. She suspected that this corridor was added much later to the original part of the house. Not only was its semicircular shape a stark contrast to what from outside she had perceived to be the typical design of a 1950s bland, fast, and square mass construction, but also because most of the light was provided by the glass roof, now offering the view of a slowly darkening sky that was a deep blue except for two bright contrails cutting across it. Doors obviously leading to other areas of the house were interspersed with tall and narrow windows that offered views to different areas of the garden. The little spaces of actual wall were white-washed. Hermione decided to give the garden a closer look the next day, as it was getting near the end of the day and sunlight was waning.

Parvati stopped about halfway down the corridor and turned back to Hermione. "Severus would love to put the piano here, but unfortunately it isn't practical, this being an outside wall," she explained, waving her hand over an area where the corridor expanded in width, pointing to two cosy chairs separated by a small table of solid oak. She continued, "So, instead, he's turned it into a kind of *corner* for quiet contemplation. If you take a closer look at the walls, they have lots of crystals adhered to them. It's quite a sight when the sun shines on them...the entire corridor looks like a rainbow."

Hermione's eyes widened. Snape and quiet contemplation in such a beautiful surrounding simply did not quite fit. "Parvati," she said weakly, "are you going to tell me next that he's a gourmet cook? Or maybe a saint?"

Parvati laughed. "Well, he is a very good cook, I must admit. But don't worry, he's definitely not a saint," she assured the fellow Gryffindor before motioning her to follow into the kitchen. Although, calling this particular space a kitchen, or even room, was quite an understatement.

Unbidden, visions of The Burrow at its cosiest entered Hermione's mind, and with it the stabbing pain of all the losses the last battle had incurred. She pulled herself together and forced to concentrate on the interior. It was a kitchen, no doubt, only it was much more than that.

To the left of the door was a range, clean, and presently not in use. Cast iron pots hung from a cast iron frame suspended halfway between the range and the ceiling, leaving enough headroom to stir any dishes cooking on the range, but low enough for a reasonably tall person to reach any pots without difficulty. Adjacent to it was a wooden table that represented a work top, and beside it an old-fashioned deep rectangular sink. Cupboards, more work tops, and a Welsh dresser displaying a colourful selection of plates and bowls were resting against the wall opposite the range. One side of the kitchen was taken up by a wall-to-wall window with a rather wide ledge covered with various herbs and flowers.

The centre of the kitchen area was taken up by a large oak table with chairs of obviously different styles gathered haphazardly around it, giving the room an air of lived-in, cosy comfort, to which the large candle chandelier above the table only added.

The kitchen ended there, but not the room. Instead, the open space continued, turning into a living area in one smooth transition, Hermione noted with surprise when Parvati switched on another light that bathed the next part of the room into a warm glow. An upright piano stood against the wall that was an extension of the one harbouring the Welsh dresser. Opposite, bookshelves leaned against the wall, lining the entire right side from floor to ceiling, only once interrupted by an unusually narrow set of double French doors leading to the garden. The end wall to the right was again dominated by a very large window. The only untidy space was a small, short bookshelf strewn with sheet music and handwritten notes. Nevertheless, Hermione felt this little bit of a mess offered a welcome contrast to the otherwise almost meticulous tidiness of the remaining space. She took a deep breath.

"This is *so not* what I expected," she said, feeling utterly confused and helpless.

Parvati nodded ruefully. "What exactly did you expect?" She was unable to hide her curiosity.

Hermione looked at her, surprised. "I don't know," she replied honestly. "I guess anything to do with... discomfort. Something *not* nice. Certainly not this homey," finished Hermione, not quite certain how to word her confused thoughts of their former Potions professor.

"I felt similar at first," Parvati admitted. "But, you know, the way I got to know Severus... Let's just say this particular room, his sanctuary, as he tends to call it, suits him to the core." Then she motioned Hermione to follow her past the piano, past the small shelf, to a door that revealed a staircase leading up to the first floor.

Upon reaching the top, Parvati switched on the lights and turned again to the other witch. "You might have noticed the stairs leading up from the front room. They go to a different area of the house, mainly Severus' lab, and there's no electricity there. *This* part of the house has electricity throughout. Come on, I'll show you my space. We'll have to share a bedroom until we can sort out some different arrangements."

Parvati opened the first door to the left of the rather narrow and straight corridor, and Hermione realised they were now right above Snape's *sanctuary*. She was once again lost for words. The room she entered was not large, by any means. It would have barely passed as a 'generously proportioned single room' in any classified advertising private housing.

What caught her breath, however, was the incredible efficiency with which every inch of space was being utilised. One corner housed an obviously custom-made desk that reached from the floor to the ceiling, giving sufficient space not only for the typical activities conducted at a desk, but also accommodated many books, parchments, a telephone, and a computer.

A good sized window separating the desk from the other corner promised a good supply of natural light during the daytime. A wide bookshelf fit snugly into the space below the window ledge, and Hermione lost any inhibitions now that she was in Parvati's room rather than in Snape's home. She gave the books a quick look-over and startled. These types of books would even have held fascination for Lavender Brown, her and Parvati's former dormmate. Every conceivable recipe for cosmetic potions could probably be found on this one shelf, Hermione had no doubt after skimming over the titles. *Potions For Sensitive Baby Skin*, *Potions For The Mature Skin*, *Nutritious Rejuvenating Potions*, *Glamourising Potions*, *Cleansing Potions For Hair And Body*, were just a few titles she glanced at. The young witch looked up into Parvati's smiling face.

"I guess you have an idea now why Severus thought I was adequate for the job," she remarked.

"Let me guess," Hermione replied dryly, "He makes a living selling cosmetics to Muggles." She did not quite expect Parvati's answer.

"Right in one!" Parvati beamed. "Severus is friends with this beekeeper who also sells natural cosmetics, mainly ones containing honey or beeswax. Apparently, most of the Muggle commercial products are laden with poisonous chemicals, and there is a growing number of Muggles who are looking for alternatives."

Hermione was unable to hold back a giggle. "Oh, goodness, Parvati, Snape manufacturing cosmetics? For Muggles, no less?" She found the thought simply inconceivable.

"Well, I do most of that side of potions. He's mainly busy with brewing medicinal potions for Draco. And then he has to play the piano regularly, in order to keep the magic up," volunteered Parvati and waved her hand to another prominent corner of the room. This one was dominated by a large sink and two small stoves with medium sized cauldrons, one iron, one glass, suspended above and surrounded by wooden shelving covered with jars of various sizes.

Parvati seemed to sense that Hermione had reached saturation point where *Snape news* was concerned and suggested gently, "Come, let me show you the bedroom and bathroom, so you can dump your luggage there and freshen up. I'll organise some drinks, and then we can sit down here and chill." She pointed to the centre of the room with its four squashy chairs and a small, round, wooden table.

Hermione gratefully followed Parvati into her bedroom and then took her time in the bathroom. She had much to digest and made the most of the short-lived recluse. *So much change in one afternoon, she thought, I wonder what tomorrow will bring...*

When the young visitor returned, Parvati reminded her to phone her parents to ask for the Sweet Woodruff. Speaking to her mother calmed her nerves somewhat, but she felt justified to drink the proffered Firewhisky nevertheless.

Parvati, far more perceptive than Hermione remembered, steered the conversation to more mundane subjects, until they inevitably landed at the days after the battle and her arrival at Spinners' End.

They were interrupted by a knock at the door. Upon Parvati's invitation to enter, Snape stuck his head through the slightly ajar door. Parvati groaned, "Oh, no, is it dinner time already? I completely lost track of time!"

Snape quirked his eyebrow and suggested, "If you are hungry and want *h*ofood, you better come down now." Not waiting for either witch, he turned and exited.

Parvati and Hermione hurried and entered Snape's sanctuary just as their former Potions professor sat down at the table with a full plate. Parvati grabbed two plates off a shelf, handed one to Hermione and motioned for her to help herself. The food was simple but nutritious and tasty, and for the first few minutes, everyone was busy eating.

Eventually, Snape spoke in his typical sardonic manner, "If you wish to eat meat, Miss Granger, there is a pub about ten minutes walk from here."

Hermione looked at him in surprise. She was sure she remembered seeing him indulge in meat dishes at Hogwarts in the past. She remained silent, though, considering that she was a guest at his home, not quite sure how to reply.

Parvati rolled her eyes at Snape. "I'm sure one of these days you *will* learn to be civil, Severus!" Turning to Hermione, she explained, "The reason we keep a vegetarian diet is that meat seems to affect our magic negatively. And maybe, if we volunteer to clean the kitchen after dinner, Severus might be convinced to give a bit more information to you."

Snape sighed dramatically, very unlike Professor Snape, Hermione noticed, and grumbled at Parvati, "If you're willing to brave the wildlife in the cellar and get a 1986 bottle of Chateaufort du Pape and open it now to let it breathe, I *might* just agree to give some explanations."

Parvati smirked and stood up to follow his request. When she returned with the bottle shortly afterwards, the young witch remarked, "No critters this time. Have you willed them away, Severus?"

"I have done no such thing. Might be because of the recent increase of owls," he replied blandly.

Hermione tried her best not to gape. It was one thing *to hear* about her former Potions professor being 'not so bad,' but it was an entirely different matter to witness him being civil, even displaying a sense of humour.

Hermione startled when she suddenly heard the classroom voice of Professor Snape. "Miss Patil, pray tell, what spell have you subjected Miss Granger to, she is in a near catatonic state!"

Parvati glared at him. "Anyone of your former students would be in that state if they met you now, Severus," she pronounced and started to clear the table. Hermione pulled herself together and stood up to help her former dormmate. In joint effort, they put the kitchen back to its former state, in readiness for the next meal.

In the meantime, Snape had moved to the small sofa near the piano and bookshelves. Three wine glasses were sat upon the small coffee table, and as soon as the two young witches sat down opposite the sofa, Snape prepared to pour the exquisite wine. Then he sat back down again, clearly relaxed.

Hermione looked at him expectantly until he met her gaze and quirked his eyebrow. "Any questions, Miss Granger?"

"Yes. No. I..." She felt an utter loss of words. What could she ask? *You used to be the most horrible person imaginable. What happened?* No, she figured, that would be the wrong approach.

However, before she could find the right words, Snape addressed her. "You came here because you had reason to believe that collaborating with me will get the magic back, not just in occasional pockets but globally. Furthermore, in your quest, you defied several people's opinions about me being a murderer, me being the most horrible person on this planet, so to speak; me... being me. You set out, despite your own misgivings, despite your own fears. I might have saved your neck once, but you had no way of knowing how I would react seeing Gryffindor's know-it-all in my own surroundings. For all you knew, I might have been hiding the last Death Eater. Correct, Miss Granger?" He looked at her questioningly, as if truly interested in her reply.

Hermione could not help but gape. Finally, she asked, somewhat bewildered, "How do you know all this? The few people I've been with lately have no idea of your whereabouts, so none of them could have told you!"

Snape smirked at her words and took his time replying. When he finally did, Hermione felt even more bewildered. "I believe a spirit guide recommended you read Wilhelm Reich, or what's left of his works?"

Hermione nodded. "I only managed to find one book in the short time I had, and I've not finished reading it," she explained.

"Yes, I'd have been surprised if you had found more. Many copies got burned by some Muggle government officials who felt threatened by the information contained therein." That said, he stood up, moved to the bookshelves and withdrew two books, which he handed her. "Studying these two in addition to the one you have already will bring you up to par, and we can then start working on bringing the magic back." He uttered the words as if he had absolutely no doubt that the task would be successful, Hermione noticed as he sat down again. Snape poured some more wine for all before relaxing deeper into the chair again.

Hermione noticed Parvati rolling her eyes at him and found herself unable to hide a grin.

"Parvati, your behaviour ensures that Miss Granger will lose even the last shred of respect she may have had for me." He sighed.

"Slytherin or not, Severus, Hermione, I believe, is here to help you with getting the magic back. You know you can't do it on your own, and what's more, you've known for days she'd be joining us, so the least you can do is be courteous and tell her *everything*," Parvati countered.

Snape looked at her pensively for a long moment. "You know, it's disconcerting how accurate your perceptions are of late," he said.

Then he turned towards Hermione and started to speak with a serious expression. "Old habits die hard, Miss Granger, and I tend to fall back into the persona I was forced to portray for nearly two decades...that of the sarcastic bastard, nasty bat of the dungeon, scary teacher...even though I don't mean to, most of the time. I apologise."

Hermione, hard put to hide her surprise, and nodding her acceptance silently, looked at him expectantly. He continued. "The spirit guide I mentioned *my* spirit guide, to be precise...is temporarily offering advice to one of your contacts. A Slytherin, if I'm not mistaken." Snape looked at Hermione questioningly.

"Yes, Pansy Parkinson," Hermione confirmed quickly. "In fact, it's a spiritual medium who channels Red Cloud, and Pansy and Seamus have been visiting her and then communicated the information to me while I was staying at Grimmauld Place." Hermione hesitated for a moment before asking, "So, Red Cloud is *your* spirit guide?"

"That he is," Snape answered. "And I believe Red Cloud was the driving force in bringing *you* here," he added, in an odd manner. Hermione thought his voice might have sounded affectionate, had it not been Snape's.

The young witch was suddenly overcome with a feeling of warmth. It was not merely physical, more the way she would feel when overcome by instinctive knowledge that everything was going to work out perfect, that obstacles meant nothing and would be overcome smoothly, if not easily. She looked at Parvati, whose face carried an expression of sheer delight.

"Oh... Red Cloud is here, isn't he, Severus?" Parvati asked, excitement evident in her voice. She turned to Hermione and explained, "I've only witnessed Red Cloud being present a couple of times, but his energy is incredible. It makes me feel all warm and content and... happy."

Snape's face showed a state of relaxation that Hermione thought made him look almost like an entirely different person. When he spoke, it was with a soft voice that carried a mixture of happiness and deep respect, if not reverence.

"Greetings, Red Cloud. I am, as always, at your service."

The voice that answered came from nowhere. Afterwards, Hermione was not even sure if it hadn't been in her head entirely, but it came across as too loud and too clear to not be physical, even though she could see nobody new in the room.

"Greetings to you. I see your helper has arrived. Treat her fairly, Dark Man, for you need to collaborate closely for your project to succeed. I will give you as much help as you need, but know that it is *you* who will bring your magic back."

Both Parvati and Hermione watched in awe as Snape presented a deeply relaxed state and spoke in a low voice that emitted nothing but deepest respect for the entity from higher dimensions that was his spirit guide. "Thank you for your timely visit, Red Cloud," he acknowledged quietly.

Red Cloud took over again. "Your skill in researching is required here, Gryffindor. Concentrate on the findings of Orgone. You will both find that there is a better, or rather, more effective way to create Orgone, but it will take some experimenting before you achieve satisfying results. This is the key for regaining your magic."

Everyone took in the information Red Cloud had just divulged. Hermione found herself surprised that she did not doubt Red Cloud's words in the slightest. Her eyes wandered wistfully between Snape, who was still deeply relaxed, and Parvati, who looked as awestruck as Hermione felt.

The atmosphere cooled marginally as Red Cloud slowly withdrew. A few minutes later, Snape stretched languidly and then checked the time.

"I better go and entertain Draco for a while," he said, slowly standing up.

"We'll clear up here and then probably call it a night," Parvati remarked.

Snape briefly waved his hand at both witches and left the sanctuary to tend to Draco.

* * *

Hermione spent the following days immersed in books, occasionally helping Parvati concocting cosmetic potions. Evenings were spent with her former dormmate and former Potions professor, talking about the research Hermione was doing on Wilhelm Reich's findings on Orgone, discussing new possibilities to improve the cosmetic formulas, and pondering over Draco's reluctant improvement.

Hermione's parents had obliged and sent a package of dried woodruff to Snape's home, and the Potions master immediately set to work to brew potions that would improve Draco's state of mind. In the first few days after administering the new potion formula, nothing happened, but after nearly a week, Draco emerged from his room in the late afternoon and even joined the three for dinner. He barely said anything, but did acknowledge Hermione politely. She figured it was an improvement to his previous near-catatonic state most of the time.

The days might have been spent in a routine manner, but neither Hermione nor Parvati ever felt bored. Parvati took delight in experimenting with new cosmetic formulas, all fuelled by lively discussions during evenings, and Hermione enjoyed being able to immerse herself so fully in research, even though she felt somewhat lost in the beginning. What did researching a physical bio-energy basis for Sigmund Freud's theories of neurosis in humans have to do with finding a way to bring the magic back? Her question was not answered immediately, and she continued reading through the books, the content of which she found nevertheless fascinating, although frequent references to Sigmund Freud made her squirm with discomfort.

Neither witch had any idea what Snape was up to when he was not playing the piano or brewing potions for Draco, but Hermione did not care. She loved listening to his playing most afternoons and laughed at Parvati's delighted expressions that they would be able to use magic to clean the dishes after dinner.

Hermione came to treasure not only the sessions Snape spent playing the piano, but also the occasions when Red Cloud made his presence known and challenged her about her current research. It always started the same way as the first session she'd witnessed, with a feeling of warmth and secure comfort overcoming her, very often followed by Parvati's utters of delight and her former professor deeply relaxing into the chair in his sanctuary.

"Gryffindor, get over your discomfort of the connection with Sigmund Freud. There is far more to Wilhelm Reich's findings than the sexual connection instigated by Freud. Libido is nothing but life energy, desire, the source of human striving, not necessarily in sexual terms, although it all is interconnected. Reich developed the libido concept, concentrating on its physical expression and simultaneous psychological content, until he was able to show the relation of bodily attitude and emotion. He left the path of Freud's theories, those which left no room for anything but sexual matters, rather early on.

"In order to regain your magic, you need to know *all* his works. Read 'Character Analysis' next; it explains the relation of mind and body, and you need to understand that. And then you and your collaborator need to find a way to create Orgone without the danger that Wilhelm Reich encountered. You cannot afford to risk anyone's life."

Hermione remembered the words she had read recently: *Warning - misuse of the Orgone Accumulator may lead to symptoms of Orgone overdose. Leave the vicinity of the accumulator and call the 'Doctor' immediately!* She had also learned that what Freud had termed libido, Reich called Orgone, and it could as well be termed Life Force or, as Asian healers typically referred to it, Chi. She was still unable to make the connection to magic or how to regain it with the new found knowledge, but she was willing to overlook the connections to Freud, who to her was nothing but a sex-obsessed and even deranged psycho-analyst, for Reich's findings fascinated her on every level.

At the same time, she felt embarrassed. Red Cloud had evidently been keeping an eye on her, and she did not like her discomfort openly being discussed in front of others, least of all Snape. He was nowhere near as sarcastic as he'd used to be at Hogwarts, and she was startled to realise that she felt perfectly safe around him, but she was no more willing to share her most private thoughts or feelings with him than with any other former teacher except maybe Remus Lupin, whom she had long ago started to consider a friend rather than a figure of authority.

One day not long after she'd arrived at Spinner's End, Hermione discovered the back garden and almost instantly declared it her own sanctuary. It was possibly the only pocket of full magic left on the entire island, and magical it was. A few owls, the number of which was slowly increasing, spent their days sleeping in trees and bushes, a unicorn occasionally came to graze on the small meadow that seemed to have been created for just this very purpose, fairies zoomed around the magical plants that grew all over the garden, and the little patch of herb garden produced potion ingredients as well as those little, but significant, additions to tasty dinners in abundance.

Hermione was not particularly surprised when, one day, she was interrupted from her studying by a snow white owl. On closer inspection, she recognised Harry's Hedwig.

"Hedwig!" she exclaimed. "What brings you here? Where have you been?"

Hedwig looked at her in disdain and hooted mournfully. Then she stuck her leg out for Hermione to untie the piece of parchment she was carrying. Hermione obliged quickly, wondering who would be able to send her a letter the magical way, when most of the magic was gone. She unfolded the parchment and was surprised to recognise Ron's handwriting.

Dear Hermione,

I doubt you'll ever get this letter since the magic seems to have disappeared completely, but Hedwig flew into my bedroom this morning and looked so miserable, so I figured I might try and give her something to do.

I miss you something fierce. Weren't you going to come back for weekends? I would love to see you and spend some time with you. I know I was a complete prat before you left, and I'd just like the chance to make up for it.

You might not be able to send word back with Hedwig, that is, if you get this letter at all, I don't have a clue how the owls work now that the magic is gone. So, I guess, I'll just wait for you every Friday afternoon/evening and see if you come here. Unless you are so absorbed in whatever it is that you're doing that you don't want to take a break. We haven't heard from you, Hermione! Even Remus and Tonks have no idea how you are. Please at least write, if not via Hedwig, I'm sure there is a Muggle Post Office nearby.

Love,

Ron

Hermione could not hide a smile. It was good to hear from her boyfriend, and he was right. She was far too absorbed in studying Wilhelm Reich in order to bring the magic back. She resolved to talk to Snape about spending a weekend in London at her earliest opportunity.

* * *

A/N

Galium odoratum - Sweet Woodruff

Big thanks to NotSoSaintly who tirelessly weeds out all my punctuation or lack there of as well as all those typos that seem to sneak themselves in. You rock!

Everybody Hurts

Chapter 5 of 13

The aftermath of the Final Battle and the loss of magic has different effects on everyone, and some people are more unreasonable than others.

Disclaimer: The characters do not belong to me. The story does. I have written this story for pleasure and am not making a single Knut out of it.

* * *

Chapter V

Everybody Hurts

A week later, Hermione was still waiting for an opportunity to approach Snape about leaving for a weekend. She felt anxious because even after nearly three weeks, she still had no idea how to address him. *Professor Snape* did not ring right, considering that he was no longer a teacher. Addressing him by his first name like Parvati and Draco did she considered rude since he had neither given her permission to do so nor did he address her by her first name. And calling him *Mr Snape* sounded simply wrong.

Furthermore, Hermione felt she was letting the scattered magical community down if she took a weekend off, during which she would not get any research done.

Eventually, the problem took care of itself.

One evening, the residents of Spinner's End had finished dinner and were enjoying another exquisite bottle of French red wine when Snape looked into the round.

"I need a volunteer to run some errands in London for me," he announced blandly.

"Oh, no," Parvati groaned. "Not London! I went last time and got totally lost!"

Draco remained silent, his face void of any expression as if he was not part of the group.

"I'll go," Hermione offered quickly. "I have been hoping to find an opportunity to look in on Grimmauld Place, and I know London fairly well, so I could go wherever you need me to while I'm staying there for the weekend. That way, I won't feel as if I'm wasting time by not researching."

"That'll work for me, Miss Granger. All I need is some herbs from a Muggle apothecary in Covent Garden. I would also appreciate if you could visit The Leaky Cauldron and see if any shops in Diagon Alley are open. If the apothecary is back in business, you could find out if they have any magical potion ingredients for sale."

"Sure, no problem, sir," Hermione replied, happy to be useful while taking the break she wanted.

"Oh, scrap the formalities, girl," Snape snapped impatiently. "None of your peers present here bother with them, and I don't see why you should." He ignored Hermione's blush and continued, "And while you are in London, do me a favour and try to find out what's up with Shackbolt. I want to know if he's safe. And kindly don't let Moody know my whereabouts."

* * *

On the following Friday, Hermione took the train to London's Kings Cross and walked the short distance to Grimmauld Place.

It was early afternoon, and only Ginny was at home. Hermione was both relieved and anxious at seeing just her for the time being. She was not certain how Ron would receive her despite his earlier letter to her. The memory of their constant squabbling during her previous stay was still painfully present.

Ginny led her friend to the kitchen and, after brewing some coffee, joined her at the table. "So, tell, Hermione, how have you been? Snape treating you at least half decent?" Ginny asked.

"Yes, he's not bad," Hermione replied dismissively. "Where is everyone, Ginny? What's been happening here? Any news?" She was not keen on sharing her experience or thoughts of their former professor, and she knew Ginny well enough to distract her attention. Her strategy worked for now.

Ginny was more than happy to update Hermione with the latest events in what was left of wizarding London. She grinned and said, "We've some news, alright. Tonks spends her days in the City, listening to brokers discussing the movements of stocks and shares and sharing insider information. She's made a bit of money that way in the last couple of weeks.

"Let's see, what else... Oh, yes. Moody is still planning on getting Kingsley Shacklebolt to come into hiding here. He, Remus and Tonks met this guy near The Leaky Cauldron a couple of weeks ago. He's totally wacky apparently, convinced there is a conspiracy against humankind. You can imagine how that fuelled Moody." Hermione grinned and Ginny giggled before she continued. "He's greatly into dealing in the City and makes a killing by listening to those who have inside information. That's how Tonks got into it."

"Who would have thought Tonks would ever do such a Muggle activity!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Too true," Ginny agreed. "Although I'm glad for her sake; at least we don't have to worry now where the next day's food is coming from.

"Remus still spends most of his time at The Leaky Cauldron. Some shops in Diagon Alley have reopened, and the place gets invaded by Muggle tourists now that it's no longer hidden by magic. I think Madam Malkin has never before made such good business, nor any of the other places, and mainly with Muggles.

"And, before I forget, the first issue of *The Quibbler* is coming out today. Remus has arranged for some classified notices in it, so hopefully, any survivors of last year's Hogwarts students will come forward. Tom agreed to let us use the Leaky Cauldron address."

Hermione took in all the news. She was wondering about Kingsley Shacklebolt, even more so because Snape was equally interested in the Auror's whereabouts, although she had no idea why.

Both young witches sat quietly for a while, each following their own thoughts until Ginny broke the silence.

"So, how have you been, Hermione? How is life with the greasy git?" Ginny smirked.

Hermione sighed inwardly. She was not quite ready to talk about life in Snape's home; or Parvati or Draco, come to think of it. Or the talking sessions with Red Cloud, even though she figured that Ginny of all people would probably understand her awe better than anyone else.

"It's been... strange," Hermione replied hesitantly, trying to find a way to satisfy Ginny's curiosity and at the same time not to divulge a lot. Then she continued more firmly, "He seems to have calmed down some. He doesn't sneer half as much as he used to in class. He's kind of more human now."

Ginny looked at her expectantly.

"And... he is a gifted pianist," she added with an air of finality. This was as much as she was willing to give for now.

Ginny's expression changed to shrewd. "He plays the piano? Hm. Red Cloud mentioned someone holding up the magic with music..." She thought for a while as if trying to capture a particular memory; then she shrugged. "Do you mean to say you enjoy staying with him?" Ginny asked, curiosity evident in her voice.

Hermione took her time to reply. "I guess. *Enjoying* is too strong a word, Ginny, but it's nowhere near as bad as I had anticipated," she said. "And compared to the days right after the battle, life is wonderful."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. I missed the battle, but I find it really tough coming to terms with it all. Sometimes, I just wish the battle had never happened. It's great that Voldemort is gone, but what kind of life is this? No magic, no idea what the future will bring, our world nearly completely destroyed..." she finished, leaving an air of depression.

After a short silence, Hermione took a deep breath. "So... where is Ron?" she asked.

"He's gone to The Leaky Cauldron with Remus. Remus has been spotting some witches and wizards, but it looks like they don't want anything to do with him." Ginny sighed. "You'd think they'd put their silly fears aside and combine forces to bring the magic back, but no chance! So anyway, that's why Ron has taken to hanging around there, to make more contacts with others from our world. Not that we've found out much. The magic is gone everywhere; not only here in England, but in France, Germany, and most other European countries as well, from what we've learned. Nobody has any idea how to make the magic work again." Ginny sighed again.

"Ginny," Hermione started carefully, "it's not easy at the moment, I know. But *do* have hope that we'll find a way to bring the magic back. I'm working on it, and Snape is helping." Hermione was interrupted by a commotion coming from the front door before she had a chance to elaborate.

"Come on, man, only a few steps. You can make it," a voice growled as both girls hurried out of the kitchen towards the front door, the depressing state of the wizarding world momentarily forgotten.

Moody stumbled through the hallway, trying to hold an obviously injured and drugged Kingsley Shacklebolt.

Ginny instantly took charge. "Alastor, move him to the front room...he's in no state to climb stairs to the nearest bedroom. Put him on the sofa." She hurriedly moved to open the door, wiped some cushions off the sofa in one swift movement, and disappeared up the stairs in search of some bedding.

"What happened?" asked Hermione, disturbed by Shacklebolt's state. His shirt was torn in several places, blood dripping down his right shoulder, and his eyes were moving about wildly and unfocused. Moody managed to unload his charge onto the sofa and caught his breath as Ginny returned with pillows and blankets.

"I had been warning him, but he wouldn't hear any of it," Moody said. "Lucky for him, I kept him under constant surveillance. The idiot has been mind-controlled for weeks, if not months, but he insisted it was me being paranoid."

"All right, so your paranoia proved correct, old man. Big deal," the dark-skinned Auror slurred like a drunk and then winced audibly, pressing his left hand onto his right shoulder.

