

The Sound of Magic

by karelia

Muggle authorities should know better than to mess with the wizarding world's greatest weapon, but then, they have no idea that a priestess of Avalon will never bow to them either.

Prelude

Chapter 1 of 8

Muggle authorities should know better than to mess with the wizarding world's greatest weapon, but then, they have no idea that a priestess of Avalon will never bow to them either.

Disclaimer: I own nothing but imagination.

A/N: Little Yule gift for Annie Talbot. Thank you for all your support. May love continue to find you, as you spread it so well.

1 - Prelude

The minute you choose to do what you really want to do, it's a different kind of life.

Buckminster Fuller

Shortly after the demise of Voldemort, missives appeared in various wizards' and witches' homes, and Poppy Pomfrey remained busy for weeks, despite most war injuries having been dealt with quickly and efficiently.

Each epistle was worded similarly and stated more or less the following: *When you read this, the Dark Lord will have gone, all Secrecy Charms applied will have dissolved, and I am no longer wandering the planes of this existence*, and typically ended with, *Please contact Poppy Pomfrey at Hogwarts. If all has gone according to plan, the child will be with her.*

"Narcissa, Lucius," the wizened Mediwitch greeted the couple solemnly. "He is adorable, and I have no doubt that with some loving nourishment, he'll never become like his... parents." She left her office to return seconds later with a toddler, no more than two or three. "Hermann, say hello to your aunt and uncle."

Hermann looked up at Narcissa with huge, piercing blue eyes and impatiently shook a streak of dark, wavy hair out of his face. "You're beautiful," he said with something akin to reverence.

Narcissa smiled and stretched her arms out, and Hermann flew into them as if he'd been waiting for the chance.

As she caressed the child's hair, he glanced at her long locks and then at Lucius. "Your hair is beautiful, too."

Lucius smiled thinly and turned to his wife. "Are you sure about this, Cissy?"

Her eyes met his as she shook her head lightly. "The fact that she made those arrangements speaks for itself, don't you think? Nobody knows of his parentage, and we can keep it that way." She took a deep breath. "Perhaps here is our chance to make good for some of the wrongs we've done."

"As you wish." Lucius didn't look particularly happy, but when the child smiled at him and stretched his arm out, he accepted him into a hesitant embrace.

Poppy sat down heavily. "Three gone, nine to go." She sighed.

"Poppy." Minerva entered the office. "How was the meeting with the Malfoys?" She took a seat opposite the matron.

Poppy smiled. "Better than I dared hope. Narcissa, at least, took to him immediately. Not that I'm surprised, mind. He's inherited his mother's beauty. Let's hope evil won't destroy him." She didn't bother to suppress her shudder.

Minerva cast a sharp glance at Poppy. "Yes." A short silence followed before she asked, "And how did Lucius react?"

Poppy took her time answering. "I don't think he was happy with the situation, but he seemed willing to humour his wife. They've taken Hermann home with them." She looked at Minerva