"Big deal," Moody snapped. "You would be dead if Tonks and I hadn't been there!"

Ginny had moved towards Shacklebolt to assess the extent of his injury but was stopped by him. "Who gave *you* permission to touch me?" he slurred, slapping her hand away.

Then he turned to Moody. "Yeah, I would be dead now, asshole! What gave you the right to decide if I should live or die? I *ra*supposed to be dead!"

The pain, and likely drugs too, got to him, and he blacked out, giving Ginny a chance to at least evaluate the extent of his injuries.

Hermione watched curiously as Ginny tended to the Auror's wounds. "Where did you learn all that, Ginny?" she inquired, observing her confidently taking care of Shackbolt's shoulder, her face set in a concentrated frown.

"It's the kind of thing you can't help learning, growing up with six older brothers," Ginny replied. "All it takes is adapting it to work without magic." When she was satisfied with the state her patient was in, she turned to Moody. "Did Tonks go to The Leaky Cauldron?"

"She did. Said she'd inform Remus and Ronald," Moody confirmed.

"Let's go to the kitchen. It's more comfortable, and there's nothing I can do for Mr Shackbolt right now. If we leave both doors open, we'll hear him if he wakes up," Ginny suggested.

She exited the room and headed to the kitchen, followed by Hermione and Moody, who moved to sit down at the table. Ginny prepared a new pot of coffee before she joined her friend and the old Auror.

They drank their coffee in silence until Moody grunted, "Have anything stronger, Miss Weasley?"

Ginny sighed quietly and opened a cupboard to reveal a bottle of Firewhisky. "You're in luck, Mr Moody," she said and poured him a generous amount. "Remus brought one from The Leaky Cauldron, but the stuff is getting rare."

Moody took a large gulp and nodded his approval at the liquid. "I appreciate it, Miss Weasley," he said in a normal voice that for once *did*not resemble the growl of an angry dog.

The next bout of silence was interrupted by the opening of the front door.

"I smell coffee," Tonks stated as she entered the kitchen, closely followed by Remus and Ron.

* * *

The first minutes of Hermione's reunion with Ron were pure bliss for her. Ron told her about Hedwig showing up as if the magic had never gone, how he felt more hopeful about the magic returning, even more so now that he knew that Hedwig had, indeed, delivered his letter.

"Of course, it would've been even better if she'd returned," he said, holding Hermione close to him, "but I guess that's asking a bit much."

Hermione refrained from telling him Hedwig's whereabouts, knowing that any reference to their former professor was a sore subject for Ron. *He'll be okay with it, once we succeed in getting the magic back*, she thought and simply enjoyed the physical closeness to him.

Eventually, Ron was unable to contain his curiosity. "So, how's life with the greasy git?" he asked, smirking as if expecting a tirade of bitter complaints, to which he could have replied, *I told you so*.

Hermione shrugged. "He's human, Ron. I'm researching possibilities to bring the magic back. He spends a lot of time playing music...it helps keep the last of the magic up," she explained.

Ron snorted. "Fancy that; you study, he plays."

Hermione felt the peaceful atmosphere that had prevailed initially slip away. "He's playing the piano, Ron. It keeps the magic around!"

"What? So he can practice Dark Magic? Or do the cooking?" asked Ron.

"I've not noticed him use Dark Magic. He's a rather good cook without having to use magic, Ron, just so you know. And who are you to judge some wizard's Muggle cooking skills anyway?" she challenged him.

Hermione was losing her patience with her boyfriend. She took a deep breath to calm herself and continued, "Ron, he needs to hold the magic because he's been taking care of Draco Malfoy ever since they fled Hogwarts. Draco is suffering from a severe depression, and it's only thanks to Snape that he's making some progress."

"Who the hell cares about Malfoy? He was the one who planned to kill Dumbledore, Hermione! Even if he didn't do it in the end!" Ron argued.

Hermione looked at him. "Are you saying that you would leave him to rot because he's responsible for a bad deed?"

"Duh! You can't expect me, or yourself, to look after a Death Eater; now, can you? Come on, Hermione, be serious!" Ron looked at her exasperatedly.

The realisation that Ron and she had been developing in very different, no longer compatible directions, a thought that had been lingering on the edge of her consciousness, both frightened and relieved Hermione. She slowly stood up and headed to the kitchen door.

"I think I need to be alone for a while. Excuse me," said Hermione, her voice sounding hollow even to herself.

She went upstairs to her former room without looking back. The familiarity of the room she had slept in every time she stayed at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, soothed her. *Where am I going with this?* she wondered as she sat down on the old, creaky bed and put her head in her hands, sighing heavily.

Hermione had been sitting on the bed for a while, trying to figure out a future that might not include a relationship with Ron, when she heard someone knocking at the door.

"Hermione! Can I come in, please?" She recognised Ginny's voice and stood up to open the door.

Ginny gave her a look full of sympathy. "Ron being a prat again?" she asked.

"I don't know, Ginny. I'm not even sure if we have any basis for a relationship anymore. He seems so full of hate where my actions or thoughts are concerned. But I can't just give up my hunt for the magic." Hermione let herself fall on the bed, her despair evident.

Ginny hugged her tightly. "You know, I've been wondering how you put up with him. I mean, don't get me wrong; he's my brother, and I love him dearly! But I also know that he has a lot of growing up to do. One would think that with the kind of experiences we've been having, he should have grown up overnight, but I guess we all react differently to trauma. And he's simply refusing to look at things from a different point of view. You, on the other hand, seem to have been born all grown up and mature. And Ron simply can't match that. At least not at the moment."

Hermione could not help but be impressed by Ginny's wisdom. "You are right, Ginny. His moaning about everything seems really childish. And he can't be serious about what he said about Draco; how he would leave him to his own fate." Hermione groaned. "Gods, Ginny, I know he's done wrong, but nobody deserves to be such a... vegetable. You know how he always was so full of life? His eyes were pure arrogance, I know, but ever so lively! And now, it's like looking at a corpse." Her thoughts trailed off to when she had seen Draco for the first time at Spinner's End, and she shuddered.

"You know, I always thought he was really handsome," Ginny admitted. "I always thought it was a shame he was such an arrogant bastard... If it hadn't been for his upbringing, I guess, he could be a great person."

"I know what you mean. Now, there's nothing of this arrogance left, and I doubt anyone would find him handsome. He's skinny as hell, and he stares into nothing most of the time when he isn't asleep." Hermione took a deep breath. "Anyway... Maybe Ron *will* grow up one day. I guess I can only hope."

"In the meantime, let's have some fun," suggested Ginny. "You look like you've been studying too hard, and I've been stuck in this place for too long. Let's go do some shopping tomorrow."

* * *

Hermione was unable to sleep. She had felt tired, even exhausted, and had gone to bed early, but sleep eluded her now. She reflected on her recent time spent at Spinner's End, feeling the urge to re-evaluate her opinion of Snape, now that there was a physical distance, and finally came to terms with the just-reached conclusion that a relationship with Ron was, at this point, not conducive to her happiness. She resolved to speak to him the following day after her shopping trip in the hope that both would by then have cooled down somewhat after their latest squabble.

Ron did not have the patience or inkling to wait until the next day. Hermione sighed when she heard the knock at her door. She got out of bed, none too pleased with the disturbance.

"What is it, Ron, that can't wait till tomorrow?" she asked tiredly.

"I've been thinking, 'Mione." Hermione shuddered at his abbreviation of her name, but remained silent.

Ron continued in an accusing voice, "I don't want to continue like this. We've both finished school, and I've always thought we'd live together after school."

Hermione drew a sharp breath. *Ah, this is where he's coming from*, she thought.

"Yes, Ron. I've thought that, too. I also thought Harry would be around. And I thought we'd all be training in one magical field or another so we could actually make a living," she replied.

"But Harry isn't around, Hermione. And the magic isn't, either. But you are, and so am I. Why do you have to run after a murderer instead and take Malfoy's side? Come on, let's move in together and forget about Snape," Ron said, desperation evident in his voice and looks.

Hermione shook her head. "Do you really not understand, Ron, or do you *not* want to understand? My first and utmost top priority is looking for a way to bring the magic back! To me, it doesn't matter whether it's with Snape's help or the Minister's. I don't care, as long as *somebody* shares my effort, and Snape happens to do just that!"

Ron rolled his eyes. "That's it? And for that, you *riskour* relationship?" he asked incredulously.

Hermione had enough. "No, Ron. All I'm doing is thinking *beyond* the initial euphoria that we might feel if we settled down together...with no magic, no jobs, heck, not even a home!" she exclaimed. "What do you think will happen if we live together, here or maybe at The Burrow if it's still standing. Without money, no jobs, no friends to speak of? I just can't imagine either of us being happy like that!"

"You don't care about *my* happiness, do you? Well, never mind. It's not like you're the only witch in the world. At least most other witches don't put the well-being of the entire world *before* their relationship!" With these words, he stormed out of Hermione's room and slammed the door.

So much for a future relationship to look forward to, Hermione thought mockingly and laid back down in bed.

She did not expect to be able to sleep now, after the heated debate with Ron, and was rather surprised when the alarm clock woke her some hours later.

A door slammed downstairs, and Hermione peeled herself out of the covers, wondering who had left so early, with such force.

Suddenly, her bedroom door was flung open, revealing a wild-eyed Ginny. "Oh, gods, Hermione!" groaned Ginny. "Kingsley just left; he ran out, I went after him, someone stopped him across the road, and then both disappeared! I can't believe it! *Nobody* can Apparate these days!"

Hermione was suddenly wide awake. "He left? But he's in no state to go anywhere! And there's only one..." She stopped speaking, remembering Snape's interest in the dark-skinned Auror.

Ginny looked at her curiously. "Go on, continue. You mentioned yesterday that Snape has some magic left."

Hermione groaned. "He asked me to find out about Mr Shacklebolt!" She sat back down. "Ginny," she said slowly, "whatever his interest is, I don't think it's anything bad. If Shacklebolt had gone back to his work, he'd probably be in far more danger than if he's with Snape. And I have a feeling that Snape knows about him because of Red Cloud. Shacklebolt was mentioned even in Pansy's letter."

"Red Cloud?" Ginny's voice perked up.

Hermione sighed. Now was as good a time as any to tell Ginny *all* about her stay at Spinner's End.

"Yes. Red Cloud. He's Severus' spirit guide. He talks to us, even Parvati and me, quite frequently, and he's giving me advice with regard to regaining our magic."

"Parvati? As in Parvati Patel?"

"It's a long story... Parvati was already there when I arrived. She's been there for a few months, helping with cosmetic potions that he sells. Draco's been there since Dumbledore died. Severus upholds the magic by playing the piano for hours every day. That way he can brew the magical potions that help Draco. And when there's some magic left, we use it for mundane things, like cleaning the floors and stuff like that." She laughed helplessly, knowing that no one else would find her experiences amusing, or even believable, and was awarded with a look of knowing sympathy.

"We've all had some very strange experiences recently," Ginny said. "And to be honest, if it's Snape who caught him before he got back into the hands of those Muggle scumbags, then I'm not worried. It looks as if Moody was right with his paranoia; I mean, Kingsley Shacklebolt has definitely been messed with," she added.

Hermione was unable to suppress a yawn. She said, "I better take a shower; hopefully that'll wake me up."

Ginny stood up. "I'll get the coffee brewing; then we can get ready to hit the shops."

The two friends headed first for the Muggle apothecary in Covent Garden, and Hermione found all the ingredients Snape wanted. The main errand now out of the way, they enjoyed themselves hunting for and eventually finding some clothing bargains in the lesser known and sometimes obscure back streets of Covent Garden.

When both felt hungry, Ginny suggested *The Leaky Cauldron*. "I know Tom started offering food again since it's become a place for our kind to find other survivors. We can eat there and then check out Diagon Alley."

Hermione agreed. She was curious about a Mugglefied Diagon Alley. "I wonder if the apothecary is open again," she mused.

"Let's check after lunch. The entrance is where it always was...it's just not hidden anymore," Ginny replied.

The young witches were halfway through their lunch, which comprised typical English pub fare, when Remus stepped in. He looked around, spotted Ginny and Hermione, and walked to their table, pulling some papers out of his scruffy looking jacket.

"Fancy seeing you here." He smiled and handed copies of *The Quibbler* to the girls. "No major news in the first issue. I'm quite impressed with the classified section, though; it's quite big," he commented.

Hermione leafed through the pages, skimming the headlines. *The Worst Terrorist Is Gone...But At What Cost?* read one headline; *The Science Of Genetics And Its Application To Magic* said another one. Hermione stopped when she reached the classifieds in the hope of finding news of someone, anyone she knew.

One notice shocked her to the core. *It is with great sadness that I announce the passing of my beloved wife, Erin Brown, and my beloved daughter, Lavender. They saw no sense in continuing a life without magic. May they be happier where they are now. Aaron Brown*

"Oh, Merlin," Hermione whispered. "Lavender. Dead." She shook her head in disbelief.

"There are five in there," Ginny stated flatly. "Five suicides, all because they couldn't envisage a life without magic."

"Yes, and these are only the only ones publicly announced. I have heard of others, too. There have been several suicides," added Remus quietly.

The witches and wizard finished their lunch in silence. Remus soon left to meet with some wizard in the hope of learning something about the whereabouts of Tonks' family.

Hermione and Ginny entered Diagon Alley, both subdued and too lost in their own thoughts to chat.

The atmosphere in London's main wizarding shopping street ripped Hermione out of her reverie. Whereas Diagon Alley had always been a haven compared to the mostly crowded Muggle shopping areas of Central London, it was now akin to a nightmare. Muggle tourists spoke loudly in a variety of languages, some gesturing wildly with their arms, completely ignoring all other passers-by on the narrow streets.

"Gods, Ginny, this is horrible! It's worse than Oxford Street the day before Christmas!" Hermione exclaimed.

Ginny nodded grimly. "Yes, it is awful. These people act as if they own the place. I can imagine how they're fascinated with the difference, compared with Muggle shops, but that's really no excuse to leave their manners behind."

"Let's just go straight to the apothecary. I don't think I can stand being here much longer," muttered Hermione.

As they walked past Eeylops Owl Emporium, Ginny suddenly stopped dead in her tracks.

"What..." Hermione did not need to finish her question as she glanced at the entrance. A poster was covering the door of the locked-up shop.

By Order of Her Majesty's Government:

This establishment, namely

Eeylops Owl Emporium, 61, Diagon Alley, London SW1 1MM

has been forcefully and permanently closed down by the

Westminster Branch of HM Department of Health

for the following reason(s):

- Ignorance of the Health and Safety Act, 1974

- Ignorance of the Pet and Livestock Act, 1951 (Revised 1971)

- Ignorance of the Schedule to the Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976

"Oh, no," whispered Hermione, "the Muggle Government has discovered Diagon Alley!"

She looked at Ginny, and both groaned in unison at the potential consequences. If the various Muggle government agencies cottoned on to all the magical shops in Great Britain, there would probably be not a single one left, save maybe Madam Malkin's; and even her shop would likely be swallowed by the rather military Muggle designer brigade who were keen to ensure uniform clothing for all under the disguise of dictating trends.

Their pace quickening, they made their way to the apothecary, which, to Hermione's relief, was open. Once inside, Hermione looked around curiously and increasingly disappointed. Gone were the jars with obscure contents, gone were the barrels filled with slimy unidentifiable items, which had always been the main focus at Diagon Alley's apothecary.

An old, short, miserable looking, nearly bald man slouched from the back of the store to the counter as Hermione approached from the front.

"Yes?" the man asked in a grumpy manner.

"Good afternoon, sir," Hermione said, "I have a few items I need, and I wonder if you have them in stock." She handed him a list with the potions ingredients Snape had asked her to obtain.

The old man took his time studying the list, then gave her a shrewd look.

"So... He survived, then," he said.

Hermione looked at him questioningly. "Sir?"

"Young lady, don't pretend you don't know who I'm referring to," he replied. "Tell him I'm in need of many ingredients. I'll pay triple the usual price if he can get me anything. I won't even question the quality. Things are looking bleak." That said, he went off to prepare Hermione's order, only to return almost instantly.

"I don't have armadillo bile, bicorn powder, or lacewing flies. And I don't know when I'll get them in again...most of my suppliers are from old families and don't have a clue about contacting others the Muggle way. And some magical ingredients might not be obtainable at all. If you want, you can leave a phone number with me, and I'll phone you when I have them in."

Hermione thought quickly. She did not want to give Snape's details out, in case any wizard might decide to go after him to revenge Dumbledore's death. The only other

phone number she could think of was that of her parents' place. She gave him their number, paid him for the supplies he did have in stock and said good-bye.

Back in the kitchen at Grimmauld Place, the atmosphere seemed tense when Hermione and Ginny entered. Tonks shot Hermione an apologetic look, Ron's expression was smug, and Moody stood up, rushed out and came back almost instantly, glaring at Hermione. "You will not leave here without telling me where that traitor, Snape, is hiding," he growled, looking her up and down in an almost threatening manner.

Hermione gasped. Looking at Ron's smug face, it dawned on her how Moody knew who she had been spending her time with.

"I see," she said quietly, her face without expression. She turned to Moody. "And you decided that because?"

"Miss Granger, I don't care what your personal opinion is, Snape is a murderer and needs to be brought to justice," said Moody.

Hermione looked at him incredulously. "Who do you think you are, and how are you going to achieve that, Mr Moody?" she asked. "We have no knowledge of the whereabouts of most wizarding families, let alone the Ministry of Magic! Even *if* you catch him, what are you going to do? Bring him to justice, as you claim, single-handedly?"

She would have laughed at Moody's exceptional interest in bringing Snape down, had she not felt genuine sadness overcome her at the old Auror's determination. He knew no better the circumstances surrounding Dumbledore's death than anyone else, yet he had taken Harry's words as fact.

"There is always the Muggle police, Miss Granger," Moody pointed out coldly and smirked as Hermione gasped at his words.

"You'd go as far as getting him framed, wouldn't you?" she mused.

"What I would or wouldn't do is none of your concern. *What* is of your concern is your need to tell me his whereabouts," Moody stated.

Red Cloud, a little help, please, Hermione pleaded desperately. Under no circumstances would she betray Snape...even if she had not come to slowly change her opinion of him, she owed him her life. She also knew instinctively that on her own, she might well fail in trying to regain the magic. Even if, for some inconceivable reason, she managed to communicate directly with Red Cloud without Snape being present, she needed Snape's expertise in Potions to make the project successful. And the mere possibility of failure was even less of an option now since she'd learned about the suicides.

In the meantime, Ginny reprimanded her brother. "How could you, Ron? *You* claimed to love Hermione, and at the first opportunity, you betray her trust! You had absolutely *no* business telling anyone about how she spends her time!"

Ron shrugged. "She doesn't know what she's doing, and I will not have my girlfriend collaborate with a murderer," he countered hotly.

A snort escaped Hermione. "Girlfriend, my arse," she said, looking at him and feeling, for the first time, dislike towards him. "Do you seriously believe I could *ever* trust you again, Ron?"

Ron did not answer.

"I didn't think so, either," Hermione said dryly, earning admiring and agreeing grins from both Ginny and Tonks.

Hermione needed time to think. She would not be able to concentrate on how to get out of her predicament in the presence of Moody and Ron. If she did not get away from them soon, she would only be drawn into wasting her energy on fighting with the two wizards. Feeling the urge to breathe deeply, she did and then slowly stood up. "I will be in the room I always stay in. Mr Moody, I will *not* tell you anything. I have never been employed by the Ministry of Magic; therefore, I have no duty to tell you the whereabouts of someone whose past actions are obscure, especially not when I can be quite certain that *you* are acting out of sheer dislike for that person rather than genuinely wishing for justice." Without a backward glance, Hermione exited the kitchen.

She sat down on her bed and furiously wiped the tears out of the corner of her eyes. *Stop those crocodile tears, Granger! Come up with a feasible plan of action instead!* she chided herself.

When Ginny joined her sometime later, she found Hermione in deep concentration. "Don't worry, we'll find a way to get you out of here," she said.

Hermione startled at Ginny's voice. She had not heard her come in.

"And once you're safely back at Snape's, Tonks and I will throttle Ron," Ginny added, anger at her brother still blazing in her eyes.

Hermione snorted. "Don't bother with Ron, Ginny. The little bit of affection I was still holding is completely gone. I could not care less about him."

Ginny nodded. "I don't blame you," she said. "He's turned into a real prat."

The two young witches were silent for a while; then Ginny said, "Hermione, I'm happy to do anything to help you get out of here. You do know that, right?"

Hermione smiled gratefully at her friend. "I was hoping I could count on you." Then she asked, "So... what's the situation? Has Moody locked the front door? And is he standing guard?"

"Yep. Although I doubt Remus will agree."

Tonks appeared in the door, looking unhappy. "Remus *won't* agree. But the problem is, he's got a lead to several wizarding families in Cornwall and left to follow it. Considering the distance he has to travel, and without his own transport, he'll be gone at least a week, if not longer. And unless he phones me, which is unlikely, he won't know what Moody is up to.

"To Cornwall?" Hermione asked suspiciously. "When we parted after lunch at The Leaky Cauldron, he said something about finding out the whereabouts of *your* family!"

Tonks groaned. "If I find out Moody sent him on a wild goose chase, I will hex him into next millennium," she promised, seething.

"Okay, so Hermione is stuck here until Remus returns," Ginny mused. "Unless... we find another way for her to get out."

"Yes," agreed Hermione. "Merlin knows how many more suicides are going to happen with a whole week's delay in working on the magic to return." She sighed at the threat of wasting so much time.

The silence that followed was suddenly broken by a tap on the window. The witches looked up and exclaimed as one, "Hedwig!"

Ginny was the fastest, rushing to the window and letting the owl in. Hedwig ignored her late human's mate and flew straight at Hermione who smiled in relief. Her plea to Red Cloud had obviously been heard and answered. She untied the piece of paper from Hedwig's leg, opened it and started to read. Her face widened into a grin. She re-read the letter several times to memorise the content, then whispered almost reverently, "I believe in magic."

At that, Hedwig took off through the still open window, and the paper dissolved into nothing.

A/N: Big thanks go to NotSoSaintly who has such better ideas as to the use of commas than I do and who manages to tweak my overlong sentences into readable ones.

Blushes

Chapter 6 of 13

Severus enjoys the misery of one blushing Miss Granger, Red Cloud shares some wisdom, and a visitor arrives.

Disclaimer: The characters do not belong to me. The story does. I have written this story for pleasure and am not making a single Knut out of it.

Chapter VI

Blushes

The time was approaching midnight, and Hermione stood shivering at the window, staring out into the dark while silently repeating the words of the note Snape had sent with Hedwig.

Gryffindor,

I have been informed you need a little help. Be in the creature's favourite hiding place at around the witching hour. Be prepared to leave. Memorise the content of this, then say aloud what both you and Peter Pan believe in. After all, we wouldn't want someone else to know what's happening, would we.

Hermione pondered over Snape's ingenuity, wondering what rescue plan he had plotted. Suddenly, the air around her was filled with palpable magic, and there was a loud whoosh.

Hermione startled. Her mind was busy, trying to figure out whether she had suddenly entered some drug-induced dream state. But no, this appeared to be reality, she thought as she heard a mournful note that made her hairs stand up.

"Fawkes?" she asked hesitantly. The phoenix, his wear none the worse since she had last seen him shortly after his human had died, blinked at her and looked carefully around the attic room.

"Oh," said Hermione, the reason for his behaviour suddenly clear to her. "It's safe, Fawkes, I did not tell anyone about this."

Fawkes blinked at her again, and with another whoosh, he was gone. Before Hermione had time to wonder how exactly Snape was going to go about the rescue mission, she heard someone stomping up the stairs. Then she heard Ron's voice.

"She has to be up there, Alastor; we've checked everywhere else."

Although relieved that she had had the sense to lock the door behind her, she knew it would not take long for the two men to knock the door down. *Oh, gods, Snape, you better hurry,* Hermione groaned inwardly.

If the two men managed to get in, there was no way they would let her escape again, of that Hermione was certain. She was starting to panic at the prospect of being locked in her room, constantly guarded by either Ron or Moody for days on end while more witches and wizards ended their lives because all hope for the magic to return was gone. The distinct pop of someone Apparating interrupted her thoughts. She turned around and found herself face to face with Snape.

"Oh, Merlin," Hermione breathed, immense relief flooding through her at the sight of him. "I've never been so happy to see you!"

Snape smirked at her. "I'd never thought I'd hear you say that, Hermione." His expression changing to a serious one, he asked, "Am I correct in assuming that Moody has been informed of your whereabouts?"

Hermione nodded and blushed in embarrassment. "Ron told him."

"Tut, tut, Miss Granger; you should choose your boyfriends more carefully," quipped Snape.

Hermione glared at him. "Are you going to get me out of here, or do you want to wait for them to break the doors down?" she asked, her expression defiant.

The door started to rattle.

"Hold on to me. I'll Apparate us, but I wish to see Moody's expression when he sees me here, which, no doubt, will be priceless," replied Snape with amusement in his voice.

Hermione rolled her eyes. Of course, Snape being Snape, he could not possibly pass up such an opportunity for goading someone. "I just hope he never find out where you're staying," she muttered as she placed her hands on his arms.

Suddenly, the air was filled with the noise of the crashing door, and Moody and Ron tumbled inside, struggling to steady themselves. Ron, a mere arm's length away, looked first at Snape, who had his arm wrapped around Hermione, and then glanced at her briefly.

"Let her go, you bastard," he demanded angrily.

"Not this time, Weasley," Snape sneered, looking Ron up and down, his face expressing distaste. "I suggest you go and get yourself a life, you poor excuse of a human. Learn how *not* to betray your loved ones, instead of going by what The-Boy-Who-Didn't-Live perceived as truth," he hissed.

His grip on Hermione tightened, and with a pop, he Apparated both of them just as Moody lunged forward.

They were in the garden behind the house at Spinner's End. Hermione felt as if someone had knocked the breath out of her. Shakily, she let herself sink down on the lawn.

"Are you alright? I didn't splinch you or anything, did I?" enquired Snape.

Was that concern she detected in his voice? No, it couldn't be, she decided. It must have been due to the Moody-induced excitement that made her imagine things.

"I'm fine," she replied, although she felt anything but.

Now that the ordeal was over, the impact of Ron's actions as well as Moody's unreasonable thirst for revenge started to hit her with force. She started to shake uncontrollably and was unable to swallow the sobs that threatened.

"Come. Let's get you inside," she heard Snape say from somewhere above. Hermione felt herself gently lifted and carried inside, but she didn't care. All she knew was that she was safe, and she had not had to betray him to Moody. The sheer horror at the thought of being forced to betray him in return for her freedom invoked even more cries and sobs.

"Shsh, you're safe now, Hermione. Nothing happened. Moody still doesn't know where I am, and he can't use magic to track us. All is well." Soothing pats on her back and the quietly spoken, reassuring words calmed her somewhat.

"I'm sorry," she blurted out. "If I'd have had any reason to believe that Ron might tell on me, I'd never have gone there!"

"Of course not. Even I'll grant you more intelligence than that," said Snape.

"Wow, that is saying something." The words escaped her without thinking, and she put her hands on her mouth in horror and turned to apologise. She expected a snort, a sneer, a cutting comment, a reprimand, anything...except the reaction he delivered.

Throwing his head back, he laughed; a loud, deep, genuine laugh, one which Hermione imagined no Hogwarts student had ever witnessed. "Indeed, Miss Granger, indeed," he drawled then, quickly returning to his typical sombre self.

"You need to be brought up to date with the latest happenings, but that will have to wait until tomorrow. I dare say I'm exhausted, and you probably are, too," said Snape, eyeing her.

Hermione suddenly realised just how exhausted she was. Pushing aside the curiosity his words had invoked, she got up and said, "Yes, it has been a bit of a trying day."

* * *

The sun was already high in the sky when Hermione finally woke up. She realised with a jolt that Parvati had not bothered to wake her at the usual time. Grabbing some clothes, she hurried to the bathroom to take a quick shower.

Parvati was waiting for her in the room the two young witches shared. "How are you? I figured I should let you sleep after what you went through, and Severus agreed. He mumbled something about preferring you in a more stable state of emotions...not sure what he meant," said Parvati.

Hermione smirked as she remembered the events of last night, of Snape not only rescuing her but also being there to comfort her when she needed it. "Umh, yeah, I rather agree with him," she replied wryly.

"What a relief," his deep voice drawled from the door. "There I was, afraid you might have garnered a taste for becoming a drama queen."

Hermione felt herself blush in embarrassment. Parvati rolled her eyes at their former teacher. "Severus, have you gone mad? Hermione and drama queen go about as well together as you and divination," she admonished him.

"Just wanted to be certain," he reassured her and turned his attention to Hermione.

"I thought I'd better tell you *before* you come down that we have another visitor," said Snape. Seeing her face change from surprise to dawning comprehension, he continued, "Uh, yesterday could be declared Apparition Practice Day, you see. I now know exactly to the minute how much piano playing is required to gather enough magic for two return trips to Grimmauld Place."

Hermione held his gaze steadily and said, "Kingsley Shacklebolt."

"Correct, Miss Granger," he said. "Thankfully, Fawkes arrived here hours after you left for London on Friday and has done much to heal Shacklebolt's physical injuries. However, I will require considerable amounts of magic as well as time to brew potions for both him and Draco," he finished, looking at her questioningly.

"You know, you could just ask," muttered Hermione.

"Having had a few hours to figure out the best plan of action, all while you were obliviously ensconced in the land of Nod," he continued, ignoring her remark but firmly holding her gaze, "and having been given a little *guidance* on the subject matter, I concluded that I need to reinstate some of the magic I utilised yesterday, which means I can't do any brewing today.

"If you brew the potions I need for Draco and our new arrival, Parvati can tend to the patients. And if she feels really generous, she might even cook a nice, hot curry to sustain us." With that said, he turned to Parvati who had been as aptly listening as Hermione.

"I'll do whatever is needed," Parvati agreed readily.

"Will I need magic for any of the potions?" asked Hermione.

Snape's readiness to set aside a day to ensure Shacklebolt's healing reassured her increasingly improving opinion of him. Despite her recent bouts of embarrassment in his presence, despite her suspicion that she was in for more of the same because he had evidently enjoyed baiting her and seeing her blush, she knew she had started to see him in a new light. Not that Hermione had ever lacked respect for him. Right from the very first Potions lesson, she recognised a very highly educated person in him...something she herself had been striving for ever since she could remember. His eloquence as well as his immense knowledge in both Potions and the Dark Arts proved him quite the scholar.

However, what he had never displayed at Hogwarts...at least not in front of students...was his side of humanity. Hermione had known that it was there, hidden somewhere deep inside, since the end of her first year, when it had become clear that Quirrell was the culprit who was after the Philosopher's Stone and not Snape. She figured her opinion of him had started to change the moment he'd saved her life in the battle. From then on, he'd gradually risen on the scale of respect, with each little gesture that firmly put him into the species of humans...not gits, not bats, certainly not vampires...escalating last night when he soothed her with words and reassured her with the lightest of physical touches that all was well; even though he must have been far more exhausted than she, having Apparated considerable distances and tending to both Draco's and Shacklebolt's needs. *Knight in shining armour*. Hermione had to suppress the giggle this cliché prompted within her.

"You will soon need magic to learn to shield your thoughts. You're about as easy to read as a Muggle neon sign in Piccadilly Circus," sneered Snape.

"And most definitely *not* a knight in shining armour," he drawled, his eyes glinting triumphantly as she blushed. "But no, for the potions you are going to brew today, the

lingering magic in my lab will suffice," he added, the glint remaining.

Being entertained with the beauty of the compositions created by the likes of Beethoven, Schumann and other musical masters, executed with equal skill and creativity, was a highly enjoyable experience for Hermione. She rather enjoyed brewing potions in any case, but perceived witnessing the magic gently and intricately weaving itself into the ambience like a well and thoughtfully chosen gift. The more Snape had played the piano, the better Hermione was able to feel the magic. Although she was careful to utilise its availability only when required as part of the brewing process, she was certain that the apparent magic helped with simply being present. Watching the different potions in their various brewing stages while enjoying the music that drifted from Snape's Sanctuary to the upstairs makeshift laboratory, she allowed her thoughts to return to her former Potions professor. *I wonder if he likes Mozart. Probably not. He surely doesn't strike me as the over-the-top-cheerful musical type,* she mused. *The severity of Beethoven's works seems much more fitting.*

Hermione looked up in surprise when the door opened to reveal Parvati.

"You look like you've been enjoying yourself," said Parvati, smiling. Then she sighed. "Lucky you. Brewing potions all day sounds a lot more fun than looking after damaged wizards."

"I can imagine." Hermione eyed her friend with sympathy. "How is Kingsley Shacklebolt doing?" she inquired.

Parvati let out a groan. "If it wasn't so sad, I'd laugh. The stuff he comes up with, you'd think he's developed some strange paranoia syndrome." She shook her head. "He insists that the Muggle government will come after him to kill him unless we find him some special type of magnet to disable the tracking device that they allegedly implanted him with. Honestly, it's bizarre!"

"Well... at least he's stopped insisting that he should be dead," Hermione replied wryly, remembering her recent encounter with the Auror in the front room at number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

Parvati inhaled sharply. "That sounds even worse." She sighed. Then she added briskly, "I just came to let you know dinner will be ready in a few minutes. How far have you got with the potions?"

"I'm nearly done here. I'll clean up and come downstairs," replied Hermione.

Dinner proved to be an interesting affair that evening. Parvati turned out to be an excellent cook, at least as far as vegetable curry was concerned, although her first taste left Hermione gasping for air. The chillies were clearly on the high end of the heat scale.

"Ah. Looks like Miss Granger has never had a chance to adjust her taste-buds to the intensity of cayenne pepper," Snape observed while evidently enjoying his food.

"Intensity?" Hermione asked incredulously. "I'd call it bloody heat!"

Parvati snickered, and Snape went into lecturing mode.

"Cayenne Pepper, typically *Capsicum Annum* or *Capsicum Fastigiatum*, is a medicinal *and* nutritional herb. The potent, hot fruit of cayenne has been used as medicine for centuries. It was considered helpful for various conditions of the gastrointestinal tract, frequently used to treat diseases of the circulatory system. It is even used in Muggle herbal medicine as a circulatory tonic. Rubbed on the skin, cayenne is a remedy for rheumatic pains and arthritis due to its counter-irritant effect." He stopped talking to take another bite, and Hermione was aggravated to note that the heat of the pepper left him entirely unperturbed.

He continued, in the typical manner that enabled him to hold the attention of an entire classroom full of pupils, "Cayenne contains a resinous and pungent substance, capsaicin. This chemical temporarily stimulates release of various neurotransmitters from nerves, leading to their depletion. There can be little doubt that cayenne furnishes one of the purest and strongest stimulants that can be introduced into the stomach. It is said to have been used with success in curing diseases that had resisted all other remedies."

He looked gleeful, Hermione decided, but nevertheless, she found the subject highly fascinating and said so.

"If you are interested, I have Dr John Christopher's book entitled *Capsicum* on the shelf over there. Feel free to read it," he offered and then added menacingly, "in your free time, Miss Granger. *After* you study the Reich works."

Then, as if there had been no interruption, he returned to the characteristics of cayenne pepper. "Cayenne pepper is extremely pungent and, when taken, makes the mouth feel as if it is on fire; this, however, lasts but a few minutes, and I consider it essentially a benefit, for its effect on the glands causes the saliva to flow freely and leaves the mouth clean and moist."

Unbidden and unexpectedly, the low sound of his quiet, deep, penetrating voice sent shivers down Hermione's spine. *Don't blush, don't blush, don't blush.* She learned in that moment, however, that blushing was *not* within her capabilities of control.

"Miss Granger," Severus Snape intoned softly, "is the subject of *Capsicum* giving you discomfort, or have you, perhaps, uncharacteristically allowed your mind to wander off into more dangerous fields?"

Hermione fervently wished for the ground to open up and swallow her, but even in the only place that continuously upheld its magic, her wish was entirely ignored.

Damn that man for noticing her weakness. Her eyes firmly adhered to the floor, she replied, "No, neither."

"Pray tell, what is the cause of this rather noticeably changed... complexion? Is it, perhaps, the *heat* of the cayenne itself?"

She straightened herself, gathered the courage to look at him, and stated boldly, "That is for me to know; and I thank you for desisting your amusement at my cost."

Snape smirked. Sighing mockingly, he said, "Be like that, Hermione; spoil my fun." Whether or not he would heed to her demand remained to be seen.

Both witches rolled their eyes at him as they stood up to clear the table.

While Hermione and Parvati busied themselves tidying up the kitchen, Severus disappeared to check on Draco and Kingsley who had eaten earlier and were now fast asleep, courtesy of their drinks having been laced with a dose of Dreamless Sleep. Considering both wizards' somewhat questionable states of mind, Severus was unwilling to share with them any new insights he was hoping to gain at the impending visit from Red Cloud. It was safer to have one depressed wizard and one recently mind-controlled one firmly established in the land of Nod rather than potentially sneaking around overhearing things not meant for their ears.

Snape's next task was to choose a bottle of something he could enjoy sharing with his female housemates. By the time he returned to his sanctuary, both witches had made themselves comfortable, and three glasses were sitting on the table, waiting to be filled.

They sat, contentedly sipping the 1990 oak-aged Rioja for a while. *Red Cloud must be near,* realised Hermione as a feeling of warmth and comfort washed over her. Now familiar with the scenario, she sank deeper into her chair as Snape said quietly, "Greetings, Red Cloud. We are ready to listen to your wisdom and insight."

The candles that bathed the room in a soft light seemed to suddenly brighten as Red Cloud made his presence known.

"Dark Man, I am happy that all is well again and your rescue operation was a success. The Auror needs neodymium magnets on his arms, shoulders, and neck for some days in order to disable the electronic chips his employers implanted in him. Do not, under any circumstances, allow him to leave this house until they are completely disabled. We can uphold the energy that shields this house from dark forces, but we cannot presently extend it to other areas."

Hermione and Parvati were fascinated by the conversation that followed between Severus and his spirit guide, with Red Cloud giving his charge precise instruction as to the locations of the microchips as well as Kingsley's health, emphasising the need to rid the Auror's body of parasites.

"He'll take less time becoming whole again if the healing is not hindered," he stressed.

Eventually, Red Cloud's attention focussed on Parvati. "The Auror will heal under your care, never fear. Trust your instinct and be rewarded with his full recovery."

Parvati was so much in awe of being addressed by the spirit guide that she was unable to do more than nod in reply.

The deep voice started again. "Gryffindor, you have shown your loyalty to my protégé, and for that, I am grateful to you. You have taken on a tremendous task, which not only requires you to utilise your intelligence beyond limits because, in reality, there are no limits to such, but it will also force you to throw away an entire belief system you and most others have been led to think of as fact. And the only likely reward will be a spiritual awareness unmatched by anyone else so young. You have free will, as you know, so you are free to turn your back and live your own life however you wish."

His words rang into the ensuing silence, until Hermione answered.

"I believe..." She took a deep breath and continued, "My individual needs are taking a back seat at the moment, and that's fine. My conscience tells me to do what I can in order to help restore the magical world. Learning about..." She stopped as she realised that Parvati did not know yet about the death of her best friend. This would not be the right moment to tell her. Hermione continued, "Hearing about the suicides, all the despair that the loss of magic has caused... I don't think I could ever forgive myself if I walked away," she finished.

"You may, at one time or another on this journey you have embarked upon, curse your conscience for its discomfort or think back longingly to the days when ignorance was bliss," Red Cloud said. "But you will learn that neither is true; knowledge...true knowledge...yields power, whereas ignorance inevitably results in fear. And it is your conscience that will lead you to your own powers of magic...the true magic of the universe."

Hermione took in his words. Even if she did not comprehend all Red Cloud had said, she was instinctively confident that one day, she would.

"And that, my dear friends, is what I came to share tonight. May your days be filled with joy. Until we meet again."

Red Cloud's presence slowly faded, leaving three members of the human race deeply relaxed and content with themselves as well as each other, yet with much to consider.

* * *

As much as Hermione loathed the prospect of being the one to inform Parvati of Lavender's death, she felt compelled to do so. Even if she did not share her copy of *The Quibbler*, which she would consider unfair in its own act, chances were that Parvati would find out in any case, possibly at the wrong time or place, Hermione figured.

Strangely enough, it was Kingsley Shacklebolt who helped Parvati overcome her grief. Snape had obtained the neodymium magnets...Hermione had no idea how he had managed that; she had never heard of them until Red Cloud's mention...and he had plastered them on the Auror's arms, shoulders, and neck as advised by his spirit guide. Gradually, Kingsley was coming out of his state of stupor, remorse, and paranoia and beginning to live again. Parvati concentrated wholly on his healing, determined to ensure that at least one person would *not* follow the path Lavender had chosen. It was her own contribution to the Spinner's End residents' joint venture, putting all effort into the healing of one being. For her, his recovery, his becoming whole again somehow gave meaning to Lavender's suicide. She found it no less painful, but at least a meaningful loss became easier to bear, if with time.

Days turned into weeks, September passed almost unnoticed by Hermione, as gradually, her time spent making potions for Draco and Kingsley shifted back to time spent researching Wilhelm Reich's idea of orgone and, eventually, experimenting with orgone.

Time went by unnoticed by Parvati. She busily divided her waking hours between caring for Draco and Kingsley and creating the cosmetic potions that Severus sold to his Muggle acquaintance. The customer base was growing slowly but steadily, with each and every buyer enthusiastically returning for more of the same product or for different ones to try.

For Severus Snape, September passed unnoticed, too. Gradually, the level of magic that had existed the day before he'd Apparated twice was achieved once more. And gradually, he started to spend less time playing the piano and more time looking into ways to heal Draco's depression and joining Hermione in her orgone experiments.

Many evenings were spent in Snape's sanctuary over a bottle of wine while they discussed their progress. Often, Red Cloud communicated with them on such occasions, often to share his wisdom, occasionally to inform them of the well-being of other individuals such as Pansy and Seamus, rarely to give a snippet of what was to come, but always leaving behind a soul-deep contentedness. On one occasion, Red Cloud informed Severus that someone "on our side" was on his way to Spinner's End. As the divine being deemed that this was all he needed to know, he did not divulge any more insight, and Severus knew better than to ask.

Therefore, Severus Snape was nowhere near as surprised as his female housemates when one day, in the middle of dinner, the bell rang.

Outside stood Charlie Weasley, carrying a large, bulky package.

* * *

A/N

Grateful thanks to Notsosaintly for cleaning up my writing and for being a sounding board whenever I need one.

Stranger Than You Dreamt It

Chapter 7 of 13

Charlie reveals the contents of the package, Parvati speaks kind words, Draco begins to see the light at the end of the tunnel, and Hermione is afraid she has a masochistic streak.

Disclaimer: The characters do not belong to me. The story does. I have written this story for pleasure and am not making a single Knut out of it, let alone any other currency.

* * *

Chapter VII

Stranger Than You Dreamt It

* * *

"Charlie!" exclaimed Hermione. "What brings *you* here? And how did you find Spinner's End?"

Snape cleared his throat. "Since Red Cloud told us to *expect* a visitor, I'll assume my *spirited* guide is somehow involved." He arched his eyebrow and looked questioningly at Charlie.

Hermione felt a sliver of warmth wash over her, as if Red Cloud was not far, but not entirely present.

"Oh..." Comprehension dawned on Charlie's face. "Red Cloud?"

Severus nodded.

"He didn't tell me who his protégé was while we were Vanished, and since we've returned, I've not been able to communicate with him. At least not consciously," explained Charlie.

"That doesn't surprise me," muttered Severus before turning back to Charlie. "So, Mr Weasley, would you like to elaborate on your recent activities? Miss Granger was informed about your Vanishing and subsequent rescue by your sister, who is currently residing at Grimmauld Place. As is your youngest brother."

Charlie nodded and started to tell his story. "When we were safely back in this realm, I decided to follow Red Cloud's advice because, although it didn't make much sense at the time, it felt instinctively right. And when I realised that all the magic was gone, well, let's say I kind of got the idea that I was doing my bit to contribute to the effort of probably no more than a handful of people working on ways to bring the magic back." He stopped and looked into the round.

Snape smirked at Hermione, and she rolled her eyes at him.

"I'm relieved to note that *your* brain cell count is higher than that of your youngest brother, Mr Weasley," drawled Snape.

Charlie laughed. "Yeah, my little brother still has a lot of growing up to do. I bet he wasn't happy about Hermione working with you."

That's the understatement of the year," muttered Hermione, sounding angrier than she meant to as she thought briefly of her ex-boyfriend.

Snape snorted amusedly. "He went as far as telling Mad-Eye Moody who Hermione was spending her time with and helped him try to force her into divulging my location." Then he added, more as an afterthought, "All in the name of love, of course."

Charlie looked concerned now. "I'll have words with him," he promised.

Hermione gazed at him. "Don't do it on my behalf, Charlie. I'm through with him, and I doubt there'll ever be more than a polite hello between us, if that."

"Hermione, you were always too good for him, honestly. He never deserved you. *I will* talk to him because he needs to learn to respect the will of other people. I don't need more than one prat for a brother, you know.... Unlike Percy, Ron *does* have potential. If he needs a kick in the arse to realise it, I'll be happy to deliver it."

Somebody cleared his throat in the ensuing silence after Charlie's words. *Must be my imagination*, Hermione thought, as no-one else seemed to notice.

"Do go on with your story, Mr Weasley. I dare say it's more interesting than hearing you plan boot-camp methods for your brother, even though I'll admit the *ideas* sound delightful," remarked Severus and grinned wryly when Hermione rolled her eyes at him again.

"Yes, I bet that idea would appeal to you," Charlie agreed. Then he squared his shoulders and returned to reporting his recent activities. "First, all I knew was to go to Hogwarts and to look for something. I didn't even know *what* to look for; all Red Cloud had told me was that I would know the moment I saw it."

"It was difficult enough to find the castle...without the magic it is only a derelict building, a ruin. But eventually, I found a way in, managed to get beyond the ruins, and after an entire day spent looking for the unknown, I found it."

Everyone looked at Charlie expectantly, and into the silence, someone, a male, cleared his throat.

"Yes, yes, I'll uncover you, sir," Charlie said as he got up and moved to the bulky, wrapped package that he had brought with him, ignoring the confused looks of his audience. He placed it on a chair and started to unwrap it with reverence.

Hermione and Parvati gaped. Severus turned white. Charlie looked smug.

"Oh, it is *so* wonderful to finally be able to communicate again," sighed the portrait of Hogwarts' former headmaster, Albus Dumbledore.

"Severus, aren't you pleased to see me well? Ladies, no need to look like fish out of water." He chuckled. "Mr Weasley, congratulations for a difficult mission accomplished."

Snape was the first to find his voice again. "Headmaster." He bowed slightly.

"Incredible," breathed Parvati. "After we lost the magic, I didn't dare dream of ever being able to communicate with a portrait again."

Hermione was too distracted to speak. She was worried about Snape's reaction.

Suddenly, nagging doubts entered her mind. Maybe Snape was, after all, only a cold-blooded murderer and had no other reason than the genuine wish to kill whoever was in his way. *Don't be stupid, Granger*, she admonished herself. *No murderer would communicate with a spirit guide the calibre of Red Cloud.*

"Severus," Dumbledore said softly and looked at his former Potions professor searchingly.

"Not now, Albus." Severus sounded pained.

"Yes, now, Severus. I can't imagine Miss Granger being here, at your place, if she did not trust you implicitly. Aren't I correct, Miss Granger?"

"Absolutely." Hermione's voice sounded hollow, her tone unconvincing to herself. *Get a grip. He is not a murderer.* She felt queasy.

Snape gestured with his hand for the headmaster to speak. Hermione noticed that he looked defeated, resigned to whatever fate was coming his way.

"Just because I'm dead does *not* mean I won't help you once you succeed in reclaiming the magic. If it is in my power to keep you out of Azkaban, then I will make certain to utilise that power; especially as it is for a crime I myself forced you to commit it," said Dumbledore.

Hermione breathed out slowly in relief at Dumbledore's speech. *He really is not a murderer.*

"When Red Cloud approached me, I realised instantly that my portrait staying *with you* for the time being was the best course of action. And I wholeheartedly agree with your spirit guide that you deserve freedom for all you have done and *not* a sentence!" continued Dumbledore. "You are *not* guilty, Severus. It was I who forced you to take the action you did; and I, for one, know without a shadow of a doubt that you would *never* have agreed to end my life...regardless of the fact that I was close to the end when you did so...had you not agreed to obey me unconditionally when you joined our side."

Hermione's mind was whirling. She could not fathom a life of unconditional obedience to anyone for any length of time, and Snape had done so for nearly twenty years. Her thoughts were interrupted by the former headmaster's voice.

"You may find, Severus, that sharing your story with the two young ladies present will not only ease your own burden but will benefit the working relationship you have with each one," suggested Dumbledore.

Severus remained silent, the expression on his face now unreadable. Hermione felt relieved that he no longer looked so defeated.

Everyone looked up in surprise when Charlie spoke again...they all had forgotten his presence. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but I'm dead tired. Is there a bed I can occupy for the night?"

"Of course, Mr Weasley. You must be exhausted after the events of the last days," said Dumbledore. "I'm quite ready for a nap myself, actually. I'm not used to talking as a portrait yet."

Severus looked lost in thought for a moment, and Hermione wondered where he would put Charlie for the night. Draco's room was small and already had two occupants. Hers and Parvati's did not have sufficient space for another bed or even a mattress.

Snape stood up and motioned for Charlie to follow. "I'll let you have my bedroom, and I'll stay down here on the sofa. That way, nobody will wake you up, and I can have coffee and increase the level of magic as needed," he stated as both men left the room.

Dumbledore gazed at Hermione. "You know, Miss Granger," he said slowly, "he really *is* innocent. I hope he will tell you all that happened, but have no doubt of his innocence."

Hermione stared at the portrait. "Yes. I believe you, Professor Dumbledore," she replied softly. Then, embarrassed that he had obviously read her doubting thoughts, she whispered, "I had no reason to doubt his innocence, and I am sorry."

Suddenly, the emotional result of the past few hours washed over her in a wave of exhaustion. She excused herself, bade Dumbledore good night and followed Parvati to the bedroom.

* * *

The atmosphere at Spinner's End following the arrival of Albus Dumbledore's portrait became decidedly subdued.

Charlie left soon after he had woken up the following morning, keen on seeing his youngest siblings and hoping he might be of further use stationed close to Diagon Alley. "I don't need to tell you that I'm there if you need any help. Just have Hermione or Parvati contact me through Remus, Tonks, or Ginny," he said in parting, earning a grateful "Thank you" and a wistful expression from Snape.

Albus asked Severus to hang his portrait above the piano so that he could not only enjoy the music but also be present when Red Cloud spoke to them.

Severus Snape withdrew to himself. Dinners were mostly silent; only occasionally were questions asked and answered with regard to each resident's work, but never personal.

To Hermione, it felt as if Snape's sardonic humour, his evident enjoyment of teasing her over the previous days, was nothing but a bizarre dream. Utterly bewildered, she realised that she missed that formerly unknown side of her ex-professor.

How stupid can I get! she fumed at herself. *Do I have a masochistic streak I didn't know about that I enjoyed him making me uncomfortable?*

With all her might, she concentrated on her notes, returning to working out a way to improve Wilhelm Reich's Orgone so it could be utilised in the search for the magic.

Hours later, Hermione's grumbling stomach told her that dinner time was approaching. She sighed; still no progress on the magic front, but at least she had managed to rid herself of any more unpleasant thoughts about masochistic tendencies.

Parvati appeared to call her for dinner. On the way to the kitchen, she remarked, "I'm worried about Severus. He's so... miserable."

"Yes, I've noticed that, too," replied Hermione. "He was becoming quite likeable, I thought. And now, he hardly talks." She stopped speaking as they approached the sanctuary.

Dinner was once more a subdued affair. However, for the first time in more than a week, Severus produced a bottle of Chateaufort-du-Pape while the two young witches cleared the kitchen.

He motioned for Hermione and Parvati to take their usual seats around the small table.

"I believe," he said slowly, "it is time to share each one's progress over the last few days in some detail."

He looked at Parvati, and there was a hint of a smirk on his face. "Kingsley has improved tremendously under your care. And from what I can see, Draco is at least as stable as he can get for now."

Parvati squirmed slightly under Severus' scrutiny, but faced him boldly. "Kingsley is definitely recovering. It won't be long before he'll get all edgy from sheer boredom. He was actually looking over my shoulder today when I was brewing cosmetic potions."

"Draco, hm... I'd say Kingsley's presence is good for him as well as the continued use of woodruff in his potion. I know that doesn't sound very scientific, but I know from experience that scents can do a world of good, and woodruff seems to be the one for Draco. He's actually been *talking*, as in... more than giving one-syllable answers. So yes, there's progress, for sure."

Snape nodded thoughtfully. "And how is the brewing going, Parvati? I imagine nursing another back to health must have slowed down the process?" he enquired.

Parvati grinned smugly. "Nah. It was simply a matter of using bigger cauldrons. With Hermione's help, I worked out the formula for bigger batches, so I'm not behind," she said.

Hermione fully expected a sarcastic remark from him after Parvati had mentioned her help. However, it never came. Instead, he looked at her with a hint of approval and said, "I suppose there is no need for me to check that you took the arithmantic calculations into the equation. You always understood perfectly well how to apply your knowledge of various subjects."

She looked at him in surprise, and he quirked his eyebrow. "What? Have I said something untrue?"

"No," she said haltingly and felt her face blush, "I just never expected you to say something complimentary about me out loud."

Hermione was unsure whether it was her blushing or her words that elicited an amused chuckle from him.

The portrait of Albus above the piano also chuckled. "Believe it or not, Hermione, he might not have cared for the hand-waving in class, but he's always appreciated your brain. Even if he never admitted it in front of you."

Hermione did not know what to say and blushed even deeper when Severus drawled, "Goodness, gracious, me, what a note-worthy moment...Miss Know-it-all is at a loss for words," causing both Dumbledore and Parvati to burst into laughter.

Eventually, the laughter died down. Soberly, Severus turned his attention back to Hermione. "What about you? How is your research coming along?" he asked, now fully focused on her.

Hermione hesitated. She was not happy with her lack of progress where Orgone was concerned and hated to admit failure. "It's not," she admitted grudgingly. "I just can't seem to come up with a way to improve Reich's formula of Orgone. And Orgone alone doesn't have *any* effect on the magic whatsoever." A frustrated sigh escaped her.

Snape's words soothed her, and once more, she marvelled at how different a person he was outside Hogwarts.

"Don't despair. The task you have taken on is not something you could expect to resolve overnight. Reich took years to come up with something as powerful as Orgone, and he was much older.

"You have studied the subject for a mere few weeks. How can you expect to find a solution so soon?" challenged Snape.

Hermione felt the urge to explain her frustration. "To me, every day without magic is a day that leads to more potential suicides. I'm dreading the next issue of *The Quibbler*, knowing there'll be more notices of wizards and witches taking that way out because they can't cope."

In her agitated state, she never noticed the sudden change of energy, the warmth and soul-deep comfort she had come to associate with Red Cloud's presence, and was surprised when she heard Severus greet his spirit guide.

The wise being from another dimension wasted no time with niceties. A short greeting, addressed to all of them, the acknowledgement of the new addition to the household in the shape of Albus Dumbledore's portrait, and he came straight to the point.

"You have, this week, reached an important point. Your untiring dedication to find a way to enable the magic to function again will indubitably bear fruit sooner rather than later.

"Naturally, my charge is as stubborn as ever, but I am sure there is hope yet."

Upon Red Cloud's words, which held evident amusement in his voice, Hermione glanced at Severus. He looked uncomfortable, and she had difficulty suppressing a grin. Witnessing the discomfort of the master of sarcasm, who never failed to use an opportunity to make others squirm, was something she would remember for a long time.

Her attention returned to Red Cloud's words. "I believe you have now covered the basics. One is holding up the magic, one ensures the continuing healing of those in need, another is up to date with the Orgone research. And the wisdom of a former headmaster will benefit all involved.

"Now, it is time to move on to the next stage. Dark man, holding up the magic is still inevitable. However, it might speed up matters if you get together with your helper. Start experimenting, the two of you. Take into consideration that magic, in and of itself, cannot be scientifically determined by either wizard or Muggle standards. Therefore, I advise you to take metaphysical qualities of any potential additional Orgone ingredients into consideration.

"Look at man-made items designed to improve the quality of life. Look at the ratio of organic versus inorganic components.

"Take the metaphysical quality of crystals into account, too. That is an important item; do not underestimate it."

Hermione's mind was whirling. There was now an entire new area to explore. Maybe what Red Cloud had suggested would *really* help them to regain the magic.

Red Cloud was not finished, and Hermione once again focused her attention fully on his words.

The spirit guide was now addressing Parvati. "You are doing well. Your approach to handling the injured Auror has been a success, and he is healing faster than expected. He will be an asset to your team here. When he is ready to talk, he will give you insight on the workings of the collaboration between Dark wizards and Muggle governments.

"Do not worry about the young, fair-skinned one. He, too, is on the road to recovery. His former headmaster is doing *his* part to contribute to his healing. And there will be further help. Nothing to look out for just yet...regaining power over the magic has to have first priority."

Parvati beamed at Red Cloud's words. Hermione was pleased for her friend's success as well as relieved that Draco was no longer such a worry. As much as she had disliked him at Hogwarts, seeing him in such a poor condition made her feel helpless. She was also relieved that Red Cloud considered finding the magic the highest priority.

* * *

Over the next few days, a new work pattern was established for the residents of Spinner's End. Kingsley started to show interest in the cosmetic potions Parvati was brewing. He began analysing Muggle cosmetic products to have a comparison. Together, they looked after Draco, who was slowly overcoming the severe depression he had tumbled into soon after Albus Dumbledore's death.

Hermione spent most of her mornings studying, sometimes indoors, but whenever the weather allowed, she sat outside in the back garden, surrounded by owls, the occasional unicorn, Fawkes, and other magical creatures.

She generally experimented in the lab in the afternoon. Often, Severus joined her, starting by reading her latest notes and then doing new Orgone-related experiments himself.

Severus was beginning to relax again since Red Cloud's visit. Hermione had no doubt that Albus contributed to his improved state, too...she often found the two talking; either when Severus had gathered enough magic at Spinner's End for everyone's needs by playing the piano, or when he was preparing dinner, a task, Hermione figured, he was as adept and creative at as he was at brewing potions.

Experimenting was a true challenge for Hermione, especially with Severus around. Within days, they had finally achieved small successes. A rose quartz added to the Orgone resulted in sparks of magic as far as two houses away.

A change in the formula by adding metal shavings to the resin mix increased the level of magic inside the lab manifold. For the first time since the battle, Hermione felt a hope that they might regain the magic.

"We're on the right path, Severus!" she cried excitedly when the magic shifted significantly after a batch they poured was hardening.

"I think we are," he confirmed. "Let's go for a walk and see if this version of Orgone will yield magic further away from here."

They experimented with simple spells every few minutes as they walked away from Spinner's End. A pebble was successfully lifted up with a *Wingardium Leviosa*, a stray cat subjected to a *Petrificus Totalus*, Hermione hit with a giggling hex.

"I see; this seems to work a treat." Severus smirked and took his time to reverse the hex on her.

When they came closer to the more inhabited part of the town, passing a newly constructed tower, Severus stopped to examine it.

"What is this eyesore?" he wondered aloud.

"Oh, it's one of those new mobile phone signal towers. Muggles have been improving the reception of mobile phones by putting these towers up all over the country," Hermione said dismissively, keen to move on to see how far away from Spinner's End the magic would work.

"Try a spell, Hermione," demanded Severus. Remembering his recently cast giggling hex, she decided to cast a hair-dyeing spell to turn his hair green, if only temporarily.

His hair remained black, but there was no smirk on his face. Hermione realised then that he had not even tried to deflect the spell, as if he had expected for it to fail.

"I believe," he said thoughtfully, "it is time for Kingsley to talk."

They walked back silently, each deep in thought about this seemingly unexplainable haphazard disappearance of magic. Hermione wondered how much Severus knew about this and why he thought talking to Kingsley would help.

As it was Parvati's turn to prepare dinner, Severus headed straight to the kitchen, assuming correctly that Kingsley would be keeping her company. Hermione followed closely on his heels.

"Kingsley," Severus greeted the Auror, "what do you know about mobile phone towers...from a Muggle perspective?"

"Uh..." Kingsley shifted his eyes rapidly from one place to another, avoiding looking at anyone directly.

Snape, Hermione, Parvati, and even Albus Dumbledore were looking at the dark-skinned Auror expectantly, and the silence that followed grew to an uncomfortable level.

Parvati dropped the cooking spoon into the sink, approached Kingsley, and lightly put a hand on his arm. "It's okay, Kingsley. They are on the same side as you. If we are to have any hope of bringing the magic back, it's up to Severus and Hermione. I know *you* are as desperate as any of us to make that happen. And if you tell them what you know, the magic might be regained all the sooner. And then we can kick arse with the Muggle Voldies of the world."

Parvati's flippant use of American slang made Kingsley grin slightly, and he relaxed.

Hermione wondered how much Parvati knew already about Kingsley's ordeal with the Muggle government. *They seem to be a lot closer than I realised*, she mused and noticed once more how much Parvati had matured since their days at Hogwarts.

Her musings were interrupted by Kingsley's words. "There is a lot more to the entire disaster than just mobile phone towers," he started and followed Severus' motion to sit down. As he drew a deep breath, Parvati switched the cooker off and took a seat next to him.

"It's okay, Kingsley," Parvati said in a soft and reassuring tone. "You can trust Severus and Hermione. They won't judge you for what you know."

Kingsley nodded and relaxed once more. "Alright. You asked, and I shall answer.

"From what I gathered shortly after the battle took place, Voldemort had made a pact with some high officials in various Muggle governments. Some such Muggles had approached him sometime last year. They used Muggle technology to render his magic useless, so they could force him to hear them out.

"Then they told him they knew about our world, and they knew about the war between him and us. They claimed that they agreed with him on his views about mixed blood, and that they had the same problem in the Muggle world, that there were too many inferior races about and they wanted to do something about that.

"They made a deal with him; they promised to help him win the war with their Muggle technology and disabling the magic for all wizard-kind except Voldemort and his followers, provided he agreed to get rid of some specific Muggles, the names of which they would provide him with. They likened those individuals to Harry Potter and Albus Dumbledore, people who were rebelling against the true goal of the governments, and promised that he would have free reign with them as long as he got rid of them for good.

"That appealed to him, of course, having some Muggles served on a silver platter, so he agreed; not that he had much choice, what with his magic not working.

"They ran into problems, though. First, someone manipulated the technology they used for disabling the magic; and by the time they figured it out, Voldemort was defeated, and there weren't many Death Eaters left, if any at all.

"So, in the end, those stooges refined their technology even further, and within weeks, these signal towers went up all over, not just in England, but in Europe, North America, parts of Asia...all under the guise of improving the reception on mobile phones. In reality, these antennas on top of those towers contain the technology to not only keep the magic disabled but also to place large parts of the Muggle population under mind-control," explained Kingsley. "Those few Muggles in control can effectively turn entire nations into mind-controlled sheep in a matter of hours," he finished.

A long silence followed. Suddenly, everyone started to talk at once.

"Oh, Merlin, those Muggles are just as bad as Voldemort!"

"This is even worse than I feared!"

"It's Voldemort all over again, just different weapons!"

Kingsley had gone all quiet, occasionally nodding in agreement, all the while holding on to Parvati as if for dear life.

Eventually, Albus cleared his throat loudly to gather everyone's attention. "I believe there is a way to disable this Muggle technology." Turning to Hermione, he asked, "Would you mind telling me about your walk this afternoon?"

Hermione did so, occasionally interrupted by Severus who added some detail or other.

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes. Could you possibly bury your improved Orgone near this tower?"

Hermione looked questioningly at Severus, and he nodded.

"We can do that, sure," he said and turned to Hermione. "It might be beneficial to run some arithmantic calculations to get an idea on how many pieces to bury and how long it's likely to take before there is any noticeable effect."

Dinner was, for once, a more lively affair. Kingsley showed his affection for Parvati openly, and Parvati looked very happy. Draco displayed interest not only in joining the others at the dinner table but also in the latest developments in the search for magic.

Hermione was at the same time grateful and disappointed that Snape had not taken up teasing her again. *Gods, Granger, you are masochistic*, she groaned inwardly, confused at her own emotions.

Once everyone finished eating, Snape invited Kingsley and Draco to choose some wine. The three wizards disappeared to the cellar, and Hermione and Parvati started clearing the table.

"How big is this wine cellar?" Hermione wondered aloud. "I've never seen him bring any wine, and yet, we seem to go through a fair amount every week."

Parvati chuckled. "He barter shampoo and moisturisers with a few small vineyards in France. They only sell their wines directly to the public and found that people who are interested in such artisan products are also interested in high quality cosmetic potions. The vineyards cannot buy the potions because then they would be subject to heavy regulations imposed by Muggle governments. So, instead, they pay Severus with wine in turn and only sell his potions to trusted customers."

"What a cunning way to bypass Muggle taxes!" Hermione could not help but be impressed.

"Cunning?" Severus, having returned from the cellar, snorted. "I'd call it self-preservation. Why would I wish to contribute the financing of more Muggle wars? I know enough about the way Muggle governments work, and I dare say I have better ways to spend money than paying taxes that will be used for a purpose I despise," he finished, smirking.

"Damn right," muttered Kingsley as he put two bottles of wine on the table.

"Some members of Muggle governments make Voldemort look like an innocent child. They've long stopped returning the taxes to the population and use it any way they want."

"Is it that bad?" Draco asked incredulously.

"It is, Draco," Kingsley replied softly. "But it's nothing we can't deal with. We have one huge advantage...our creativity. These few handfuls of Muggles who have the upper hand at present can't spell the word, let alone know its meaning. All we have to do is use it to our advantage, and they'll fold like a house of cards."

Everyone looked at Kingsley in astonishment until a voice thundered, "Well said, dark-skinned man. Creativity is indeed the key. It goes hand in hand with following your heart, for you can only be creative when you let your heart speak."

Nobody had noticed Red Cloud's presence until he spoke, but it was noticeable that he left as soon as he had said what he had come to say. There was a sudden chill in the air.

A long silence followed the spirit guide's departure. To everyone's surprise, it was Draco who spoke next.

"Uh, Granger," he said hesitantly, "I suppose you'll be doing the calculations on the Orgone? Would you mind if we did them together?"

Hermione did her best to hide her surprise at his question. "Sure, *Draco*," she said. "In the morning after breakfast, okay?"

"Yes, okay. Thank you, Hermione," replied Draco.

* * *

A/N

The title of this chapter is lifted off the Phantom Of The Opera Soundtrack. I thought it fitting.

Big thanks to the fantabulous beta goddess, Notsosaintly. Her never-ending supply of commas, her intimate knowledge of the English grammar, and not least her thoughtful comments all help turn this into a readable story. You rock!

It's Just A Little Crush

Chapter 8 of 13

Draco starts to live again a little. Hermione brews Orgone. Severus discovers he's grown rather fond of the young witch.

Disclaimer: JKR owns it all. I don't. Heck, I only own the paper I write my stories on because nice people like Dorkboy gift me with notebooks.

* * *

Chapter VIII

It's Just A Little Crush

The following evening, dinner was more blithe than any previous occasion. Parvati and Kingsley had created a curry that held a decidedly Caribbean touch with morsels of pineapple added and plantain on the side. Even Draco praised the food as highly palatable once he had overcome the shock of the chilly-induced heat.

The day's work with Hermione improved Draco well past expectations anyone might have harboured. They had started off in companionable silence after Hermione had explained the goals of the arithmetic calculations. When they were ready to compare results, both were surprised that each one's conclusions were very similar, and by the time Severus popped in to check how Draco was faring, both were entangled in a passionate discussion about Arithmancy.

Severus was simultaneously relieved and affronted that Draco was opening up to Hermione. Relieved that Draco appeared to be finally leaving the mental abyss behind that had held him entrapped for so long; affronted because it was obvious how much Hermione was enjoying Draco's company. *What is it to you, anyway? She's none of your business.* He was thoroughly irritated with himself.

When Severus sat down at the piano for his daily gathering of magic, he still felt chafed. Thankfully, playing Schumann's Kinderszenen did its own magic to soothe his nerves, and soon he was as calm as always when indulging in performing the works of masters long gone.

Severus stopped playing once the magic abounded again. His eyes fell on the portrait, and he allowed a small sigh to escape. Portrait Albus seemed no less omniscient than living Albus had been.

"What bothers you, Severus?" Albus asked promptly. "You are not still worried about the consequences for yourself once the magic returns, I'm sure. It can't be the relationship between Parvati and Kingsley. You told me yourself of your surprise at what an acceptable pair they make. Has Draco fallen back into depression?"

"No, not at all. In fact, he's doing better than ever today. Discussing Arithmancy with Miss Granger in the most animated way." Severus sneered at the portrait.

Albus chuckled quietly. "And that irks you."

The scowl deepened on Severus' face, causing Albus to laugh. "If you'll excuse me, Albus. I'm not in the mood for this," he uttered and turned to leave for some solitude in the garden.

The weather was still warm for late September, many bushes still in bloom, and the magical creatures were scattered around in a peaceful way. He sat down on the stone bench underneath the weeping willow at the end of the garden. *Why does her getting along well with Draco bother me? It's not as if Draco will stop her from working hard on regaining the magic, and even if he did attempt to do so, she would not allow it; she is far too dedicated to allow any interruptions* she mused.

But she is quite enchanting when she blushes so prettily, suggested another voice. He mentally shook himself, trying to thwart any further thoughts of the young witch. Unfortunately, any train of thought seemed to inevitably lead to destination Hermione. He had never given thought to Parvati in the same way when it was just her, Draco and himself residing at Spinner's End. The whole situation, or rather his thinking process on it, was highly disconcerting to him.

Severus' musings were interrupted by Draco, who sought him out to present the arithmetic calculations.

"We figured it out," Draco said, his tone carrying something akin to pride. "The best days for brewing the Orgone is tomorrow and Sunday. And according to some calculations of our resident genius, it'll best work if half of the metal shavings comprise copper, and the most suitable gemstones seem to be quartz." Draco uttered the words nervously and in rapid succession, not yet used to speaking more than a word or two at one time.

Severus looked at Draco with interest. What the boy had said sounded plausible. But why did he have to refer to *her* so affectionately as resident genius? And why was he capable of talking with *her* in a normal way, but seemed nervous around him?

He let it go for now, concentrating instead on the results of the arithmetic exercise. "We'll discuss how to proceed after dinner, I suggest, when everyone is present," Severus said eventually, and Draco left to go back inside.

After dinner, another bottle of wine was shared as all of the residents of Spinner's End settled comfortably into chairs around the small table. Hermione obliged Severus's request to rehash the calculations for the broader audience, earning admiration from Parvati.

"Arithmancy has never been my strength." Parvati sighed wistfully.

"Oh, Parvati, I've never been good with cosmetic potions," said Hermione impatiently. "We all have different talents! And you're really good at those potions!"

"She is," Kingsley confirmed and gave the young witch an affectionate look as she squirmed, uncomfortable with the praise.

Severus was keen to return to the subject at hand. "Now, we should probably dedicate tomorrow to brewing the Orgone." Turning to Hermione, he asked, "How many batches can you brew in one day?"

Hermione replied, "I can do twenty-four muffin-sized ones, as long as there are sufficient amounts of resin and metal shavings, especially copper. We have plenty of quartz, probably enough for at least a hundred muffins or so."

The young witch shifted and withdrew a parchment from her jeans pocket. "I did some more calculations earlier. They show that it might be worth burying larger pieces of Orgone with a larger crystal point embedded in the centre. A kind of cone or pyramid shape appears to work best," she said while unfolding the parchment. Then she handed it to him.

He studied her additional calculations, and marvelling at her ingenuity, he wondered if this new experiment might meet Red Cloud's approval. *Of course it does, Dark Man. Remember, creativity is the key to regaining control from those particular Muggle forces,* Red Cloud spoke directly to his mind and disappeared as suddenly as he had arrived.

"Have you thought about possible moulds?" Severus asked Hermione.

She grinned. "I've given it some thought. Ideally, I'd like to devise a small pyramid at the exact scale of the Cheops Pyramid. Until I figure out how to go about this, I think ordinary Muggle party hats will work as moulds."

Severus looked at her, astonished. "Blimey," he said. "Your creativity really knows no bounds. Party hats!" He laughed.

Hermione blushed. "The size is just right. They mustn't be too large, or else they'll take too long to harden. And besides, it'll be hard to hide them if they're too big," she said in defence.

Parvati grinned at her. "No need to defend your creativity. I think Severus meant to praise rather than mock you."

Severus felt a wave of protectiveness wash over him when he observed Hermione's face turn a deeper shade of red. He found her blushes delightfully enticing. Her ability of preserving such a measure of innocence after the years of war, of facing prejudice, and eventually of battle, and with it the loss of friends and subsequently the magic, amazed him.

"I never meant to mock you, Hermione," he said softly. "Allowing our creativity free reign is exactly what we need to beat those scumbags who use technology that suppresses the magic."

Severus was not sure how to interpret the look of relief on her face. Did his opinion of her or his actions matter to her? He did not know. What he did know was that he had grown increasingly fond of the witch, who, for years, had been an irritant at best and the bane of his classroom existence at worst.

* * *

Hermione politely declined Parvati and Kingsley's offer of help with the brewing the next morning. She had already accepted Draco's offer to help, and more than two people did not really fit into their small working space.

Severus was playing the piano, but for the first time, the sound did nothing to soothe him. When he stopped playing, he remained seated and just stared at the keys.

Albus' portrait observed him, and eventually, he spoke. "If the thought of Draco and Hermione being alone together is torturing you so, why don't you join them? I'm sure she won't mind, Severus."

When Severus merely glared at him, Albus smiled. "Go on. I dare you." He chuckled softly to himself.

Severus sighed. His days had definitely been more peaceful before Albus-Omniscient-Dumbledore had joined the household.

Slowly, Severus made his way upstairs. Halfway up, he heard Hermione talk and paused to listen.

"No, Draco, I don't think you're ugly at all. Don't be daft. I find you perfectly likeable since you got rid of that arrogance of yours. And I can understand your craving for companionship, especially now, with seeing Kingsley and Parvati so happy together.

"But honestly, Draco, you and I just wouldn't work. Not now, in any case. It's only been a few weeks since I broke up with Ron, and I'm not feeling ready for a relationship, not after he betrayed me so," Hermione added softly.

Severus found himself unable to move. A multitude of emotions crashed somewhere deep inside him. Relief that Hermione had pushed Draco away. Hope that she would get over the Weasley prat without having issues with trust in any future relationship. And annoyance that Draco was making advances on her. *How dare the prat. It's preposterous! She is far too good for him*, he thought.

And she's not too good for you? another voice piped up. He faltered.

She would never give him a second look. Not only was she too pure-hearted, too innocent to accept someone with a past like his own, but she was also too good-looking, very much unlike himself.

She would never give him a second look. She liked good-looking guys like the Weasley prat who had betrayed her. She would probably team up with Charlie Weasley. At least his brain cell count was considerably higher than that of his youngest brother. Charlie obviously liked her, Severus was certain of it, remembering the night Charlie had stayed and how he had praised Hermione.

Eventually, Severus resolved to simply enjoy her company while he had the opportunity and proceeded to the top of the stairs to enter the room with the lab setting.

"No, Draco," Hermione was saying. "I can assure you the resin will not touch your skin! Unfortunately, I can't hold the crystal in place and pour the resin...I'd need three hands to do that!

"Why don't I hold the crystal and you pour the resin?"

"I can't because my hands aren't steady. And I don't want to burn your fingers," whined Draco.

Prat, thought Severus as he moved towards them. "Allow me," he said and took the crystal from Draco. Turning to Hermione, he nodded. "Pour it."

Hermione rewarded him with a brilliant smile, and he felt suddenly very happy that he had heeded Albus' advice.

"You've come at the right moment. Draco was afraid I'd burn him with the resin," she said in a cheerful voice and carefully poured the resin into the party hat, expertly avoiding his fingers that held the crystal in place.

He did not care about that in the least. If she was this nice to him, he would gladly let her burn his hand. Nevertheless, he appreciated that she did not. "Thank you for sparing my hands."

She laughed. "Thank you for having more confidence in me than Draco did."

Draco sighed and rolled his eyes. "It's not a lack of confidence in you. I'm not feeling confident about myself." He looked down, as if not quite willing or able to meet anyone's eyes.

Hermione was at his side instantly. "Draco, look at me." She tugged on his sleeve until he lifted his eyes, full of uncertainty, and met hers. "You've only just come out of a debilitating depression, Draco, and you're doing wonderful! You are completely the opposite of the person you were when I arrived. Heck, until a few days ago, you never spoke! And if you don't feel confident now, that's fine. You'll re-learn that. Just like you've learned to laugh again, to *live* again. Please, don't despair, just because of a tiny setback.

"It's not important, anyhow. Severus can help me with pouring the few that are left. We've got most of it done already, and that's thanks to you, Draco," Hermione said. Draco looked happier.

How does she manage to always find the right words? Severus wondered. He had never met anyone so compassionate, anyone with such a lack of prejudice.

"Hermione is right. No reason to get upset over yourself. Besides, since I'm here, I can risk getting my skin burned," Severus said wryly. "I saw Fawkes in the garden earlier on. Why don't you keep him some company? It will soothe you."

Draco shrugged, but appeared to follow his advice and left the room.

Hermione returned to the counter that was filled with muffin pans, which contained the hardening Orgone poured earlier, and several glass jars over which party hats were suspended.

Severus chose a crystal point from a pile and held it upright in the party hat nearest to him.

As Hermione poured the resin carefully, she said, "Draco is doing quite well. He's really come out of his shell in the last couple of days." She sounded pleased.

"Yes," he agreed. "I'm glad. I found it quite frightening, seeing him so despondent all the time. He seems to enjoy your company tremendously." He could not help himself. That last sentence had simply tumbled out of his mouth.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "He'd enjoy *anyone's* company right now, after not taking any interest in life for so long! He was just... existing, nothing more."

They continued working, Hermione filling the party hats with Severus holding each crystal point as she poured the resin.

Severus could not help but admire the efficient manner Hermione was working in. Just like his own movements, hers were precise and efficient, and for the first time, he felt that he could not have been such a bad teacher, even if he had been generally dreaded while at Hogwarts. Of course, Hermione was known as one of the brightest witches, but he liked to think that her deft hand at brewing the Orgone was at least partly due to his teaching.

Finally, Hermione poured the last of the resin mix into a party hat and sighed. "Right. First step accomplished. It'll be dry and hard in the morning, ready for burying."

"Will you take Draco to bury them?" Severus was unable to control the sneer that attached itself to the young wizard's name.

Hermione gave him a look of surprise. "Uh, I thought you should bury them! After all, this is all based on *your* spirit guide's information, and you are the one who figured most of it out."

"In that case, would you do me the honour of accompanying me? After all *you* are the one who did most of the ground work." He fleetingly thought that this must have been the most unromantic way of asking a woman out in the history of mankind, but her reply distracted him entirely.

She offered him a brilliant smile as if she genuinely liked the idea and then said, "I'd love to, Severus."

He bowed slightly. "That's settled then. We should start off around sunrise. I'd prefer for nobody to be around, even if it means rising at such an ungodly hour."

Severus' sleep that night was unsettled and restless. He felt anticipation, worry, dread, and hope. *What if the magic comes back? The Ministry will have Aurors here in no time. What if the exercise is futile, and we'll have to start from scratch again? What if she finds she doesn't enjoy my company? What if she does enjoy spending time with me?*

His restlessness continued until he felt the presence of Red Cloud. *Dark Man, don't waste your time with doubting yourself. That trait will not help the magic. Trust yourself. Believe in your abilities. And trust your Gryffindor friend. She is a force to be reckoned with. She has already proven her loyalty to the same cause that is close to your own heart. Open up to her. You'll find not only a loyal companion in her, but you may find that she shares interests with you beyond regaining the magic. Above all, trust yourself. Follow your heart.* Red Cloud's words left him considerably calmer, and he drifted off to sleep.

When he woke up, it was still dark, but the birds outside were already busy chirping, announcing the beginning of another day.

It was very early, but Severus decided that coffee was a good way to start any day, early or not. He knew that Hermione usually remained silent until she had at least one cup. It was a trait they shared, and he hoped the offering of coffee would compensate a little for having to rise so early.

The young witch appeared in the kitchen, muttered "Morning" and yawned.

"Morning. Here, have a wake-up potion," he said, smirking, and handed her a cup of steaming black coffee.

She rewarded him with a mischievous grin. "Thanks...I think. My reputation must be really bad if it drives you to offering me coffee."

He smirked. "There is that. Plus the hope that the caffeine will keep us alert."

They finished their coffee in silence. Hermione went back upstairs to pick up the Orgone pieces. Together, they left quietly, heading towards the communication tower.

Severus motioned for Hermione to stop at the end of the road. "Let's track how far from the house we are able to do magic." He cast *Wingardium Leviosa* to lift a leaf off the ground. The leaf danced effortlessly through the air until he finished the spell, and it slowly fell back onto the ground.

Hermione took a piece of chalk from her pocket. "Let's mark it. That way, we can check the same places every day and keep track of any changes."

Severus was again surprised at her ingenuity. "Good idea. Especially once we get closer to the tower."

They continued their walk until they could hear the brook gurgling away. "You know... maybe we should put one of the cones in the water. Water carries energy, doesn't it, and it might help with the magic," Hermione mused.

"I'd say it's worth testing if one of those Orgone cones will affect the environment positively. This brook is bound to be polluted. Why don't you throw one in the water," suggested Severus.

Hermione reached into her bag and took a cone out. She looked at him questioningly. "Simply throw it in?" She sounded hesitant.

"Just dump it," he said wryly. "And think happy thoughts while you do it."

She blushed slightly and grimaced. Then, taking a deep breath, she threw the cone into the centre of the small river.

"Okay. One down, many to go," Hermione said, looking at the brook for a moment before she took the chalk out again and marked the pavement.

They continued on their way, stopping sporadically to check the level of magic with simple spells and leaving chalk marks on the road.

"Let's just hope there'll be no rain in the next few days, or else all the marks will be washed away," Severus remarked on one occasion.

The closer they came to the tower, the weaker the magic became. "Merlin, this is depressing," Hermione complained when she was unable to move a piece of littered paper off the ground. "To think that some Muggles have figured out a way to disable the magic! They're no better than Voldemort!"

Hearing Voldemort's name so carelessly spoken made Severus flinch, but he had to agree with her. He felt an uncommon urge to divert her suddenly dejected mood and sent a silent prayer that he would find the right words for her. "It can be a depressing thought, Hermione, or you can choose this knowledge, like *any* knowledge, to be empowering, even liberating."

She met his eyes, and he continued, now in his typical classroom voice, "Kingsley has been analysing several Muggle cosmetics and learned that every single commercially manufactured product contains slow-acting poisons, or metals, which are equally poisonous. When this information is made known, and it *will* be, have no doubt, the reactions of the general public can be roughly split into three categories. The first one will dismiss it as scare-mongering and refuse to believe it. The second group will lament the audacity of it all, complain that products without poisons are unaffordable and continue using the stuff they now know will poison them in one way or another. And the third category will use their creativity and find alternatives. Only the people in this last category will grow, by learning, by being open to changing any possibly long-held opinion, and by being creative and applying their new-found knowledge."

Severus stopped for a moment, allowing her to digest what he had just said. Then he continued in a more passionate manner, "I'd like to think that we are in the third group. In fact, I'm sure you are. You thought me a cold-blooded murderer, yet you had the courage to stand up against Moody, when complying with him would certainly have ensured you a safer and possibly happier life."

Hermione blushed and took to studying the ground at his last words. After a long silence, she said, "I don't know if you can call it courage, Severus. You had just saved my life and killed several Death Eaters, thus ensuring that we'd win the battle. I couldn't have possibly allowed Moody to be his vindictive self on that occasion. That would have gone completely against my own morals. They might not always concur with those of the general wizarding public, but I will stand up for them."

"That's exactly my point, Hermione. If *everyone* had the guts to follow their own morals instead of merely following the herd like obedient sheep, all this wouldn't be happening, don't you see? Instead, we have this self-policing sheep herd attitude even in the wizarding world. But I have no doubt that eventually this world will be a better place *because* people will learn to live true to their own morals."

Hermione looked at him in horror. "Oh, Merlin, how could I have overlooked that? Severus, we need to place your home under the *Fidelius*! What if the magic comes back once we bury the Orgone? The entire department of Ministry Aurors will be here in no time!"

Maybe she does like me a little, was his first thought as her words sunk in. Then his mind began racing. Why hadn't he not thought of putting Spinner's End under the Fidelius charm? Surely, it was the best option to keep him safe, considering nobody knew if and when the magic would return.

He felt a tremendous relief wash over him that he was capable of upholding the magic at his home.

"Good thinking, Hermione," he said. "It is a better option than any other for keeping me out of the Ministry's wrath."

And then, once again, his mouth took on a mind of its own. "But don't you think it would be only fair if the Aurors caught me? After all, I did kill Albus."

Hermione looked at him. He was unable to make out her expression. Maybe it was one of calculation, maybe it was one of confusion, he had no idea.

"No. It wouldn't be fair. I don't know the whole story, but Dumbledore in portrait form didn't seem in the least displeased with you. And Voldemort's side lost because of you. When I recognised your voice that day, I thought you were about to kill me. Instead, you saved my life by killing those Death Eaters. So, I'm sure there is a whole lot more to the event than merely 'Snape killed Dumbledore.'

"And then there is the whole matter about regaining the magic. If you were out for your own interest, you wouldn't work for that goal. You have magic in your home, even enough to Apparate and return. It would be in your interest for the magic to stay away in general, to ensure the Ministry can't come after you.

"And besides, I don't believe for one moment that the Ministry would give you a fair trial. My suggestion would be that you stay at home under the Fidelius and let Kingsley, Parvati, and me deal with the Ministry until we manage to clear your name. But that, of course, entirely depends on whether or not the magic returns." That said, she started walking again.

Severus digested her words. She was right, of course, in all points, which only slightly disconcerted him. Instead, he admired her tremendous insight. He imagined that at least she did not outright dislike him if she was willing to work towards clearing his name.

"You'd be willing to help clear my name?" He could not help but ask.

"Of course I'm willing to help clear your name, whatever it involves," she replied impatiently. "Any form of injustice doesn't sit right with me. Now, how are we going to bury those Orgone pieces?" They had arrived at the communication tower.

"Like so," Severus said smugly as he pulled a spoon from a pocket. "The idea is to just bury them deep enough so they're hidden from sight."

He knelt down on the ground, as close to the first pole as he could get, and dug out enough earth for the muffin-shaped Orgone to fit in. Hermione handed him a piece, he placed it into the hole and covered it with earth. Then he stood up and padded the earth even with his shoes.

Silently, they repeated the process twice, each one close to another pole upholding the structure.

"Maybe we should throw one into the centre, too, and see if those scum-bags take it," he suggested.

Hermione took out another piece of Orgone and deftly threw it towards the middle of the structure. "Right," she said. "Mission accomplished. I could do with some breakfast, and then, I think, we better get going with the Fidelius Charm."

"Yes, boss." He smirked when he saw a blush creep up on her face.

"I didn't mean to sound bossy," she replied with a sheepish grin.

They started walking again, now at a faster pace as there was no need to check the levels of magic again so soon.

As they rounded the corner into Spinner's End, Severus gathered his courage. He would rather ask her now, without any third party present. "Hermione, would you be willing to be my Secret Keeper?"

Hermione looked at him, surprised. "Uh, wouldn't you prefer Parvati or Kingsley? You know them much better than me."

His hopes faltered. Of course she wouldn't be willing to shoulder such a responsibility for him. *Stupid idiot*, he berated himself.

"Never mind," he said flatly and started walking again.

"Severus, wait!" Hermione caught up with him and gently placed a hand on his arm. His heart gave a pleasant lurch. "The question just took me by surprise," she said apologetically.

Then she looked at him intently. "I'd be honoured to be your Secret Keeper, Severus," she said softly.

"Thank you, Hermione," he said equally softly as they arrived at his house.

* * *

By the end of the day, Spinner's End was under the Fidelius charm, and Parvati, Draco, Kingsley, and Dumbledore's portrait all let in on the Secret.

Hermione was the first one to bid the others good-night, but she reappeared downstairs within minutes. "The lab is crackling with magic! I think the Orgone is working," she said.

Her excitement almost made Severus smile. "Care to explain?" he asked with a quirked eyebrow.

"When we returned from the tower this morning, I put the Orgone pieces back on the work-top upstairs. On my way to bed, I thought I'd check if we needed more metal shavings before the next brewing, and when I entered the room, the magic literally hit me. It was almost like it used to be, you know, before it disappeared."

"Did you try any spells?"

"Yes, and everything worked perfectly! I Summoned a book from my bedside table, Transfigured a cushion into a goblet, and conjured some water. Then I managed to *Wingardium Leviosa* the wardrobe to the ceiling and back down!"

"How many Orgone pieces do you have left?" asked Severus.

Hermione thought for a moment, then she replied, "Seven cones and about twenty muffins."

Kingsley had followed their conversation. "Maybe we should experiment by leaving one cone and a couple of muffins in each room," he suggested.

Severus and Hermione looked at him thoughtfully. "I think we should place a cone or two in one room, and a muffin or two in another," Hermione said slowly.

Severus nodded. "Yes, that will tell us the difference and what each type of Orgone does. We should do that now, so we'll get the answer in the morning."

"Yes," Hermione agreed. "I have a feeling that the muffins will merely interrupt the high frequency radiation the towers put out, which of course should be all that's needed to enable the magic to flow."

Everyone looked at her expectantly. "What do you think the cones will do?" asked Severus.

"I believe the cones with the larger crystal points will enhance the magic that's present," said Hermione. "Of course, this notion is more a gut feeling than based on any science," she added and shrugged. "But then, I have been told lately to follow my heart..." She looked slightly uncomfortable.

"If this is what you feel inclined to do, then simply go ahead. Intuition can be fickle, but it can also provide great insight into the larger picture. Besides, in this instance, no harm will be done following it, and we'll know in the morning if your gut feeling was right," Severus soothed her and was pleased when she visibly relaxed.

She gave him a tentative smile and said, "Okay. I'll put the pieces in different rooms."

* * *

The following morning, Severus waited with growing impatience for Hermione to emerge. The moment he had awoken, he felt the strong presence of magic, and for the first time in months allowed himself to use a shaving spell instead of the usual Muggle razor.

By the time Severus reached the kitchen, he knew Hermione's intuition had been spot-on. His bedroom, which had been housing an Orgone cone overnight, was alive with magic, as was his corner of contemplation in the corridor downstairs. The kitchen and his sanctuary showed no signs of increased levels of magic.

Severus was sipping his first cup of coffee when Hermione bounced in, looking absolutely radiant.

"Morning," she said, sounding uncommonly cheerful. "Is your room full of magic, too?"

"Good morning," he replied. "Indeed it is. And using mundane spells instead of Muggle appliances didn't deplete it, either. It was a good thing you followed your intuition."

She looked pleased. "Do you want to go to the tower to see if the magic works there, too?"

"Yes, we better check," he agreed. They finished their coffee in comfortable silence.

On the way to the tower, just as the day before, Hermione and Severus took turns casting spells in the same locations. This time, the magic did not falter as much once they were in close proximity of the tower. When they reached it, the magic was weaker, but present nevertheless.

Severus felt a shiver down his spine when he realised what it meant. He turned to Hermione. "Can you even begin to imagine the implications of this?"

Hermione gazed at him thoughtfully. "Probably not all of it," she allowed. "I mean, this is *ishuge!* A small group of Muggles, within their own government no less, took it upon themselves to disable the magic by means of Muggle technology. Blast. I just hope they don't catch any other wizards or witches and give them the treatment they did Kingsley!"

"You may find that Red Cloud will take up this issue soon and advise us on relevant protective measures beyond what we can achieve with a wand," Severus replied. After a short silence, he continued, his voice carrying a sense of urgency. "We need to get this information out to all. In fact, if we can put an article together by the end of tomorrow, I can probably have Mr Creevey include it in the next issue of *The Quibbler*. In the meantime, we ought to keep a close check on this tower. If the scumbags find out we've found a way to defeat their nasty technology, they'll likely not only remove the Orgone but also figure out ways to attack us.

"We should also venture further out and disable all the towers in this area," he added.

Hermione looked up and smiled. "Nothing gets me going like a worthy challenge. What's your plan? You look as if you've already figured something out."

He thought for a moment that she was getting to know him rather well. "First, we'll get the article together with precise instructions on how to brew the Orgone and where to place it."

"Are you sure Mr Creevey will accept it just like that?" interrupted Hermione, her expression full of doubt.

Severus sighed. He might as well tell her. After all, he trusted her to be his Secret-Keeper, and he saw no reason not to trust her with any other secret.

"From Severus Snape probably not. From William Dafoe, my trusted Muggle friend who keeps bees and markets my cosmetic potions, yes. William acts as an agent of an undisclosed benefactor to *The Quibbler* to enable the magazine to become widely known rather quickly."

Hermione, realisation dawning on her face, blurted out, "It was *you* who donated a large sum to them!"

"Guilty as charged," muttered Severus. He was surprised how fast the young witch digested the information.

"So we can use *The Quibbler* to publish our findings and most wizarding readers will know to follow our suggestions. That has a very good chance of succeeding! We'll have at least pockets of magic all over the place in no time," she said, looking positively hopeful.

After checking that the Orgone piece in the centre of the tower structure was still there, Severus said. "Let's go back and work on that article. That has to be the top priority since I know the latest issue of *The Quibbler* will go to print in the next few days. Once that's out of the way, we can work out a plan of action with the others. I'm sure Kingsley will offer some input, since he's the one who knows most of the technologies this faction of Muggles utilises."

They headed straight back to Spinner's End, not bothering to stop anywhere, intent on working on an article that would allow wizards all over to claim back the magic.

* * *

A/N

Big thanks to Notsosaintly, without whose help this story would never make it to an archive. You rock!

Play The Game

The magic has returned fully to Spinner's End, and Severus and Hermione have their first encounter with some dark-sided people.

Disclaimer: It's all JKR's and whoever she shares with. Not me, in any case.

Chapter IX

Play The Game

Hermione was surprised to realise that the lack of routine in the Snape household did not bother her in the least. The only regular activity was dinner time...since her first day, everyone present nearly always shared the evening meal. Usually, whoever was the first one to be hungry would be the one to prepare the food, sometimes with another joining in the preparations.

But aside from sharing the one daily meal, every time an activity became regular, it happened to change. Hermione thought with a start that after only two days of walking to the tower with Severus, she would miss this particular part. She admitted to herself that she enjoyed his company. He was still acerbic to the extreme, and she did not think that he would ever be anything else, but she had also come to appreciate how much wisdom he had to share. His outlook on some issues was downright novel and refreshing to her. It felt good to be in the company of someone who was always able to look at situations, striving to grow from them.

Hermione forced herself to return her focus on the instructions of Orgone brewing that she was compiling. After ensuring she had included every single step and ingredient, she took the parchment to the workroom with the computer.

Severus was sitting at the computer, typing away busily. He looked up when Hermione entered. "Done already?" he asked.

"Yes. I double-checked everything," replied Hermione, handing him her parchment.

Severus skimmed over it. "It looks okay." He paused for a moment and frowned. "I wonder if we should give this Orgone a different name. After all, it's different from the one Wilhelm Reich created. And if we don't refer to him often, the article might even lead Muggle readers to experiment with it. Who knows."

Hermione thought for a moment. He had a valid point there. If Muggles were to start gifting those towers, the magic would be restored faster and sooner everywhere. Furthermore, she remembered reading something about a similar name.

"Yes, I think we should give it a different name," said Hermione. "You know, Karl Welz called it Orgonite, and from what I've read, his Orgonite is closer to our version of Orgone than to what Reich did. Besides, I like the sound of it." They agreed on calling the resin-metal mixture Orgonite.

Hermione was turning to leave when Severus spoke again. "I need you to visit William. He can't find Spinner's End now. In fact, I'm not even sure he will find it if you tell him the location, being a Muggle. Can you bring him back here with you so we'll know for sure?"

She looked at him and thought smugly, *He clearly isn't at his sharpest...I wonder what's up with him.* Aloud, she said, unable to hide a grin, "Um, Severus, how do you usually communicate with him?"

Severus looked startled for a moment before his face took on a positively sheepish expression. "Damn," he muttered. "I think the sudden increase of magic has addled my brain."

As Severus picked up the phone, he motioned for Hermione to wait. Then he briefly spoke to William.

"William will be here in about fifteen minutes," Severus said. "Would you mind meeting him outside and informing him of my location?"

Meeting William Dafoe was a revelation for Hermione. He looked like a typical Somerset farmer...loose trousers, light coloured shirt with rolled-up sleeves, chewing on the inevitable straw. His hair was bleached and ruffled from sun and wind. His boyish features made it hard for Hermione to guess his age, but she thought he might be around the same age as Severus.

Before Hermione had a chance to approach him, he called to her. "Oi! You must be the new addition Sev told me about. You the one working to get the magic back? Any success yet? Now, where's his house gone?" William had now reached Hermione, who was standing on the pavement in front of the house. He looked around curiously.

Mr Dafoe's words surprised Hermione. Regardless of his Muggle nature, Severus obviously trusted this man a great deal.

"You must be Mr Dafoe," she said. "Severus asked me to meet you here as we've put him under the Fidelius Charm. Severus Snape's home can be found at number thirteen, Spinner's End."

"Thanks, dear. Now I can see the house again." He finally took the piece of straw out of his mouth and looked at her with interest. "I suppose you're the gal whose parents had a thing for Shakespeare, eh? Hermione is an unusual name!"

"Yes, that's me," Hermione said, smiling. She could not help but like this person. "Why don't we go inside, Mr Dafoe. Severus will be pleased that you can indeed access his home."

"Yeah, all right; and let's do away with the formalities. Any friend of his snarkiness is a friend of mine. My name is William."

They went inside together, and Hermione could only stare at the men as they greeted each other.

"Oi, youngster, I'm noticing the magic is stronger. Have you been playing the piano more or have you had success with the Reich recipes?"

"Call me that again, and I'll hex you." There was a distinct lack of bite in Severus' voice, and the glare was entirely absent.

"Aw, I know you want to, mate, but we both know I dodge them, no matter how hard you try." William grinned at him and made himself comfortable on the sofa in Severus' sanctuary.

Severus sat down and motioned for Hermione to take a seat. "You might as well join in, Hermione. There isn't much you don't know about what's going on."

William regarded Severus curiously. "You look considerably more relaxed, Severus."

Hermione noted almost gleefully that William addressed Severus by his full name.

"I bet the presence of beautiful young ladies does wonders for you," William continued.

Severus glared at him now, but smirked when he turned to a beet-faced Hermione. "Don't worry, you'll get used to William saying whatever is on his mind. Even the notorious Gryffindor bluntness pales in comparison."

"He's right, you know," William said conversationally. "But let's get to the reason why I'm here." Turning to Severus, he asked, "I'm assuming you want me to run an errand? Use me like a house-elf?"

Parvati appeared in the kitchen. She spotted William and hugged him affectionately. "Haven't seen you in a while! You staying for dinner? I'm just about to start cooking."

"You're getting more beautiful every time I see you, love," William said, ruffling Parvati's hair with one hand. "Are you making one of them fantastic, devilishly hot curries? Then I won't be able to resist." He grinned at her.

"Sure, don't bother asking the host," muttered Severus. His expression elicited a giggle from Hermione.

Parvati laughed. Turning to Hermione, she said, "Don't mind those two! They always act like an old couple." With a nod at Severus and William, she returned to the kitchen.

Severus cleared his throat and said, "Yes, old man, I need you to play house-elf for me. I have an article that needs to go into the latest issue of *The Quibbler*. I'll have it ready for you by lunchtime tomorrow. It's absolutely vital that it is published as soon as possible, as it's likely to help us regain the magic on a much greater scale than what we can do here."

Upon William's prompt, Severus and Hermione took turns relating the latest events in their effort to regain the magic.

At some point, Draco joined the group, and William voiced his relief that the young wizard had much improved since they had last met.

Kingsley turned up in time for dinner and was introduced to William. "You're going to have to expand the house if you keep collecting people at this rate, Severus," quipped William.

Severus looked thoughtful. "You know, I haven't even thought about that," he admitted. "Not that I expect anyone else, mind you, but even though, this place is a bit small for all of us."

William looked at Severus. "Don't bet on nobody else turning up," he advised. Hermione thought he sounded rather mysterious, but looking at the others, only Kingsley appeared confused.

Severus sighed. "Out with it, old man. What do you know that I haven't been told about?" He looked at his friend expectantly.

"No, no, it's nothing specific," William hurried to assure Severus. "You know how it is. The thought just popped into my head, and I felt the urge to voice it."

Severus rolled his eyes at his friend. "As if," he muttered.

"Oh, all right," William huffed. "I have a hunch that there'll be another. Also, you may want to make contact with that healing sanctuary up north. Restore the magic and then put it under that charm, like you did your home. If those scoundrels find it, they'll attack, no doubt, and it won't be pretty if they're unprepared. They use natural forms of healing for Muggles and wizards alike, which, as far as the idiots are concerned, takes their profit away. They don't take kindly to natural forms of healing."

"Do you mean the healing sanctuary that is run by Professor Sprout's sister? Both Neville and Madam Pomfrey are there. At least that's where they were planning to go when we all left Hogwarts," Hermione chimed in. Then she shook her head. William could not possibly know about this...she did not recall telling Severus any details.

"Don't be surprised how William knows things. I'll tell you all about him...but not now. Use magic to clear the table and to clean up. I'll Summon some wine for a change," said Severus.

William looked satisfied. "Thanks for a lovely meal; it was excellent as always." He observed Severus Summoning two bottles of Chateaufort-du-Pape, and the moment the bottles landed on the table, he said, "Looks like you're finally recognising the signs of your guide having something to say. About time, too."

Hermione and Parvati took barely minutes to return the kitchen to its pristine condition and rejoined the group, who were scattered around the coffee table.

Parvati sighed contentedly. "It's so nice to have enough magic to do the chores. I really don't like the Muggle way of cleaning."

Hermione nodded. "Hopefully the magic is here to stay from now on," she said.

The young witch noticed a marked shift in energy and relaxed deeper into her chair, idly thinking that she had become more sensitive lately and wondering how so.

"Greetings, my friends. It is good to see you *all* taking enjoyment in life again." Red Cloud had arrived and did not waste time to come straight to the point.

"You have achieved much lately. The Orgonite you created will suffice to diffuse the rays that have kept your magic disabled. It is a vast project, and you'll need many people if your wish is the return of magic everywhere, but you are on the right track.

"I am here tonight with a word of caution. As one amongst you has himself experienced, the few who support the dark side are powerful and ruthless where their wants are concerned. They will stop at nothing...and you have to prepare for the likelihood that they will discover who is behind the gifting of the towers, no matter how you go about it." Red Cloud stopped to allow for his words to sink in.

Hermione's mind whirled. Did that mean they could not leave the house, for fear of being attacked? *No*, she thought. *There must be a way to fight them.*

"You are right, Gryffindor," Red Cloud continued. "There are ways to fight them and to ultimately defeat them, and you are indeed progressing.

"Alone, the fact that your gifting the tower resulted in the magic prevailing even close to the tower...and you will find that the magic will gradually increase until it abounds once again...will be considered a major defeat by this fraction.

"I stress once again that it is absolutely vital that you follow your heart. Do not allow fear to overwhelm you. Instead, recognise your fear, acknowledge it, and ~~then~~ *let it go*. Letting go of fear, combined with acting intuitively, following your heart, and being creative will be your greatest weapon in defeating these forces of darkness.

"Know without a doubt that these Orgone devices do not give life. You may be surprised, but let me say this much: They do not give life...they retrieve life stolen from you.

"Most of you have no idea how a small fraction of Muggles has gathered enough power behind the scenes to control an entire populace. But do not worry yourselves. Follow your heart, for your heart will have answers.

"In the meantime, our Muggle friend can teach you an exercise, which will help you to protect yourselves from undesirable forces whose interest is to keep the magic disabled. I also recommend you continue experimenting with the Orgonite...you may come up with some protective devices.

"I will leave you now so you can learn the protection exercise. May you all continue to find true joy."

A long silence followed Red Cloud's departure, which was eventually interrupted by the man inhabiting the painting above the piano. "You really *have* made amazing progress," noted Albus.

Severus inclined his head. "We haven't done badly," he admitted. "Much better than I anticipated when we started."

"If you don't mind, I'll tell you now the exercise that Red Cloud referred to," William said. "It's getting late, and I should leave soon."

When everyone paid him attention, he started, "As we all know, it is only a handful of people who exercise the power over many. However, they have helpers, and these are likely to come after all of us, using their technology for mind-control, for causing pain, for injecting micro-chips that will cause havoc to your intuition, and other fun stuff."

"Yes. I had the dubious pleasure of getting acquainted with some of that," Kingsley said quietly, and Parvati squeezed his hand and leaned into him.

William nodded. "Then you'll be pleased to learn that you can protect yourselves against such attacks. First of all, you need to understand that these people feed off fear. A well-balanced human vibrates on the frequency of love, and those who vibrate on the frequency of fear have trouble coping with love. Love affects their shape-shifting abilities, you see, and they don't like to be found out that they are not quite human. Many psychics can see their true form in the shape of an imprint over their human form.

"Now, to ward off any attacks from such forces, you simply gather what I call *the love power* and direct it to the attacker, who will then be far too busy concentrating on maintaining their human form than to attack you.

"Gathering the love power is very simple. You stand, both feet firmly on the ground, take three deep breaths, and while you're doing so, think of those you love most and how much you love them.

"Then imagine all this love to form a ball of colour; gold usually works best with me, but you might find a different colour more suitable. When you can see this ball of love in your mind, simply direct it to your attacker... and watch the fun," William finished.

"It's that easy?" Hermione asked incredulously. She could not imagine that such a simple exercise would thwart any attacks that were carried out by high-tech means, but then she had trouble comprehending the extent of the technology dark forces were utilising.

"It's very easy," confirmed William. "Exercise it a few times, so it becomes natural to you, and you'll be perfectly well prepared for such unconventional attacks."

"The beauty of this exercise is, of course, that anyone who does not vibrate on this frequency of fear won't be affected by it at all," Severus pointed out. "Why don't we all try it? Just gather the love power and direct it at someone in this room, so we can see if there is any effect from it."

Hermione stood up, as did all the others. While breathing deeply and deliberately, she brought images of her parents to her mind. Then she slowly willed those images to transform into a ball of colour. She clearly saw a vibrant turquoise ball in her mind, slightly larger than a football, and slowly growing in size. She briefly thought that Draco might benefit from such loving energy, but did not want to risk encouraging him to pursue her any further. When the ball had reached the dimension of an inflatable beach ball, she directed it towards Parvati.

A few minutes later, when everyone had completed the exercise, there was a marked increase of what Hermione could only describe as good vibes.

"Wow," breathed Parvati. "Can you feel it? This is amazing!"

"Yes," Kingsley agreed. "It feels pretty much the opposite of when those scumbags are near you."

"Exactly. That's because they cannot cope with this *pure* energy. And it exposes them, of course. They don't like that," William said, looking utterly content. "Well, guys and ladies, I'm ready to go home. Thanks for a lovely evening."

"Did you walk or bring the car?" asked Severus.

"I walked. Gotta make the most of this beautiful weather," replied William as he put on his jacket.

"Let me Apparate you. Might as well utilise the magic," said Severus.

"Splendid idea! I had completely forgotten about that little perk!"

Severus put his hand on William's shoulder, and with a pop, both were gone.

* * *

The presence of magic was palpable when Hermione woke up the next morning. She decided to go about her morning routine solely with magic. It felt almost like being back at Hogwarts. With a wave of her wand, the bed made itself, and she set out to the kitchen.

As Hermione descended the stairs, her step increased as if fuelled by the aroma of coffee that was wafting through the house.

Severus was preparing his breakfast...without a wand, but nevertheless magically.

"Your Animagus form is not a trout, I hope, although your current expression belies my hope," Severus quipped.

Hermione felt herself blush. "Sorry... I just... You're doing magic without a wand." She had trouble believing her own eyes.

"Why don't *you* try it," he suggested softly. "The magic in here abounds. All you need is your intent. Go on, Summon the pot of coffee without a wand."

Damn him, she thought. He certainly knew how to bait her.

Hermione concentrated on the task at hand, and although she itched for the wand, she directed the coffee pot to float to the table and gently place itself in front of her.

"That wasn't so hard, was it," Severus said wryly.

"N-no," she replied, awestruck. Then her mind woke up. *If I can do this without a wand, I can do other things* she thought and proceeded to direct the pot to pour coffee into the mugs that Severus had Summoned moments before. Next, scrambled eggs floated through the air and settled themselves on two plates.

"Hm, I'd love some baked beans with that. I wonder if I can cook them magically without a wand."

"Of course you can. Let's have a proper breakfast...you'll do the beans, I'll do the hashbrowns. Without wands, with magic," said Severus. Hermione could not help but notice the glint in his eyes.

Parvati and Kingsley stopped abruptly at the door as they met the most unusual sight. Hermione and Severus were sitting at the table, their faces slightly contorted with concentration, their eyes on the cooker on which beans were simmering in a pot and hashbrowns were sizzling in a cast-iron pan.

"Hm," Kingsley said. "How'd you do that?" He sounded bemused.

"Are you doing magic without a wand?" Parvati asked incredulously.

"We are," Hermione confirmed smugly. "It's not even hard. Watch." She silently Summoned the pot with the baked beans to the table, then directed a ladle from one of the kitchen drawers to dish out the beans, without spilling anything.

"Wow." Parvati was impressed.

"I want to try this," Kingsley stated as he and Parvati sat down at the table.

"Be my guest," Severus said, clearly amused.

Kingsley concentrated and tried to direct the saucepan to pour baked beans in the dishes Severus had obligingly Summoned from the kitchen. The saucepan wiggled once and remained on the table.

"Damn! How *do* you do that?" Kingsley looked questioningly at them.

"Use intent, Kingsley," instructed Severus. He demonstrated his skill by filling two new mugs with coffee and directing them to rest in front of Kingsley and Parvati.

Kingsley tried again, to no avail. "You try!" he said to Parvati, who happily complied by trying to Summon some milk from the fridge. But the fridge door remained closed, and her coffee black. She gave Hermione a pleading look. "How? Why can *you* do it, and I can't? *You* do it. I don't like black coffee."

Hermione Summoned the milk and poured it into the two mugs effortlessly.

"Right. Can we eat now before we need warming charms on the food? It does taste best while it's fresh, you know, regardless of whether it's prepared magically," said Severus and proceeded to magically distribute the hashbrowns.

They were animatedly discussing the use of magic without a wand when Draco joined.

"You've done magic without a wand?" he asked incredulously.

"Severus and Hermione have," Kingsley replied. "We haven't managed it." He did not sound happy.

"Oh! I have to try this!" Draco exclaimed. He successfully made a new pot of coffee and directed it to the table.

"Strange," muttered Severus. "Kingsley is a much more powerful wizard than Draco."

Hermione's mind was whirling with possibilities. She could not be certain of the reason, unless Kingsley and Parvati co-operated.

"I have a theory," she stated.

Severus gazed at her evenly. "The Orgonite," he said.

"Exactly. You, Draco, and I were much more exposed to it than either Kingsley or Parvati," Hermione said.

Severus turned to the couple. "Do you think you could brew a new batch of Orgonite today? If you succeed with wandless magic afterward, we'll know the reason."

After breakfast, Parvati and Kingsley went to the lab to brew Orgonite, Draco returned to his room to proofread the articles that William was due to pick up for *The Quibbler*, and Hermione and Severus got ready for the stroll to the tower to check the levels of magic.

* * *

When Hermione and Severus reached the point where she had thrown the Orgonite cone into the brook, she climbed down the bank to inspect the immediate environment for any changes. New green was sprouting in the shallow part of the water.

"This looks like watercress," exclaimed Hermione. "But it can't be. Not in early October!"

Severus joined her at the bottom of the bank. "You know, it *does* look like it. We'll have to come back once it's a bit bigger, but I'd say it's watercress," he said, turning a stem with a few leaves around.

"This Orgonite is shaping up to be really big," Hermione said thoughtfully. "First, the magic comes back, then it heals the water so cress grows in autumn. I wonder what's next." She let her thoughts trail off to explore the possibilities.

"William's theory is that once all the towers are gifted with Orgonite and the magic is stable again, it will affect those scum-bags to an extent that will render them completely powerless.

"I hope he is right. It would be nice to see humankind regain the power over themselves," he added.

Even around the tower, the magic was stronger. Not yet sufficient to work magic without a wand, but abundant even for more complex spells.

"Let's check again tomorrow...I'm sure it'll reach magical saturation point soon," said Severus and proceeded to scan the centre of the tower to see if the Orgonite placed in open sight was still there.

A car slowly approached and came to a halt right next to the tower.

Two men, Hermione guessed just the other side of middle-aged, exited the car. Both were wearing dark pin-striped suits, dark coloured shirts and dark ties. Hermione felt an ice-cold shiver rush down her spine. The two men reminded her eerily of a Muggle movie she had once seen with her parents, *Men In Black*.

The two newcomers approached Hermione and Severus. "What is so interesting here?" the taller one asked.

Severus glanced at Hermione and turned to the strangers. "What business is it of yours?" he asked conversationally.

"None, really. But since we're responsible for the maintenance of the local communication towers, we tend to get edgy if we suspect sabotage, sir," the stranger replied, and his shorter companion nodded sharply.

"And you suspect *sabotage* whenever you see anyone walking past a tower?" drawled Severus.

Hermione remained silent. She could not be certain, but it occurred to her that Severus had thought through potential scenarios rather thoroughly.

"No. But we do get suspicious when people come here every day. Especially if it happens at a time the transmission of the tower suddenly becomes unstable. This has never happened before," the taller pin-stripe said smugly.

Hermione noticed Severus' eyes flash dangerously and could hardly contain a grin. She knew he had found a reason to corner the strangers.

"Pray, tell, *sir*, how do you know if people come here every day?" Severus asked in a low voice.

Both men looked at him with a smug expression as if they were dealing with the local village idiot. "Ever heard of cameras?" the shorter pin-stripe asked.

"Indeed," sneered Severus. "Which telecommunication company are you working for, sirs?"

"None of *your* business, ugly," the taller one replied nastily.

"Really," said Hermione with an air of boredom. She was starting to enjoy this encounter. If what Red Cloud and William had referred to as potential attacks was as easy to deal with as these two pin-striped ogres, she would never fear them as long as Severus was on her side.

Severus had his wand drawn and towered over the taller pin-stripe now. He spoke in a low voice, enunciating every syllable. "It is very *welthy* business if a telecommunication company installs cameras in a public place without having a notice up to inform the public of such an invasion of privacy! Putting clandestine cameras up is illegal, and you will not get away with it unless your employer is the MI5 or one of their stooges. Now, if your employer *is* the MI5, and you have an unnatural interest in these *telecommunications* towers, then I can safely bet that these towers were most certainly not constructed to aid communication between mobile phones.

"Legilimens."

While Severus was busy intimidating the tall pin-stripe, Hermione discreetly took her wand out and pointed it at the shorter one.

When Severus had seen enough and let the man go, both jumped up and started running towards the car.

"Severus, we need to Oblivate them," Hermione said urgently. She did not like the possibility of the two going for reinforcement; after all, their technology might prove seriously dangerous.

Severus nodded at her and cast *Petrificus Totalus* on one, and Hermione followed suit and immobilised the other. Together, they strolled rather leisurely to the unmoving pin-stripes.

Severus gave her an amused sideways glance. "You're enjoying this." It was not a question.

Hermione blushed, and he grinned. "This kind of situation seemed inevitable, so I might as well enjoy it," she replied. "And besides, I really don't like bullies, so I naturally enjoy seeing them taken down a peg."

"So, Miss Granger," drawled Severus, "Care to cast an *Oblivate*?"

Hermione swallowed hard. She had not expected this question from him. "I don't think so. I've never cast one, and to be honest, I'd hate to wipe out their entire memories, you know? They didn't do us any harm, after all. And I'd hate the idea of being responsible if the spell goes wrong."

Hermione fully expected Severus to taunt her, but was pleasantly surprised.

"Just to clarify, Hermione, I was merely baiting you. If you *did* cast an Oblivate, I think I'd be rather disappointed. I don't think such a vindictive act is part of your nature."

Hermione felt uncommonly pleased with his reply...whether it was because she had expected something different or because it made her realise that he knew her rather well, she did not know.

She smiled at him and said softly, "I think you are much better qualified to cast the spell."

He nodded and proceeded to wipe the recent events off the pin-stripes' memories. "Let's go back home. It's been a rather eventful morning, and I could do with some peace and quiet," Severus said, and both moved to head back to Spinner's End.

Just before they turned the first corner, Severus turned around and cast *Renervate* on the two unmoving figures near the car.

When they reached Spinner's End, William was already there, engaged in an animated conversation about magic with Draco and Albus' portrait.

Hermione realised she had completely forgotten to remind Severus of his promise to tell her about William. But the morning had been rather eventful, and William's history would have to wait, probably until their next walk to the tower.

"Did you proof-read the articles?" Severus asked Draco.

"Yes, both yours and Kingsley's about his findings in analysing Muggle cosmetics. No mistakes in the Orgonite one, and Kingsley took his references to Muggles out," Draco replied, smirking.

"I've already got them, Severus," William said and looked at his watch. "Should make a move, really. Wouldn't want to miss the deadline." He said his good-byes and left with the promise to report about any news Mr Creevey might have.

Severus let himself fall on the sofa and sighed. "And now, all we can do is wait. And hope the wizarding world will start brewing Orgonite and disable the towers."

He looked gloomy, Hermione thought and felt the urge to make him feel better. "We don't have to just sit back and wait. *We could* experiment some more. If we're able to reclaim the magic with Orgonite, surely there must be other uses for it, such as protecting ourselves from this Muggle technology. All it might need is a little tweaking; maybe add a quartz point, or maybe find a specific shape that will aid its power."

Severus' face lit up. "You know, you might be on to something!" He stood up and then said, "I have some interesting books, both Muggle and magic, about symbols and their power; let me get those and we'll see what we find."

Hours later, Parvati and Kingsley, having spent most of the day brewing Orgonite to see if it would affect their magical power positively, appeared in the kitchen to start cooking. They found Hermione and Severus poring over books, both in deep concentration, both scribbling notes down as they read on.

Parvati shook her head and rolled her eyes. "Leave them be. They look busy."

Kingsley grinned. "That's fine. I don't want their help with cooking, anyway."

Hermione looked up, surprised to see her friends busy in the kitchen. "How long have you been in here?" she asked.

"Long enough to have dinner ready in a few minutes," Parvati said and giggled. "You two were so completely engrossed in whatever it was you were reading...I doubt you'd have noticed if the world had ended in the meantime."

"Well, it *is* interesting stuff I'm reading," Hermione defended herself, looking sheepish. She had not realised it was so late in the day already, but was pleased to notice that neither had Severus.

He let a sigh escape. "I suppose we should call it a day. Tomorrow, after we come back from the tower, we can start experimenting," he said, sounding reluctant to stop. Nevertheless, he piled the books together to clear the table for the evening meal.

* * *

A/N

I continue to be most grateful to Notsosaintly, beta extra-ordinaire, without whom this story would be nowhere near as readable.

I always love hearing what readers think *points to the button that says "review"

I'm Not In Love

Chapter 10 of 13

Hermione has an experience. Severus is upset.

Disclaimer: No matter how hard I try, no matter how inventive my spells are, JKR still owns it. And she doesn't share with me, either. Blast.

* * *

Chapter X

I'm Not In Love

The following day, Hermione's first task was to locate the cameras installed along the tower structure. Feeling creative, she decided not to blast them apart, but instead charmed the camera lens to not capture the images of people.

"That'll fool them enough to think no one goes near the tower, at least for a while, until the magic is back in full force," she said, satisfied with her charm work and happy with the look of...was it admiration?...that Severus cast her way.

One week after Hermione and Severus had buried the Orgonite around the tower, the magic was powerfully present around a large perimeter.

"Good," said Severus. "Now we can concentrate on other things." He thought for a moment and then continued. "First of all, I'd like to magically expand the house. More bedrooms, and a considerably larger lab area, seeing that Draco has taken to helping Parvati and Kingsley brew the cosmetic potions.

"Not that I'm complaining, mind...William sells them about as fast as we brew them."

"Not surprising at all," Hermione said. "Your recipes work much better than the commercial rubbish that is sold in shops."

"Well... I suppose poisonous substances never work well." Severus snorted.

"There is that," said Hermione. She had been shocked to the core at Kingsley's findings when he had analysed a commercial Muggle shampoo. What sodium lauryl sulfate, a chemical typically used as a Muggle laboratory standard skin irritant, was doing in a shampoo was beyond Hermione's imagination. The fact that Kingsley had found other poisonous substances, such as formaldehyde and chemicals that ensured the formation of dioxins when combined with the sulfate, thus creating known carcinogens, downright scared her. Any seventh-year Advanced Potions student knew to *never* use this chemical when in the vicinity of young children or even animals, as it was known to damage eye tissue in both humans and creatures. But Muggles appeared to be completely oblivious to the fact that they cleaned their hair with poisonous substances.

"I'd like to visit the Healing Sanctuary," Hermione said. The sanctuary and its inhabitants had been keeping her mind occupied since William had mentioned it.

Hermione suddenly remembered that Severus had promised to tell her about William. Throughout the week, they had been so busy brewing more Orgonite and experimenting with devices for protection that Hermione had completely forgotten about William. Now, curiosity took hold of her yet again. "Severus, you were going to tell me about William," she reminded him.

"Yes, I was," he said. They had nearly reached Spinner's End now, and he added, "Let's get inside first...I'll tell you over some coffee."

Back inside, Hermione watched amusedly how much Severus enjoyed preparing a pot of coffee magically and without a wand.

"You *are* enjoying this," she said, giggling, when he even went as far as pouring the coffee and moving the drinks to the coffee table magically.

"I am," he confirmed. Giving her a look she was unable to interpret, he added, "I believe it's paramount to find enjoyment in every situation. Besides, it's a relief to have magic again in abundance." He smiled wryly.

"By the way, I think it'd be a good idea if *you* go and gift the sanctuary. In a way, I'd like to go...Mr Longbottom's expression would be priceless, I'm sure, if he suddenly came face to face with me...but I'm not sure how Poppy and Pomona would feel about seeing me." Hermione thought he looked positively uncomfortable.

"I'll go. And I'll tell them about Professor Dumbledore's portrait and what he said. They'll come around..." Hermione said. She still did not know any details about Albus Dumbledore's death, but she knew without a doubt that Severus was not a murderer. The more time she had spent with him, the more she had come to like him. The realisation startled her. *No, Granger, don't even go there*, she admonished herself, but already felt a blush creep up on her cheeks.

"I appreciate that, Hermione," he said quietly. Then he looked at her and grinned in an almost boyish manner. "And I won't ask you about your thoughts just now."

"Right," Hermione replied, distracted. "Now, about William." She managed to look at him expectantly and without blushing deeper.

Severus took a sip of coffee and settled deeper into the chair. "I've known William since my first year of Muggle school. I was about five years old, and he six, in the year above me," Severus started.

Hermione was surprised. "You've known each other *that* long?"

"Yes, although there've been a few years between in without any contact," Severus said. Then he continued, "From the first day, I felt out of place at school. I was the only one from a wizarding family, and naturally, many kids sensed there was a difference, and it scared them. Right from the beginning, some nitwits ganged up and started to bully me. Well, they tried." He let out a barking, bitter sounding laugh before continuing.

"When one morning during break they cornered me, I hexed boils onto their faces...unintentionally. I had no control over my magic at that age. William was watching from a distance and grinned when he saw the results of my hex on those dunderheads. They ran off, and he came over and we started to talk. It turned out that he was a

complete outsider in his class. He'd been born a psychic, and thanks to his psychic father, his gift was nurtured right from the start. Naturally, he stood out like a sore thumb amongst the rest of his class."

"Oh, That's why he says things that don't seem to make sense," Hermione said with dawning comprehension.

Severus smirked. "He knows a lot, and quite often, his words only start to make sense weeks or even months later. Even when we first met, at such a young age, he knew instantly that I was a wizard. We became friends quickly, which gave me the incentive to study hard, so I could skip a grade and join his class the following year."

Hermione was not surprised that he had achieved that. She could not imagine that he had *ever* not been the studious kind.

Severus continued, "For about five years, we were rather inseparable, and I virtually lived at his home, which was much friendlier than my own. He taught me all he knew about the universe, the various energies, how to recognise them, and a lot more. And I told him all I knew of the magical world." He stopped, as if reminiscing about his childhood.

"You must have felt very lonely when you came to Hogwarts," said Hermione. Her heart went out to him. When she had arrived at the wizarding school, she had felt much out of place and alone, even more so than at her previous primary Muggle school.

Severus shrugged. "I missed having a friend at first. Eventually, my knowledge of Dark Arts become known to older Slytherins, and it made life easier for me. For a while, anyway."

The silence that followed hung heavily in the air, until the portrait spoke.

"How long did you not see William?" asked Albus.

"In the first three years, we used to spend the summer holidays together. At the end of fourth year, Malfoy had invited me to spend the summer at Malfoy Manor. I did not see William again until I'd left Hogwarts, and then only a couple of times." Another silence followed.

"And William questioned your choice to side with Voldemort," prompted Albus.

Severus let out a heavy sigh. "He didn't *question* it. He told me in no uncertain terms that he wanted nothing to do with me until I changed my mind.

"I should've listened to him at the time..."

"We all make mistakes ... and besides, you didn't take long to come to your senses," Albus said with a particularly gentle voice.

Another bitter bark escaped Severus. "Yes. *After* the damage was done."

Hermione wanted to soothe him. He looked almost forlorn as he recounted the decades-old memories. "You learned from your mistakes, though," she said. "So many people make mistakes and *don't* learn from them."

He looked at her intently. "I guess..."

"So, then you saw William again after you left Voldemort?" Hermione prodded, keen to see him in a less miserable frame of mind.

"Yes. After I went to Albus, I went to see William. Since then, we've stayed in contact.

"A few years ago, he introduced me to spiritual exercises that eventually enabled me to have direct contact with Red Cloud."

"You *learned* that?" Hermione asked, incredulous. "I always thought people are born with that kind of ability."

"You can learn a lot in this kind of... uh... shall we say, communication... with exercises that simply require a certain level of imagination. I'll likely never reach anywhere near William where psychic abilities are concerned, but I know that I can see, hear, and feel intuitively, far more than I did ten or twenty years ago," said Severus.

Hermione pondered his answer, leading her to wonder if she'd be able to develop some kind of psychic awareness. As if Severus had read her mind, he said, "You can learn it, too. Although I figure William would be a better teacher than I."

"You really think I could?" She was not at all certain.

Albus sat in his portrait, grinning, and Severus laughed, to Hermione's relief a much more genuine laugh than the bitter barks that escaped him minutes earlier.

"Tell me you haven't become more aware of your intuition lately, Hermione," Severus said.

Hermione thought about it. She *had* become more aware. Compared to a few weeks ago, she was now able to sense Red Cloud's presence before he appeared in full force. Furthermore, the idea of gifting the brook with a cone of Orgonite had not at all been a rational one...it had simply felt right.

Noticing Severus' intense gaze on her, Hermione blushed. "I guess," she said, uncertain still. Her mind might have just played tricks, after all.

"Besides, you won't know until you try," Severus said wryly.

"True enough." Looking at her watch, Hermione exclaimed, "Oh, Merlin, look at the time! It looks like Parvati isn't going to do the cooking today."

She stood up and headed to the kitchen. She was never overly keen on doing the cooking, not because she did not enjoy it, but in her opinion, Parvati's culinary skills were by far superior to her own, as were Severus'.

"You won't find much in there," said Severus, gazing at her evenly. "I didn't get fresh supplies today. I'll see what's available in the garden." He moved towards the back door and disappeared.

Hermione contemplated the contents of the kitchen cupboards and fridge, hoping for some culinary inspiration while she waited for Severus to return.

Her eyes bulged when she saw what he was carrying. "Ceps! Where did you find these?" Hermione was delighted.

"Behind the garden, by the oak," Severus replied, sounding positively smug. "And they're big enough to make schnitzel."

"Schnitzel?" asked Hermione. She had never heard that word before.

"Ah. Time for a lesson in culinary delights, Miss Granger," Severus drawled, putting the mushrooms on the counter.

"Why don't you prepare the potatoes for frying and I'll tend to the mushrooms," he said. "Fried potatoes go very well with the schnitzel."

Hermione prepared the potatoes and charmed a knife to cut an onion, all the while glancing at Severus' preparations. Once the onions were sautéed, she added the potatoes, closed the lid on the pan and paid full attention to him.

"All you need is egg and breadcrumbs for this. It's very simple." Severus was using his typical classroom voice, and Hermione shivered involuntarily.

"You brush the mushrooms clean...don't wash them...then you turn them in a beaten egg, like so." He demonstrated by taking the first clean mushroom and turning it in the beaten egg.

"Then you turn it in the breadcrumbs, which are mixed with salt and pepper," he continued lecturing.

Why have I never noticed how mesmerising his voice is? Hermione wondered, but then conceded that she had never known his humorous side, or his spiritual side, either.

"And now they're ready to fry. They taste best very fresh, so we'll wait ten minutes before we throw them into the oil, and they'll be ready at the same time as the potatoes," said Severus.

Hermione suddenly felt the urge to get away. Severus' voice had acquired an almost haunting quality to her ears, and for reasons unknown, she felt disconcerted.

"I... I'll be back in a minute," she blurted and rushed out of the kitchen, heading for her bedroom.

Hermione sat down shakily on her bed. *What the hell is going on with me?* she thought, irritated with herself. The young witch forced herself to take a few deep breaths, then went to the bathroom and splashed her face with refreshingly cold water. Putting thoughts of Severus' voice firmly out of her mind, she readied herself to join the others for dinner.

* * *

"Fancy finding and gifting another tower?" Hermione was grateful that Severus allowed her enough time to get her daily essential dose of caffeine into her system before he had started to talk to her. She had not slept well last night, and she knew it was not the delicious mushroom schnitzel's fault. But that was a matter to think about another time.

"Sure," she said, meeting his gaze and feeling uncharacteristically bold. "We have enough Orgonite to gift at least twenty towers, and there are plenty of cones left, too."

A short while later, the young witch and her ex-professor were on their way, Hermione's bag heavy with Orgonite. Severus headed in the opposite direction of the first tower.

"Do you have a particular plan?" Hermione asked, her curiosity piqued by his firm and steady stride.

"I figured that in order to stable the magic at home, we should gift all towers in the vicinity. The first tower is north of Spinner's End, so our next goal is the one to the south of us, *if* there is one. Then we'll deal with East and West, and finally with everything between those four directions. My aim is to create a wide circle of Orgonite around Spinner's End," he said.

That voice! Hermione hoped fervently that he would not look at her as she felt colour creeping into her cheeks. Pulling herself together with great effort, she started to drop Orgonite cones into the brook at intervals whenever it was accessible from the road.

The pair did not have to go far before a communications tower came into view, and the magic noticeably dropped.

"Blimey. Those Muggles seem to believe in wide coverage. This tower is no more than about a mile from the first one we found," said Severus, searching for cameras on the construction.

"They really must be on a mission to keep the magic disabled," said Hermione. She could not begin to fathom how evil those forces were, if they had invested this much just to prevent the magic from being freely available to the wizarding folk. *They're as bad as Voldemort, if not worse*, she mused.

Severus pointed out three cameras that were cleverly hidden in plain sight. "Before you do your charm work on those, let's try a little experiment," he said. He looked positively boyish with that smirk, which almost bordered on mischievousness.

He held out his hand and said, "Can I have an Orgonite muffin? Keep track of the time, so we'll know how long it takes those idiots to get here."

Hermione handed him the Orgonite, and Severus placed it within the tower's vicinity, in plain sight, carefully ensuring that the camera could record his actions.

"Okay, as soon as they turn up, I want you to do the exercise William taught us. And you can charm the cameras now...I'd rather not let them see where exactly I bury the Orgonite."

Hermione set to work. It took her much more effort than with the cameras on the previous tower. The magic seemed to be zapped out of her.

Severus busied himself digging small holes in the ground, this time ensuring that it was not within an angle the camera might record.

"I'm not sure how well this worked," Hermione said, feeling as if she'd just run a marathon and not a few minutes of spell-weaving.

Severus looked up at her and frowned. "You look exhausted," he said, concern evident in his voice. "Do you want to head back home?"

The suggestion sounded tempting. But Hermione had a feeling Severus wanted a confrontation with some bullies, and she admitted that she was looking forward to it herself. There was something liberating about outwitting bullies.

"Nah. I'll just sit down for a bit," Hermione said and grinned at him. "*I know* you're looking forward to some pin-stripe baiting." She sat down on the ground.

Sliding down next to her, he muttered, "You know me too well."

"You were my teacher for six years!" She laughed. "I can't imagine you see much of a difference between dunderhead students and dunderhead pin-stripes."

Severus looked thoughtful. "You know, I can't say I miss all the dunderheads who graced Hogwarts with their presence, but I do miss teaching worthwhile students."

Their attention switched to the sound of a car approaching. "Okay, I want you to start the exercise William taught us the moment they get out of the car," said Severus, his voice carrying the authority that had forced students in class to pay attention without effort.

A white van turned and came to a halt in front of the tower. Hermione sighed when she recognised one of the two recently Obliviated pin-stripes through the windscreen of the van. When both the driver, a bulky man clad in a grey suit, and the familiar stocky pin-stripe occupying the passenger seat opened the doors, Hermione started to gather her love power. She thought intently of her parents, mentally recalling situations that brought home how much love she felt for them. When she felt the energy rise, she imagined it a beautiful, rosy pink and started directing it towards the two guys. *Yeah, pink will suit them ever so well*, she thought, smirking to herself.

The pink-stripe approached them and addressed Severus. "What are you doing here? Surely, you could think of better places to take a young woman?"

Hermione was vaguely acknowledging her relief that he showed no recollection of their previous encounter, all the while directing the pink energy at both men, continuously focussing on the love she felt for the parents.

"I was not aware that there are laws about where we are allowed to rest," Severus said with an air of boredom. "Why don't you enlighten us?"

"There *is* no law," the pin-stripe sneered. "But you've spent a considerable amount of time here, and it looks suspicious. You've also placed something here that disrupts the rays, which will affect mobile phones!"

Hermione watched amusedly as Severus pulled himself up to his full height and towered over the stocky man.

"Pray tell, are you stalking us?" he asked the pin-stripe in a low voice.

"I don't need to stalk the likes of you. That's where CCTV comes in," the stocky guy said smugly and glanced at Hermione.

She had been watching him, and now, as their eyes met, she felt a surge of energy rushing through her. The pin-stripe suddenly started to squirm, looking decidedly uncomfortable.

"Tsk, tsk, your upbringing leaves something to be desired...didn't you learn to use the bathroom *before* you go out?" Severus' expression changed from boredom to disdain.

"I... No... It's not..." the stocky man stuttered, still squirming.

"Having trouble hiding your scales?" Severus mocked while gazing at the man whose face was slowly changing to reveal a reptilian scaly layer, replacing the human skin.

Hermione watched, fascinated, as the previously human looking man slowly morphed into a reptoid shape. She desperately willed herself to produce stronger energy. Slowly, images of her parents faded to the background, and another figure approached the front of her mind.

The reptoid collapsed on the ground and motioned for his colleague to help him. "Let's get away," he rasped with difficulty.

The bulky driver picked him up without effort, carried him to the van, and dropped him unceremoniously on the back-seat before sitting down behind the wheel. He roared the engine and took off at speed.

Hermione watched the events as though through a haze, only dimly realising the bullies had gone. The unbidden change of images of loved ones shocked her to the core, and what was more, she had felt the distinct surge of energy when it happened, leading to the collapse of the reptoid man.

"Hermione, what's wrong?" She lifted her head and looked straight into Severus' concerned face.

"I..." Hermione shook her head. "I can't say. Nothing is *wrong*," she whispered and buried her face in her arms.

It can't be. It was a mistake, a coincidence, just because he was here, she thought desperately, knowing deep inside already that she was merely trying to find excuses.

"What happened? You did brilliantly. It can't just be exhaustion. If anything, that exercise should have replenished your energy."

Hermione let out a shaky laugh. "It's not that." She was unable to look into his eyes, for fear he might read her correctly.

Severus surprised her once again at how gentle he could be if he thought the situation demanded it. "Come. Let's go home. You've been working hard. Take a break this afternoon. You deserve it," he said, tugging at her arm and pulling her up.

Hermione still felt shaky, but let him pull her up. The prospect of an afternoon of doing nothing sounded enticing.

They walked back to Spinner's End, and for the first time since they had started their daily walks, neither spoke. The silence grew increasingly uncomfortable, and Hermione felt immense relief when they reached the front door.

Once inside, Severus muttered something about picking up fresh supplies and visiting William, and before she could reply, he Disappeared right out of the front hall.

Hermione slowly made her way to her bedroom. She was surprised to see Parvati sitting in a chair reading, with Kingsley nowhere in sight.

Parvati looked up smiling, but frowned when she saw Hermione. "What happened? You look like death warmed up."

"Thanks," Hermione said dryly and let herself fall on her bed.

"Seriously, Hermione, what happened?" asked Parvati.

"Erm, an eventful morning, involving gifting, doing that exercise William taught us, revealing a reptoid; you know, just the usual kind of stuff one does," Hermione said, failing to sound as light-hearted as she attempted to.

"Details, Hermione, please. You look positively distressed, and you can't even hide it in your voice," said Parvati.

Hermione sighed. Parvati would not let up, no matter how much she would try to divert her attention.

"When I came downstairs this morning, Severus invited me to go along with him, gifting the next tower," Hermione started and told Parvati the events of the morning up until the gathering of the love power.

"And then the images I had in my mind shifted the moment I consciously wanted to increase the energy in order to completely reveal that reptoid guy," Hermione finished gloomily.

"What happened?" Parvati asked. "Did you see an image of Ron?"

Hermione swallowed hard and shook her head. "I haven't thought of Ron for ages, Parvati!" She rolled her eyes. If only it had been that easy.

"Okay," Parvati said, not in the least perturbed. "Was it Severus' image then?"

Hermione gaped at her. "How on earth..." she started to ask but was interrupted by her friend's laughter.

"Oh, honestly, Hermione. Even Draco noticed the tension between the two of you. I think the only ones who haven't noticed are Severus and you." She giggled at Hermione's incredulous expression.

Hermione felt at an utter loss. She had realised some time ago that she had come to like Severus a great deal more than she had ever been able to imagine. But to see him as someone to love? And not only that, but the surge in energy during her love power exercise suggested he had grown to be more than someone she considered merely loveable.

"Hermione, why don't you take a bath...I need a guinea pig for the relaxing bath oil Kingsley and I developed," Parvati said, smirking. Then she continued, serious again, "I know a hot bath helped me tremendously when I realised my feelings for Kingsley not long ago. I know it sounds tripe, but sometimes the simplest solutions work best." Her voice sounded soothing to Hermione.

Hermione looked at her friend. Yes, a hot, relaxing bath would help get her thoughts into order, if nothing else. She would be better able to face the world...and Severus...in a more relaxed state.

"Thanks, Parvati. I think I'll do just that," the young witch said and gave her friend a grateful smile.

* * *

Severus Apparated to the gates of a small farm in William's neighbourhood to pick up his weekly order of fresh, locally grown vegetables.

He had put the morning's episode, in particular the surge of energy that led to the reptoid's collapse, firmly out of his mind the moment he Disapparated from Spinner's End. No use dwelling on it until he had a chance to resolve it, and for now, he felt unable to do so, at least on his own.

The box of vegetables reduced and safely stowed away in his pocket, Severus walked the short distance to William's home.

"Oi, mate! Just the man I want to see!" William called out from his front garden. "I've cleaned the beeswax; it's ready for use."

"Thanks. Parvati will be delighted," muttered Severus. He reduced the chunk of beeswax and put it in his pocket.

"What's up with you? Has your cat died or something?" William gave him a scrutinising look. "Let's go inside, and you can tell me over some tea what's bothering you," he said and walked ahead towards the front door.

Once both men sat down with steaming cups of fragrant green tea in their hands, William gazed at his friend. "What happened?"

Severus took a deep breath and started retelling the events of the morning, up until the point they had reached home and he'd immediately left. "I had to get away. She refused to tell me what'd happened, and I felt so bloody helpless," he said.

William smiled knowingly, which irritated Severus. It reminded him of Albus Dumbledore when he was in full scheming mode. "When those dingbats turned up, did you start gathering the love power as well?" he asked.

"Of course," Severus said indignantly. "I could hardly let Hermione do *all* the work."

William smirked at Severus' answer. "And whose image came to your mind when you gathered the energy?" He raised his eyebrow, looking questioningly at Severus.

"Have a guess, old man. I'm sure you know the answer," Severus said, giving William an irritated glare.

"Of course I do," William said, his voice soothing. "But I'm trying to help you figure out what happened, so humour me for now, will you?"

"All right." A long-suffering sigh was followed by the uttering of Hermione's name.

"Good. Now, tell me again. She was concentrating on gathering the love power to get the bad guys off-balance, and you were doing the same, albeit not as strongly because you were talking to the pin-striped bully."

"Exactly. And suddenly, I felt the energy soar, the pin-striped reptoid collapsed, the driver picked him up, threw him in the van and took off. And Hermione looked as if she were struck by lightning, wouldn't tell me what'd happened and didn't say a single word on the way back," Severus finished in a defeated manner.

William regarded him thoughtfully. "You know, I can think of only one explanation for this..."

"You can?" Severus felt hope rise within him. If anyone could make sense of the situation, it was William, with his clear mind and his ability to sort through and comprehend emotions and human behaviour on an intuitive level.

"You see, in energy work, you typically experience a surge in energy if two people combine, or merge, their energy."

Severus looked at him blankly. "What do you mean, *merge energy*? Didn't that happen when we both started to invoke the love power?"

William shook his head. "You were working towards the same goal, but in order to *merge* the energy, you would have to use each other's images to draw energy from. What I think happened is that Hermione started off by invoking images of her parents or other loved ones. And then the image of you took over...probably unbidden, judging by her reaction...so the energy merged with yours, which resulted in the surge that knocked down the pinhead."

Severus stared at him open-mouthed. "You're joking," he said flatly.

"I thought you knew me better than that, Severus," William said evenly. "Besides, what's wrong with my conclusion? I know you like her...you should be pleased that she likes you back."

"Fuck." Severus was at a complete loss. What now?

Severus frowned when William was unable to contain his amused laughter. "Surely, she wouldn't be your first, mate!"

"No," Severus said thoughtfully. "Not my first woman by any means. But the first woman in a long time I'm fond of."

"And you don't have a clue what to do." It was not a question. William knew him well enough to get away with blunt statements without risking being hexed.

"I don't," Severus said.

"All I can suggest is to follow your heart, you know," William said.

Severus sighed. *Of course, that is the answer to everything.*

"You could show her how much you appreciate her. You know her better than I," William added in a thoughtful tone.

The two men sat in silence for a while, tea long forgotten.

"So, who's doing the cooking tonight?" William asked eventually.

Severus groaned. "Nobody until I get home. We have no fresh food. I picked that up on the way here. I guess I better make a move and rescue my house mates from starvation."

"Why don't you phone and tell them to meet us at the pub?" William asked. "That way, you'll meet Hermione on neutral grounds, and we all can have a good time. Haven't done that in a long while, you know?"

"That's the best idea you've had in a while," Severus said and moved to pick up the phone. Yes, he'd phone and tell whoever picked up the phone to bring the rest of the gang to the pub. Parvati knew its location, and he was certain that they all would be happy to eat out and simply relax away from home for a few hours.

* * *

A/N

Grateful thanks, as always, go to Notsosaintly, beta-reader extra-ordinaire. Any mistakes that remain are mine alone.

Reviews, as always, greatly appreciated.

Move Closer

Chapter 11 of 13

Hermione has a nightmare, and things are moving forward.

Disclaimer: Still not mine. Damn.

* * *

Chapter XI

Move Closer

Hermione felt a mixture of anxiety and relief when Parvati informed her of Severus' phone call suggesting they'd all meet at the pub. She was not quite certain she was ready to face Severus, but at least it wouldn't be on his home ground.

Hermione needn't have worried. Kingsley and Draco wanted to hear all the details of the reptoid being exposed, and Severus clearly enjoyed describing how the human started to morph into a snake-like being. The atmosphere was happy and relaxed, and the food was surprisingly delicious for pub fare.

At first, Hermione did not notice the four middle-aged, elegant looking men in tailored suits who sat down at a nearby table.

William suddenly wrinkled his nose. "I smell trouble." He glanced at the other table and addressed Severus and Hermione. "They're targeting you two. Recognise any of them?"

Both turned around to look at the guys. "No," said Hermione. "I've never seen any of them."

"Me neither," said Severus. "But I did expect them to step up their efforts after this morning, to be honest."

Kingsley turned briefly around. "Damn. I recognise the tall one. He worked at Whitehall when I was there. Not someone to mess with."

"Put a magical shield up around you, Kingsley," William said quietly. His eyes looked unfocused for a moment, and when he spoke again, addressing Hermione and Severus, he sounded uncharacteristically serious. "They've been shooting micro-chips at you. Actually, I'm surprised; it looks like they're only after you two. You *really* must have ruffled their feathers."

"I'm sure we did," Severus said.

Hermione felt uncomfortable. Despite having been in the limelight of the wizarding media as Harry Potter's best friend during her Hogwarts years, with her fair share of being accused of various character flaws, being targeted with means of technology unknown to her was frightening. William's dark and foreboding expression only added to her anxiety.

Severus stood up and excused himself. Hermione and William exchanged looks when seconds later, one of the suit-wearing guys also stood up and headed for the gents' room.

"Okay, guys and ladies," William said. "Let's get ready to move quickly, if needed. Parvati, Kingsley, Draco, it'll be best if you Apparate straight to Spinner's End. Hermione, if you don't mind, join Severus and me. I'd like to check both of you for any chips those bullies managed to hit you with so you can disable them before they cause havoc to your system."

Hermione nodded, unable to speak for fear of sounding as scared as she felt.

Severus returned, his eyes glinting. "Uh, let's get out of here," he muttered.

From the corner of her eye, Hermione noticed a second suit-wearing guy stand up. She groaned inwardly. *That glint in his eyes...* "Yeah, please, let's move, and fast," she said shakily, but felt immediately soothed by a comforting arm around her shoulder.

"Don't worry, Hermione," Severus said quietly. "They won't win this one."

All stood up and headed for the door. "Hermione is coming with us," William quietly told Severus. "I want to scan both of you."

Parvati, Kingsley and Draco had just reached the road, checked that no one was around, and Disapparated the moment the door opened again and two of the suited men burst through, guns in their hands.

"Time to go," said Severus, and the three Apparated straight into William's living room.

Hermione was shaking uncontrollably. "They would have killed us, wouldn't they?" Her teeth were clattering.

"Given a chance, yes," William said. "But don't forget, we have a kind of spiritual protection they don't even know how to dream of."

Hermione wanted to believe him. But she was feeling sick, despondent, and utterly hopeless. "Right. If you say so. I believe you." Even to herself, she sounded like some stranger.

From a distance, she heard William's voice, not even realising he was talking about her.

"Calming spell, Severus, please. She's got the brunt of the micro-chips; it shocked her. I need to find them and place magnets to disable them, and quickly." His voice sounded urgent, despite the calm.

Hermione never saw or heard Severus' softly spoken calming spell. Everything went black all of a sudden.

Let William heal her. Severus stepped back from Hermione, allowing his friend access to her.

He watched William's hands scan over her body, never touching it. "A little help here, please! I've never dealt with quite such an assault before," William said.

Severus' spirit guide had never let him down, but despite the years and experience with Red Cloud, he felt uncharacteristically relieved at Red Cloud's presence. Hermione would be fine.

He watched, feeling his anxiety over Hermione's state slowly dissipate. *Let her be well, let her be well, let her be well,* was all he could think.

Eventually, Severus heard Red Cloud chuckle. *The silly girl, as you were so fond of calling her not long ago, managed to intercept all the micro-chips directed at you, subconsciously no less. You will not find a single chip in yourself.*

William gazed at Severus. "Still need more proof that she cares for you?" He smirked. "You found yourself quite a treasure here, I'll say." Looking at Severus' smug expression, he added gruffly, "Lucky sod. But I suppose you deserve it."

Severus lifted Hermione carefully off the floor and placed her on the sofa. "I don't really want to wake her up now. I suspect she can do with some sleep after today's events," he said and sat down in the nearest chair.

"No need to wake her," William agreed. "I'll get us some tea." He walked out of the living room, leaving Severus to ponder the eventful day.

"Hermione agreed to gift the healing sanctuary," Severus said conversationally when William returned with a tray full of tea and biscuits.

"Do you think it wise for her to go on a gifting mission without some additional protection? Especially if you're not joining her?" William asked.

That was a valid point. "What I could do is charm some magnets to automatically find any micro-chips, for a start," he said slowly. "That way, she'll at least be able to disable any new chips."

"That'll be handy, no doubt," William said. "I was thinking more along the lines of a protective amulet. I know the two of you have been experimenting." William looked expectantly at his friend.

"Yes, we have. Although, Hermione feels there is still some component missing to make the amulet truly protective. It is easy for us to find ways to protect us from dark magic, but the threat of destructive technology is a novelty," said Severus.

"You need to combine the two aspects. After all, it comes down to the same thing; whether the darkness is created with magic or technology, it matters not. Two different recipes, if you will, but the same result."

"What are you getting at?" Severus was intrigued by William's words. If they took every aspect of protection into account, they might succeed in creating a protective device that would render harmless any assault, be it magical or technology-driven.

"With the Orgonite muffins, you have a functional recipe that reverses the deadening effects of radiation or frequencies, thus regaining the magic. The cones Hermione created are the same recipe with the addition of double-pointed quartz crystals. Those not only reverse the effect of the rays emitted by towers but also have a reversing effect of water pollution, right?"

"Yes, that's our conclusion from what we've observed so far."

"But you've not embedded any magic in your creations," William pointed out.

"No. We haven't," Severus admitted. Neither he nor Hermione had even considered using magic for the protective devices, even though the magic had been abundant at Spinner's End since they had stored all the Orgonite throughout the house.

By the early morning hours, Severus and William had developed a recipe for a protective amulet that would not only protect the wearer from destructive rays but also instantly reverse the effect of any micro-chips shot at them.

"I really want to start brewing, but I don't want to wake Hermione up," Severus said.

"You'll be no good with brewing if you're sleep-deprived. Go get some sleep, and then both of you will be ready for the next challenge," William said, pointing to his guest room.

Hermione stirred on the sofa and started to whimper. Severus instantly moved to her side to calm her, but it was futile. Her whimpers quickly grew into hysterical sobs. He let his instincts take over, and he gently lifted her to hold her. "Shshsh, Hermione, it's only a nightmare. Wake up, all is well."

After long minutes, Hermione finally opened her eyes, but the moment she saw his face, her sobs increased again, and she collapsed against his chest. "They killed you, and... and it was so unfair and cruel to kill you just when I'd found you," she mumbled almost incoherently through her sobs.

Severus thought his heart skipped a few beats. "I'm very much alive, Hermione. Look at me." He tilted her chin up with one hand, turning her to face him. "Do I look dead to you?"

She brought her hand up to his cheek and drew a shaky breath. "No. Thank goodness you're alive. It was just a dream. But it waso real!" Her voice was heavy with sleep, and she started crying again.

Severus held her tighter and stroked her head. "Try and get some more sleep. I'll stay here with you," he said gruffly.

Severus stayed awake long after Hermione had calmed down and fallen asleep again. He treasured the feeling of holding the young woman in his arms to protect her from nightmares. That someone cried over his demise was a miracle in itself...that holding that someone calmed her enough to peacefully fall asleep in his arms was something he could not quite fathom yet. He felt uplifted, and his heart welled with hope for happier times.

The protective amulet now contained not only two rare earth magnets charmed to disable any destructive rays directed at the wearer but also one double-pointed quartz crystal, which was spelled to return any negative energy to its sender. In addition, Severus had followed William's suggestion to invoke the love power and direct it at the Orgonite during the brewing process.

"Wow, I feel invincible," Hermione said when Severus placed the amulet around her neck and knotted the cotton thread holding it. She could feel the strong energy emitting from the amulet.

"Good. Next, we'll try out just how invincible you are before I let you loose on the healing sanctuary," Severus replied. "I'd rather *know* it works than hope it does. And you don't know what to expect there."

Hermione conceded. "How are we going to find out if it works, though?"

Severus smirked. "Kingsley told me about this pub near Whitehall, a hang-out for bullies. There are bound to be reptoids there at any time of the day."

Hermione shuddered. "I just hope they don't have guns. That really did me in last night."

Severus placed a comforting hand on her cheek. "They're far less likely to show guns in a busy place in London than they are here, in the middle of nowhere. Also, I want you to carry this on you at all times." He handed her a tiny, silver grand-piano on a black cotton band. "It's a Portkey that'll take you straight back here to Spinner's End. To activate it, simply touch the piano and say, *Home*."

"Thank you," Hermione said softly and kissed him coyly on his lips.

"You're welcome," Severus replied and smirked when Hermione blushed.

"You do know what that voice does to me, and you're taking full advantage," she complained.

"Of course," he said blandly. "I am a Slytherin, after all."

Hermione was enjoying their playful banter throughout the day. The increase of apparently random physical touches here and there amazed and pleased her *It is so different from being with Ron*, she thought more than once, wondering whether it was only the difference in age, or whether she was simply more suited to be with someone as deep and intense as Severus. Whatever task he chose, he did so wholeheartedly without short-cuts.

"I suggest we get the testing done and over with. Then we can have a quiet evening," said Severus, and Hermione agreed. The sooner they got this chore out of the way, the sooner they could have a peaceful, relaxing evening.

They Apparated to a side street in the city of London and headed for the nearby bar. Hermione shuddered at the sight of various groups, mainly males, all dressed elegantly, mostly in black or pin-stripe suits. The few females mingling with the men were equally elegant, dressed in suits, high-heel shoes, and with far too much make-up as far as Hermione was concerned.

Severus chose a table near the door and motioned for Hermione to sit so she could overlook the entire bar. "I'll get us some drinks. Use your intent to be invisible."

Hermione sat down, smiling at Severus' reminder to use intent, and started to concentrate on the intent to be invisible. To her satisfaction, it seemed to work perfectly. Some men had glanced at them when they entered, but she saw now that every single group had turned its attention elsewhere. *So far so good*, she thought with relief.

Severus returned with drinks and sat down next to her. His arm around her shoulders, he bent down to her ear. "You know, I have a suspicion that this will work well only because they're such a pervicacious lot. It'll never occur to them that we'd dare turn up in their own playground."

Hermione sighed. "You're probably right. Maybe taking down another tower would give us a better idea on the effectiveness of the amulet."

Severus looked thoughtful. "I have a feeling that, yet again, intent plays a vital role. If you use intent to be invisible to reptoids and their stooges and intent to remain unharmed, then they won't be able to touch you. Red Cloud always stresses the importance of using intent, and I must admit, I don't remember it often enough."

His words made sense to her, although on the other hand, Hermione could not fathom it being so simple. "It just sounds too easy."

"Exactly. Life—your own life that you control yourself—is *meant* to be easy. Experiencing struggles and hardships like Muggles have done for years, and many of us since the magic disappeared, is not natural. That situation exists purely because a force of beings—reptoids or others, I don't know, and I don't think it's important—feeds off misery and fear instead of love. So they constantly create situations that bring about misery. It ensures their continued existence."

"Are they really that powerful?" Hermione asked, not quite believing him.

"Only because we let them. It's about global consciousness, I think. Once enough people adapt to using intent and taking control over their own lives again, those forces will lose power rather quickly because they'll have nothing to feed on. And you saw for yourself what that little, easy exercise of sending conscious love does to a reptoid."

After a surprisingly uneventful couple of hours, during which the pub was becoming quiet and empty, Hermione and Severus left and Apparated back to Spinner's End.

"Well, that was a bit anti-climactic," Hermione muttered and let herself fall onto the sofa.

"How did it go?" Parvati asked from the kitchen.

"It was... curious," said Severus, frowning. "No reaction at all. And the place had emptied by the time we left."

"Empty?" Kingsley sounded disbelieving. "That place is *never* empty."

"There were quite a few people there when we arrived," Hermione pointed out.

Severus looked at her. "I wonder if the energy of the amulet caused them discomfort..."

"Wouldn't that be nice," Hermione said dryly.

"It's quite possible," Kingsley said. "From what I learned during my time with those scumbags, they can't cope with the frequency of love; it really makes them uncomfortable. Even those in relationships—it's all purely for convenience and making sure certain bloodlines continue—but it's *never* about love. If the woman doesn't conceive in a timely manner, she's considered unfit and dropped; she'll be divorced if she's lucky or killed if she isn't."

"Oh, Merlin, that sounds like living on a different planet!" exclaimed Hermione.

Severus snorted. "I'd rather look at them as a different intelligent species. We've seen for ourselves that they're not entirely human."

"True," Hermione said and snuggled up to him. "So, what's the plan now?"

"I think you should visit the healing sanctuary. Take all the Orgonite with you and gift the property and surrounding towers. Teach whoever is there how to brew it so they can start gifting in their area. See if other witches' or wizards' whereabouts are known to anyone there.

"I hate the thought of being apart from you, but if we want the magic back everywhere, it's paramount to start networking," Severus said, his tone serious.

Hermione nodded. She was not keen on leaving Severus behind either, but regaining the magic was the top priority now that they knew how to. "I'll leave in the morning."

His hold on her tightened, and his voice held a rough edge to it when he spoke. "Go, do what you must, and then come back here." He moved to hold her at arms' length,

scrutinising her face. "You *will* come back, won't you?"

Hermione looked at him in disbelief and uttered a shaky laugh. "Do you doubt me? Severus, of course I'll come back. I hate the thought of being away from you!"

Draco came in and interrupted their conversation with a dramatic sigh. "It's not fair to be surrounded by love birds! I want a mate, too," he said petulantly.

Severus rolled his eyes at him. "Give me your requirements, Draco, and I'll brew you one," he drawled.

Hermione giggled. "Aren't you a talented one!"

Severus quirked his eyebrow at her. "Are you questioning my talents?"

Hermione shook her head ruefully. "Never."

* * *

Hermione woke up early the next morning. Feeling disoriented, she turned and her face melted into a content grin at the sight of Severus, still asleep, but holding her tightly.

She had fallen asleep in his arms, and he'd never bothered to move. Carefully moving his arm, Hermione got up and decided to prepare coffee before heading for the bathroom. At least she'd have a little bit of time with Severus before the next stage of regaining the magic.

When Hermione returned to the kitchen, Severus was pouring coffee into two mugs.

"Don't just leave, making me feel all cold and lonely, witch," he growled.

"Good morning to you too," Hermione said, smiling brightly at him. She watched in wonder as his eyes softened, and her heart started to beat faster.

"Good morning," he said softly, looking at her as if she were a celestial vision. "What have you done to me? Up until recently, I was content to be alone. And now I feel a part of me is missing when you're not around."

Hermione could not help but close the distance between them and wrap her arms around him. "I'm glad you feel that way. Just the thought of being away from you makes me hurt." A feeling of complete content washed over her as she stood there in his embrace, her head leaning against his chest, listening to his heart-beat lightly drumming in her ear.

* * *

Hermione Apparated from Spinner's End to the town of Cumnock and took out the parchment with the address and telephone number that Professor Sprout had left for her when they had parted after leaving Hogwarts. She found a phone booth, called, and arranged with Neville to pick her up.

Grateful that despite cooler temperatures, it was still uncharacteristically warm for October, Hermione sat down on a bench near the public phone.

She did not have to wait long for Neville to appear. "It's so nice to see you." He beamed at her.

"It's been a while, hasn't it? How are you?" Hermione asked, glad to see a familiar face.

"I'm not bad, although things could be better," Neville said. He took a deep breath before continuing, "What with the magic gone, the sanctuary has attracted the attention of the local Muggle Council, and they've started proceedings to shut us down. They claim the healers are quacks, but truth be told, it takes away business from the Muggle hospitals."

Hermione's heart went out to him. It was not easy dealing with Muggle government stooges who went out of their way to gain control.

"I think I can help with the magic, Neville. That's why I'm here."

Neville shot her a hopeful look. "Really? What have you been up to?"

They had reached the front garden of the sanctuary now. Neville opened the door. "I come bearing a visitor, people!" he called out into the corridor. A door opened, and Molly Weasley's head appeared. "Hermione! Oh, it's so lovely to see you!"

Molly's greeting caught the other inhabitants' attention, and soon, Hermione found herself embraced by Professor Sprout, Madam Pomfrey, Charlie Weasley—and suddenly stood face to face with Ron.

"Ron. I thought you were at Grimmauld Place," Hermione said. To see him so unexpectedly came as a shock to her.

"I arrived here a couple of weeks ago," Ron said. "I needed some time away from Moody."

Hermione raised her eyebrow. "You were supporting Moody to the point of betraying me," she pointed out, wondering how Ron had come to that conclusion.

Before he had a chance to answer, Molly jumped in. "Oh, you know what boys are like, Hermione. Ron wasn't using his brain, and eventually, I had to kick him to make him come to his senses."

Ron looked abashed. "Stop it, Mum."

Hermione was unable to hide a grin, glad that at least Molly appeared to have retained her common sense.

"Do tell, Hermione, what have you been up to?" Molly asked.

Hermione told of finding Severus, her research into Reich's Orgone, their gifting the towers, encounters with the reptoid, and regaining the magic.

"You really did it, Hermione," Professor Sprout said in awe. "I read the article in *The Quibbler*, but I wasn't sure what to make of it. And we've not found any of those telecommunication towers around here."

Hermione took an Orgonite muffin out of her bag to show the others. "This is all you need. I'm sure we'll find the towers—I know what to look for.

The young witch spent the next few hours answering questions about the Orgonite, explaining how to brew it and stressing the need to disable any towers in the area. Then she told of her and Severus' observation of the reversal effect the Orgonite cones had on water.

Over dinner, Poppy filled her in on the events at the sanctuary. "We received a letter from the local council, telling us what we're doing is illegal unless we can show relevant qualifications, which of course we can't because, to Muggles, places like St Mungo's don't exist, so they would even accuse us of forging the qualifications. We haven't figured out what to do at all." She sighed deeply, and the others nodded with concern on their faces.

Hermione thought for a moment. "I'm not sure if it'll work, but I suggest that we gift the entire perimeter of the sanctuary tonight. Then, tomorrow, we'll look for towers and

gift them. Hopefully, we'll have the magic back within a few days," she said. "And once the magic is back, you can put the sanctuary under the Fidelius Charm."

After dinner, Poppy, Neville, Charlie and Hermione went outside, Hermione carrying a stack of Orgonite muffins. Reaching the fence of the large garden, she took an old spoon out, scratched enough earth out of a spot in the ground, placed a muffin in it and covered it with some soil.

"Right," she said. "Now, we should bury one in the same manner every ten or fifteen yards."

"Why don't we split into pairs," suggested Charlie. "It's nearly dark already, and I'd rather have the entire grounds covered as soon as possible."

"Great idea, seeing that we can't use magic for lighting," said Neville.

Neville's words startled Hermione. It had not occurred to her to see if her magic was working here. She took out her wand and uttered "*Lumos*".

The light emanating from Hermione's wand was not bright by any means, but to the other witch and two wizards, who had not been able to cast any spells for months, it was a miracle.

"Blimey, Hermione," said Charlie, looking impressed. "How come you can do magic?"

Poppy stared open-mouthed at Hermione's lit wand. "It's really working," she whispered in awe.

Hermione smiled softly. "The magic will become stronger once we disable the rays the towers are emitting." She looked at her companions. "We should bury more pieces, like Charlie said."

Hermione teamed up with Charlie and gave a stack of Orgonite to Poppy and Neville. Within half an hour, the entire perimeter of the sanctuary was armed with Orgonite.

Inside, Hermione found herself steered into the living room by Molly Weasley. Once both were seated, Molly started to talk. "I'm curious, Hermione. How come when there was no magic anywhere, Severus was still able to Apparate and Disapparate when Moody and Ron tried to corner you?"

Hermione shuddered at the memory of the scene in the attic at Grimmauld Place. She had no doubt that Molly was trustworthy, but the fact that it was her ex-boyfriend's mother she was talking to left a bitter taste with her.

"I don't know exactly how he did it," she said vaguely. "It has something to do with music."

Thankfully, Molly's scrutinising was interrupted when Charlie and Neville walked into the room. "Mum, leave the poor girl alone! She's been working bloody hard for weeks, and now she's decent enough to work even more so we can all get the magic back," Charlie admonished his mother.

Molly looked unfazed. "I was just curious. I mean, it's the only occurrence of magic I've heard of since it disappeared!"

Hermione figured now was as good a time as any to find out if any more contacts had been established with other wizarding families. "Do you have any idea about the whereabouts of other witches and wizards?"

"I had a letter from Seamus yesterday," Neville said. "He and Pansy are still with his parents, and he wrote that he's going to try with the Orgonite."

"Oh, brilliant," said Hermione. "I've been wondering about them."

"Remus has found a few witches and wizards, amongst them Millicent Bultstrode. Her father didn't survive the Final Battle on Voldemort's side, and she's been looking for Draco without success. Tonks and Remus have taken her in, and last time I spoke with Remus, he said she and Ginny are getting on rather well," said Charlie.

Hermione felt relief wash over her. Finally, another person she knew had re-surfaced.

"And let's not forget Mr Zabini and Mr McMillan!" exclaimed Poppy, who had entered the living room and overheard Charlie.

Hermione gave her a blank look. "Zabini and Ernie?"

"A couple of months back, Ernie brought Blaise here after Blaise had had a run-in with his mother, who was about to get married again. Since she couldn't hex him, she resorted to beating him like a Muggle. Ernie found him in an alley nearby and brought him here," Neville said, and Poppy nodded gravely.

"Poor Mr Zabini was in bad shape," Poppy said. "But thankfully, combined skills in healing and healing potions and Mr McMillan's care sped up his recovery, and he's doing fine now."

"Are they keeping in contact with you?" Hermione asked, interested. She hoped to network with enough wizarding folks to get the entire island covered with Orgonite in as little time as possible. Besides, she had no doubt Severus would be pleased to hear about other Slytherins.

"Ernie promised to come by again," Neville said.

There was a short silence, until Charlie stretched, yawned, and then asked, "Hermione, has anyone thought of showing you the guest room? You're staying, aren't you?"

"No and yes. I'm staying until you all know how to brew Orgonite and until you have at least some magic back. And you need to know how to recognise reptoids, too. But that can wait 'til tomorrow." She yawned. It had been a rather tiring day with all the talking she'd been doing.

Molly got up, and Hermione followed her out of the room, through the corridor and into a bedroom.

"Here you go, Hermione," Molly said and fussed about, pulling the quilt back from the bed and shaking the pillow. "If you need anything, the bathroom is through this door, and the kitchen is two doors down to the left."

"Thanks, Molly. I'll just get ready for bed," Hermione said and yawned again.

Molly smiled indulgently at her, and after bidding her goodnight, she left and closed the door softly.

I wonder how Severus would appreciate the daisy design of the sheets, or the floral wallpaper, Hermione thought idly as she headed for the bathroom, warding the door on her way. She missed him. It was good she was so tired, otherwise she might not be able to sleep. Just two nights in his arms had left her with no doubt that she belonged there.

Ready for bed, Hermione lay down and tried to find a comfortable position. She tossed and turned a few times until a knock at the door interrupted her *Who could that be?*

Hermione sighed, got out of bed and unwarded the door, which opened immediately. "What did you ward the door for?" asked Ron angrily.

Hermione felt anger well up almost instantly. "To avoid people interrupting my beauty sleep," she snapped. "What do you want?"

"What do I want?" Ron asked incredulously. "Hermione, we haven't seen each other for months. I've not heard from you at all!"

Hermione sighed wearily. She did not need this confrontation, not at the end of a long day, not ever.

"Ron, I had no reason to speak with you. Remember, last time we saw each other, you tried your best to impose your opinion on me—with force, I might add. What on earth makes you think I can just forget about what you've done?"

Ron stepped closer to her, too close. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I never wanted to hurt you. But I couldn't bear the thought of you being with the greasy git, with that murderer! You have to understand that! I only wanted the best for you!"

Keep calm, keep calm, keep calm. Think of Severus. Taking a deep breath, Hermione replied, "Now is not the time to bother me with this, Ron. I don't need you to protect me, least of all from Severus. Good night." Hermione slammed the door into his face and warded the door again. She would be better off if she did not blow up on him.

Returning to bed, she sighed. Tomorrow would be another day. A day closer to returning into Severus' arms.

* * *

Feelin' Love

Chapter 12 of 13

Progress happens on all fronts.

Disclaimer: Still not mine.

* * *

Chapter XII

Feelin' Love

After a restless night's sleep, Hermione woke up just as the first light broke through. Shaking off her tiredness and irritation at Ron in the shower, she made her way to the kitchen.

"Morning," Charlie greeted her cheerfully.

"Morning." Hermione yawned. "Got any coffee?"

Charlie snorted with amusement. "I see you've adopted Severus' habit."

Hermione blushed. "Actually, it's just something we have in common. I've liked coffee for a long time," she said in defense.

Charlie chuckled. "How are you getting on these days?"

"Well enough," Hermione said evasively. She found that while she was comfortable enough to talk about her feelings for Severus with Parvati, discussing it with a member of the Weasley family was a different matter.

The young witch, however, learned that Charlie was highly perceptive, unlike his youngest brother. "I'd been wondering how long it would take the two of you to get together. I've a feeling you'll make each other happy." His smile turned into a grin when she squirmed. "Aw, it's okay, Hermione. I can keep a secret, you know."

Hermione sighed. "It's not a secret. It's just so new to me, and I'm not sure I'm ready to discuss it with anyone."

"Discuss what?" Ron had entered the kitchen.

"Nothing of your business, little bro," Charlie said.

"I wasn't asking *you*," Ron said and threw a questioning glance at Hermione.

The young witch shrugged dismissively. Ron was the last person she wanted to discuss anything with, least of all her love interest.

Ron approached her, once again too close for her comfort, and she stepped back. "But, Hermione, we used to go out together. Why won't you tell me?" he asked, a hint of whine in his voice.

"The emphasis being on *used to*, as in *the past*," Hermione drawled, sounding to herself as if Severus was speaking through her. She abruptly put her now empty mug down and left the kitchen, glancing apologetically at Charlie.

* * *

By lunchtime, all the inhabitants of the healing sanctuary knew how to brew Orgonite and were fairly proficient with the love power exercise. Whilst none of them could yet cast any spells, Hermione noticed a rise in magic when she levitated a leaf from the ground.

"Now, let's go out and search for telecommunication towers near the house. Once we find them and bury Orgonite nearby, we should have the magic back here within a few days."

Madam Sprout, Professor Sprout's Squib sister, who was running the healing sanctuary, stayed behind in case anyone turned up in need of healing, but all others were keen to learn another step towards regaining the magic.

Hermione did not have to go far before the first tower came into sight, even though this one was more hidden than the ones she had found with Severus near Spinner's End, right in the midst of a forest.

Charlie bent down close to a pillar and loosened the earth.

"Charlie, wait," Hermione cautioned him. "They usually have hidden cameras installed. Let's find those first so we can bury the Orgonite without them seeing it." She looked

at the others. "And don't forget, if anyone turns up, start the love power exercise immediately."

Hermione glanced up the tower post, searching for cameras. Once she had spotted them, she motioned for Charlie to move out of the cameras' sight to bury the Orgonite. Her magic was considerably weaker in close vicinity of the tower, and she did not dare to magically tweak the cameras for fear of failure.

They had gifted three towers within close vicinity of the healing sanctuary by the time they returned.

"And you think disabling those rays with Orgonite will give us the magic back?" Professor Sprout did not sound convinced.

"It worked for us," said Hermione. "I don't see why it wouldn't work here. There is still a lot I don't know or understand, as I'm not yet familiar with the way cosmic energy works, but the main thing is to regain the magic, and this has been working just fine."

By the following evening, everyone managed simple spells.

Each day, Hermione thought more of Severus, and each day, she missed him more. She wondered if he was feeling the same way as she longingly thought back to the last night at Spinner's End in his arms.

Three days after gifting the towers with Orgonite, Hedwig arrived, carrying a letter for Hermione.

Molly's eyes shone brightly as she fed Hedwig some treats. "I'd not dared dream of seeing owls delivering mail again, and Hedwig at that! I wonder if she misses Harry." Tears were now streaming down her cheeks.

"I think Hedwig is happy in Severus' garden and in the company of Fawkes and other magical creatures," Hermione said quietly. "Harry would want her to be free like that, I'm sure, even though it's in Severus's garden." Harry was gone, but the fact that Hedwig chose to live in Severus' back garden brought her some level of solace.

"You're right, of course," Molly replied, wiping tears off impatiently. "At least things are finally looking up. Without the magic, everything looked so gloomy. And all the death announcements in *The Quibbler* don't help either."

"They don't help to keep our spirits up, but I think they help insofar that wizards and witches will do their bit to get the magic back. In fact, I'd like you to write *to* *The Quibbler* as soon as the magic is back in full force here. Describe what we did to regain it.... It will inspire others," Hermione said.

Relieved that Molly had calmed down again, Hermione turned her attention to the letter in her hand and smiled as she recognised Severus' writing.

Hermione,

Good news on the magic front. Mr Lovegood has written to William informing him that the magic has been restored in The Quibbler's offices and his own home. Young Mr Creevey has even managed to develop his first batch of magical pictures for the next issue. Miss Lovegood has single-handedly gifted the entire perimeter of the village as well as the surrounding towers and plans to venture out further away. William and I agreed that she needs a protective amulet for that task, and I'm working on it.

On a more personal note, the house feels positively empty without you, as do my arms. Kindly complete your task and move yourself back here.

Severus

Hermione smiled, both at the good news and the fact that he was missing her.

"You look happy," Ron muttered, frowning.

Hermione looked up. She had not heard him enter the room.

"Maybe I am," Hermione said, even more sharply than intended.

"What, good news?" Ron asked curiously, and before Hermione could react, he had grabbed hold of the parchment, skimming it eagerly.

"How dare you?" Hermione asked angrily, attempting to take the letter back.

Ron looked at her, an expression of disgust on his face. "You... you... you traitor! The wizarding world is in shambles, people are killing themselves left, right and centre, and all you can do is get laid by that criminal! I don't believe it! How stupid was I to fall for you? You're no less a traitor than that ugly git!"

"That's quite enough, bro!"

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of Charlie.

"You have absolutely no right to speak like that to anyone! I really thought you'd have more brains than that, Ron." Charlie shook his head in annoyance and turned to Hermione. "Sorry, Hermione. Mad-Eye must have taken my brother's brain out. He never used to be such a stupid prat."

"Thanks Charlie," Hermione replied. Turning to Ron, she hissed, "Ron, just leave me alone. I really don't want to talk to you."

Hermione took a deep breath and addressed Charlie. "I'll leave as soon as... In fact, Charlie, could I arrange with you to let me know how the magic changes here? I'll send an owl in a few days, and you can send it to William. I really have no reason for staying here."

She had enough of Ron. The sooner she did not share any space with him the better.

"Hang on, Hermione. Ron, get out. You heard her, she doesn't want to talk to you, and nor do I for now," Charlie said.

Ron made for the door. Before he exited, he turned around, his face full of anger and disgust. "I'll make sure that bastard gets his justice! I hope the Ministry will arrange a Dementor's Kiss for him," he spat.

"I so don't need this," Hermione muttered. Ron's last outburst had shaken her. She was not used to the level of hate he had emitted... At Spinner's End, hate was entirely absent.

"I'd love for you to stay longer, but I understand if you leave. I do apologise for Ron's behaviour—he's being a complete and utter prat," said Charlie.

Hermione nodded. "I'd love to stay, Charlie, and chat with you, and Neville, and everyone else. But I don't think it's a good idea to be under the same roof as Ron right now. I'll leave after lunch, though. That way I can say good-bye to the others."

Charlie and Hermione spent the remainder of the morning chatting. Hermione gave him William's address and promised to send an owl in the next few days so Charlie could let her know about the progress.

* * *

Hermione arrived back at Spinner's End after lunch, her stomach lurching in anticipation of seeing Severus. She was looking forward to seeing him again, but at the same

time, she feared he might have changed his mind. *Don't be daft! He even wrote to you!*

As soon as the young witch entered the house, she heard him playing the piano. She smiled and tip-toed into the living-room, so he would not be disturbed, and quietly sat down to listen.

Severus completed playing Beethoven's Appassionata and turned around to face her. "Enjoyed?" He smirked.

"Yes. It's so peaceful here. I'm glad I'm back," Hermione said.

Severus stood up and moved towards her. "I didn't expect you so soon. What happened? You look stressed."

Hermione snorted. "Ron happened."

Severus paled. "What do you mean, *Ron happened?*" He sounded weary. "Did you just return to collect your belongings?"

Hermione's eyes widened. He couldn't possibly think that. She laughed at the thought. "Oh, Severus, for someone so intelligent you can be pretty thick at times! I came back because Ron was a complete prat, and I decided I can have a much better time here, with you!" Then she added softly, "I missed you. I missed being in your arms, I missed talking with you...heck, I even missed your sarcasm!"

Severus looked at her as if not entirely certain whether or not to believe her.

"Severus?"

He was at her side in an instant. "Well, we'll just have to make up for lost time, won't we..."

His low, silky voice made her tremble, and when her eyes met his, the gleam she saw promised further undoing.

Severus' lips met hers, at first hesitantly, but more insistently when she offered no resistance. His tongue gently tasted her lower lip until she required a taste and darted her tongue out to sample his lips. They felt much fuller than they looked.

Their tongues met, demanding to further explore, taste and feel, not only of lips but also more than the mere tip of the other's tongue.

He tasted... good. She detected some lingering coffee from his after lunch brew. She noticed his unique scent in his taste, one whispering of wild meadows on a summer day. While her hand wove through his hair, she noted with a blurred mind that at least it didn't *feel* greasy.

A commotion from the kitchen forced Hermione and Severus to step apart from each other and focus their attention on something else.

"Not fair," muttered Hermione.

"Quite true," Severus agreed. "I should have followed my hunch and taken you to my bedroom," he added blandly, making her shudder in anticipation.

"And what exactly caused you to disturb our scientific exploration?" Severus frowned at Parvati and Draco, who were standing in the kitchen.

Parvati shot him an amused glance. "We're done brewing for the day, and Draco wanted to learn the art of Indian cuisine.

"And besides, Severus, it's called snogging," she said and laughed at his astounded expression.

* * *

Dinner was lively. William had just returned from Mr Lovegood and came by to report further progress, as often, in time for dinner.

Hermione told the others of the contacts the Sprout Healing Sanctuary had made with others from the wizarding world.

"We're really making progress, that's wonderful," William said happily.

"Yes," said Severus. "I think I'll have to start working on my defence soon. The way the magic is coming back, there'll be Aurors swarming about in no time." He looked pointedly at Dumbledore's portrait.

The Headmaster smiled. "Anytime you like, Severus, I'll work with you on it. I won't let your arrest happen for something made you do."

Hermione and Kingsley cleared the table and magically restored the kitchen ready for the next cooking session while Parvati and Draco took out glasses and poured the Côtes du Lubéron Severus had Summoned from the cellar.

Hermione was appreciatively sipping the red wine when she was overcome with a feeling of deep content. *Greetings, Red Cloud*, she thought.

The spirit guide chuckled. "Gryffindor, your perception has grown in leaps and bounds. Even my charge didn't notice me."

"Greetings, Red Cloud. Forgive me, I've been preoccupied."

"The pleasures of scientific exploration often lead to preoccupation," said Red Cloud, evoking laughter from everyone present.

"I have come to you to put a suggestion before you.

"Once the magic is restored in the capital, the Ministry of Magic will start actively looking for you, dark man, and you may have to remain in hiding here until we can be certain the judges grant you a non-guilty status.

"Therefore, the next important step is to restore the magic at the castle school, so magical children will not lose out on education.

"I will leave you now to consider my words if you have no questions."

After a short silence, Severus said, "Thank you. We shall discuss it."

Red Cloud's presence dissipated slowly, leaving everyone to ponder his suggestion.

"I think it's a great idea," Hermione said eventually. "Once the school is restored, we can put notices in *The Quibbler*, and we'll have the school open even before the magic returns everywhere, even if we start with just a handful of children."

"I love the idea, if you don't mind me saying so," Albus said.

"I don't know if I can face Hogwarts," Draco said quietly.

"You can stay here," Kingsley said. "We have enough brewing to do to keep us busy for quite a while. I'd suggest Severus and Hermione go and the rest of us stay behind."

That way, we won't lose any business, and we can keep an eye on the magic."

Severus looked questioningly at Hermione, and she smiled at him. Spending a few days with Severus alone sounded heavenly. "It's a great idea," she said. "When do you want to leave?"

"We need to brew lots of Orgonite. How about doing that over the next couple of days, and then we'll go?" asked Severus.

"Why don't you start brewing now?" Draco asked, an uncharacteristically mischievous gleam showing in his eyes. "The sooner you start, the sooner you can gift Hogwarts."

"Because, young man," drawled Severus, "I have more important things to do."

Turning to Hermione, he said with a silken voice that ignited something somewhere deep inside of her, "Do you feel too you've had enough of these people's company for today? I certainly feel that way."

Hermione nodded mutely, words failing her completely.

Severus stretched out his hand towards her, and she took it, allowing him to pull her up. Not a care in the world that everyone at Spinner's End knew exactly what important things Severus had to do, she followed him happily.

* * *

Waking up in his arms had been wonderful, but waking up naked, spooned against him, his arm possessively wrapped around her waist, his erection pressing firmly against her back, felt exquisite.

Making love with Ron had made her wonder more than once what she'd been doing wrong.

Making love with Severus left her at the same time sated and wanting. Wanting to feel his touch again, wanting to feel him inside her again, wanting simply more of him.

They started the day leisurely and only left the bedroom when the brewing required attention or when the need for food became prevalent.

Two days later, Hermione and Severus had produced sufficient amounts of Orgonite to gift Hogsmeade and Hogwarts.

Not knowing how long they would be gone from Spinner's End, Hermione stepped out in the garden and asked Hedwig to go the Sprout Sanctuary and wait there for Charlie to send a note.

Before she turned back inside, Fawkes swooped down on her and nestled on her shoulder, startling her.

Severus laughed when she entered the room. "Found yourself a new friend, love?"

Hermione glared at him. "He just decided to settle on my shoulder," she muttered, unused to the sensation. He felt surprisingly light for his size, but his red and gold plumage at the corner of her eyes took some getting used to.

"Phoenixes are not only magical birds but intelligent ones too. He knows what he's doing, Hermione," Severus said soothingly.

Hermione sighed. "Alright, we'll take him along."

They Apparated to the edge of Braemar Forest and walked into the village where Severus had booked a hotel room.

"I'd certainly look twice at someone carrying a bird the size and colour of Fawkes," muttered Hermione. "People are pretty ignorant here!"

Severus chuckled. "Can you feel any magic here apart from ours?"

Hermione stopped in her tracks. "No. There isn't any." Then it dawned on her. "Oh! No-one can see Fawkes!"

"Exactly. Miss Know-it-all figured it out as usual," Severus said sardonically, and they continued their walk to the hotel.

Later on, the couple Apparated to nearby Hogsmeade, which looked like a long-abandoned village with houses in various states of ruin and gardens overgrown with weeds.

Hermione looked around, saddened at the devastation before her. The sadness was quickly replaced with anger, however, as she counted the number of telecommunication towers in plain sight. "Merlin, look at these! No wonder there's no trace of magic here!"

"Hm, let's get to work then. I've never seen that many towers in such a small place," said Severus.

The next few hours passed with burying Orgonite around the many towers surrounding Hogsmeade.

"Phew! That was quite some task," said Hermione as she covered the muffin with some earth.

"It was," Severus agreed. "The thought of what may await us around Hogwarts makes me shudder. Let's go back to the hotel now and deal with Hogwarts in the morning."

Hand in hand, Hermione and Severus Apparated back to their hotel room in Braemar and were greeted with a dolefully haunting and yet beautiful melody by Fawkes. The phoenix startled them both when, at the end of his performance, he disappeared in a ball of fire.

"I have a feeling he's laying the groundwork for us," muttered Severus. "No matter. We'll find out tomorrow. Let's get dinner and then have an early night. I have a feeling tomorrow will be a long day."

* * *

A/N

As always, grateful thanks to Notsosaintly for rearranging commas and picking up weird spellings.

Appassionata

Things are progressing on more than one level.

Disclaimer: It's all JKR's and whoever she shares with. Not me, in any case.

* * *

Chapter XIII

Appassionata

Overnight, the Orgonite did its job of dissipating the magic-restricting electronic rays. When Hermione and Severus arrived back in Hogsmeade the next day, both felt a slight presence of magic.

Finding Hogwarts, however, proved difficult. The castle did not appear to be there at all. At first, the couple walked the still familiar route out of Hogsmeade, via what used to be Honeydukes and the Post Office, then past the Shrieking Shack. But instead of the castle, all they saw was wasteland. Punctuated by towers and a criss-cross of pylons.

Hermione frowned. "What are those nitwits up to now? This area isn't even inhabited enough to justify that many pylons. The nearest Muggle village is miles away."

Severus studied her thoughtfully, marvelling how fast her mind worked. "First of all, we plant Orgonite muffins."

They hid Orgonite around the bases of twenty-three towers and noticed that those formed a perimeter around the pylons, of which there were also twenty-three.

"Something is going on here," murmured Severus. "There is something about the number twenty-three..." He was silent for a moment. "It is a significant number to those who follow the occult if I remember correctly."

He walked from one pylon to the next and back again. "Let's count the distance between each pylon..."

Hermione nodded and measured the distance from one pylon to the next by carefully estimating each step to be one foot long. She was somehow not surprised in discovering a distance of sixty-nine feet, three times twenty-three between each pylon, nor by the 253 feet Severus measured between the first and last pylons, another multiple of twenty-three.

The number twenty-three seemed to play a major part in the hiding of Hogwarts. The towers had been erected at a distance of twenty-three yards to each other. When Severus walked between the pylons and towers, he suddenly stopped. Searching in his pockets for paper and pencil, he said, "There is something odd about this set-up. I have a feeling they represent some shape that is significant to whoever built this." He marked the location of each pylon and tower, starting with the southernmost tower.

Once he'd noted down the last two towers, Hermione looked at the paper and gasped. "Severus, they're inverted pentagrams on a map, each with a triangle in the centre!"

When Severus looked at her blankly, Hermione took the pencil from him and connected the dots on the paper, first those representing the pylons, then those Severus had marked as towers.

Now the map displayed two inverted pentagrams, each with an equilateral triangle at its centre.

Severus frowned. "This symbolises the darkest of magic. An inverted pentagram alone is recognised even by Muggles as something dark. Satanic, they call it, I think." He took a deep breath. "I doubt a library will have anything useful, but let's see if we can find anything on the symbolism of the number twenty-three."

It was impossible to Disapparate within the criss-crossed network of towers and pylons, so the couple walked back towards Hogsmeade before Apparating from the edge of the village straight into the British Library in London.

As Severus had suspected, the search for information on the numerological significance of the number twenty-three yielded no results. Hermione was hopeful when they discovered a metaphysical section. However, as soon as they met in the centre of the first shelf they'd started to search at either end, Severus grumbled about the excessive amount of misinformation contained therein.

Hermione felt something akin to happiness well up deep within her as she realised just how much Severus and she thought alike. She could not help but agree. "It's no wonder Muggles are so ignorant about magic, given what they're told in these books." Turning her attention back to the subject at hand, a hollow laugh escaped her, and she shook her head while skimming through a publication entitled *The Witches' Way to Obtaining Wealth*.

Severus let out a snort as he skimmed the book over Hermione's shoulder. "Don't these people realise that such rigid rituals will only attract darker forces?" He wrapped his arm around her, deciding the work day had been long enough, and it was now time for pleasure. "Let's get back to the hotel. We'll talk to William when we get home. I'm sure he'll have at least some answers to the significance of the number twenty-three. And who knows, maybe Hogwarts will be visible soon. In the meantime, let's have ourselves a nice evening," he said with a suggestive expression.

Hermione's eyes sparkled. "And what do you have in mind for a nice evening, Severus?"

His eyes met hers before they slowly raked downwards. "Ah, Miss Granger, I can think of a few things." Action followed his words as he bent to kiss her lips in a soft, tender, and promising fashion.

Hermione was unable to suppress a delightful shudder, which only intensified as he broke the contact briefly. "You like that, do you?" He chuckled, and his voice turned into a growl as he demanded, "Let's Apparate. Now!"

Back at the hotel room, Severus wasted no time and discarded their clothing with a spell. He bent to pick her up and spread her out on the bed like an exquisite decoration.

A shiver of anticipation waved over her as he parted her thighs. He made a growl-like sound of appreciation as his eyes raked over her naked form, and Hermione pulled his head down in demand for a kiss.

His hands moved softly over her breasts, touching, rolling her nipples between his fingers, cupping each breast in his hand. "Perfect..." he whispered in between kisses. Then his hands captured hers and positioned them above her head. Holding her arms down firmly with one hand, his other slowly wandered downward with feather-light strokes while his mouth moved to her breasts, eliciting a moan from Hermione. Encouraged by her reaction, he spread her legs wider and bent down to explore her nether lips with his tongue. As he licked and flicked her clit, she writhed beneath him, ever more needy.

"Please... Severus..."

If he continued at this rate, she would be undone within seconds. "Please... I want to come with you inside me," she managed to utter.

He needed no second invitation. Grabbing her hips, he positioned himself over her and slid home. Finding rhythm immediately, she wrapped her legs around him, urging him to thrust deeper.

"Severus..." She cried his name as bolts of pleasure shot through her, which was his undoing. His thrusts became erratic, and he gasped, "Hermione..."

He collapsed on top of her, breathing hard, looking at her in wonder.

Hermione smiled at him. "Hold me, Severus." She moved his arm around her, and he held her tightly.

Sated and content, both soon fell asleep.

* * *

Hermione and Severus Apparated back to Hogsmeade shortly after breakfast the following morning.

Squinting his eyes, Severus said, "The castle still isn't visible."

"No. Shall we go there in any case? At least we'll be able to find out if the magic is coming back." Hermione looked at him questioningly, and he nodded.

The couple headed out of the village towards the Hogwarts grounds. Hermione cast simple spells every few minutes to determine levels of magic until they reached the first pylon.

"Well, at least the magic *is* coming back," she said, relieved, as a dead leaf slowly rose a foot or so from the ground, directed by a deft *Wingardium Leviosa*.

"I'd expect this to take a few days, Hermione," Severus said. "Once the Orgonite is planted, the magic comes back gradually. It's been that way around Spinner's End as well as the Healing Sanctuary."

"Yes, I know. It's just... I was hoping to at least be able to see the castle." She smiled uncertainly, unable to entirely hide her disappointment.

Severus cupped her face in his hands and looked at her intently. "The presence of magic is the first step, a proof, if you will, that the Orgonite is doing what it's designed to do. Everything else will fall into place, don't doubt that." His voice carried a note of urgency. *I want her to be happy, not doubting herself...*

"I know..." She returned his look. "Somehow, everything is easier to bear with you around. I think if I'd been on my own, I'd given up long ago."

The corners of his mouth moved upwards, and he rewarded her with a rare, genuine smile.

"I'm glad you're here with me, Hermione. I'm not sure if I would have had the courage to come here on my own." His lips came crashing down on hers, his tongue seeking entry forcefully.

They stood there, in the midst of the towers and pylons, lost in the sensation of tongues exploring each other as if it were the first time, both overwhelmed by the sheer intensity of their feelings.

"Gods, Severus, how I love you." The words came out entirely out of their own accord as soon as their lips parted. Embarrassed, she studied the ground.

Severus chuckled quietly and cupped her chin with his hand. "The feeling is wholly mutual, Hermione."

She looked at him then, and his expression reflected his words. "I love you, too."

Suddenly taking in a sharp breath, he uttered, "Look! Just... look!"

Hermione followed his eyes and gasped. "Hogwarts Castle," she whispered with reverence.

They found themselves standing only a few feet from the entrance door. Severus made for the nearest wall and touched it. "It's solid. For a moment, I was afraid it was an illusion."

Hermione joined him and let her fingers rake over the ancient stone. "Yes! It's real. Want to go inside?"

He smirked at her. "You couldn't stop me if you tried."

The entrance door opened as easily as it had always done. As they left it behind to approach the Great Hall, Severus asked, "What was it like here just before you left? Was there a lot of damage?"

"No structural damage, as far as I know. The plumbing had gone down the drain, literally, but I guess that was due to the magic disappearing."

Severus frowned. "It looks entirely too clean for having been unused for months."

Hermione suddenly remembered her last exchange with Dobby. She told Severus and added, "If Hogwarts merely became invisible because the magic had disappeared and, without that, we are unable to see anything fourth-dimensional, then the house-elves probably still live here!"

Severus cocked his head. "You have a point. Shall we try the kitchen, then?"

Hermione nodded, and they turned towards the stairs. Before Severus reached the portrait that was the entrance to the kitchen, it swung open widely, revealing a beaming Dobby.

"Mr Harry Potter's best friend and the Potions master! I knew you would bring the magic back!"

Neither Hermione nor Severus had any idea how many hours they'd spent inside the castle. At first, Dobby and other house-elves insisted on presenting the couple with dishes befitting a feast, all conjured with elf magic. Later, Dobby took them on a grand tour, happy to show off the hard work the house-elves had been indulging in to be prepared for the day Hogwarts would be functional again.

"The water supply has been a real problem, sir," Dobby explained. "Every single day, half of the house-elves had to boil and filter the water before it was usable. But Dobby hopes the water will come back properly now that you have brought back the magic."

When the couple finally left the castle, the sun was setting, its milky hues promising the arrival of colder weather.

Hogsmeade appeared less abandoned as Hermione and Severus walked through. There were noticeably fewer weeds in the gardens, and some of the houses seemed in better shape than earlier in the day.

"Look at this! I don't remember seeing the sign of Honeydukes when we walked past it this morning!"

Severus turned to follow Hermione's eyes. "You're right. And I don't recall seeing any owls, either." He pointed to the eaves above the sign where an eagle owl was perching, entirely missing the red and gold ball rapidly approaching from the opposite side.

"Fawkes!" shrieked Hermione as the phoenix landed unceremoniously on her shoulder. "Merlin, you frightened me!"

"Back from your mission, whatever that was, Fawkes?" Severus enquired as they slowly walked down the road towards the end of the village.

Fawkes suddenly shook his head vigorously, causing the couple to stop abruptly. "What's up with you?" Hermione asked, looking at the bird with a more worried than annoyed expression. She turned to Severus. "I think we should try and Apparate from here, Severus." Fawkes nodded and let out a squeak that sounded much unlike a phoenix.

"As you wish." Severus shrugged. "It's only a few yards to the edge."

"And if the magic is back, Muggles would have to wait outside the village, Severus." Hermione felt suddenly overcome with dread, unsure whether it was a premonition or Fawkes' strange behaviour.

Suddenly, both heard someone speak, and both kept silent.

"Yeah, as soon as we have the traitor, you'll drive back to London and deposit him at Holloway Prison. There he can rot because nobody will know where he is. And I will personally take care of that young witch. Thank you so much for your help, Mr Moody."

"Gotta do what's right," growled Moody's voice, sounding only yards away.

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "The bastards," she whispered. Fawkes squeaked again and became restless.

"Right, let's Apparate now, back to Spinner's End. I don't want to risk being found at the hotel. Did you leave anything important there?" Severus asked her, his voice betraying his cool demeanour.

"No, nothing that can't be replaced. Let's go." She took his hand, and they Apparated back into the sanctuary of Spinner's End, startling Kingsley and Draco.

"Thank Merlin, you two made it back safely!" Kingsley exclaimed. "We were so afraid they'd caught you, and there was no way for us to alert you beforehand!"

Upon the blank looks Hermione and Severus cast at him, he said, "William paid us a visit a few hours ago and told us that Moody visited Mr Lovegood.

"And Mr Lovegood, of course, doesn't know anything about you. Unfortunately Luna arrived before Moody left, and he coerced her into telling him what she knew. Which, thankfully, wasn't all that much, but probably enough to find you."

Parvati handed Hermione two envelopes. "William brought these for you."

Hermione glanced at the writing and opened the first one.

Dear Hermione,

You're a heroine here at the Sanctuary! Ever since we planted the Orgonite, the magic has been returning gradually, and now it is almost fully back. I managed to Apparate from the bedroom to the kitchen, and I'll have you know, it was the most exhilarating experience since returning to this realm.

Professor Sprout has just returned from a quick visit to Dean and Pansy in Ireland, also by way of Apparating. Both have been working hard on restoring the magic...it is back in full force around their village, and they're working on a wider perimeter now. Pansy is turning out to be quite the psychic, and she's developed a few nifty exercises to prevent her parents and other Death Eaters from tracing her.

Ron has gone to London to see how the magic is progressing there. He'll be back here later, and I'll let you know if he has any news of mutual acquaintances.

That's all for now. Please do keep in touch! Mum says to tell you hi.

Love,

Charlie

Wordlessly, Hermione handed the letter to Severus and opened the next one with a feeling of foreboding.

Dear Hermione,

I'm sure you didn't expect to hear from me again so soon, but unfortunately, a situation has arisen that has me at a loss. Last night, Ron returned with Ginny and Millicent Bullstrode. It looks like Alastor Moody, in his enthusiasm to go after Severus, has rid himself of all ethics and now works closely with the people who are trying to keep the magic suppressed. With his help, Ginny and Millicent were kidnapped, and while Ginny recovered rather quickly, Millicent was not so lucky.

When you were here, you mentioned Kingsley's experience with such government forces and practices and how he recovered. We need your help with Millicent. I am at a complete loss as to how to help her. She has so far not even reacted to any healing sessions Madam Sprout has tried.

Help!

Love,

Charlie

P.S. Ernie visited this morning. He was very happy to see the magic back here, and Mum taught him how to brew the Orgonite. He said he and Blaise would start straight away and let us know how it goes.

Kingsley flew over the contents of the letter next and then handed it to Parvati. "If I get hold of Moody, I don't know what I'll do, but I promise he won't enjoy it," he said in an uncharacteristically low voice, frowning deeply.

Severus nodded slowly. "Revenge does come to mind..." He turned to Parvati. "Do we have a spare room?"

"Since we enlarged the house, yes. Also, nobody sleeps in the lab room, so there is plenty of space."

Severus thought for a moment. "Okay," he said slowly. "This might work. If we..." His speech was interrupted by a loud knock at the door.

A/N: Eternal thanks go to NotSoSaintly for poking and prodding at my writing and for placing commas where they belong. Another grateful thank-you to SouthernWitch69 for giving a rewritten scene another once-over. Any errors you see are mine and mine alone.

Reviews are love.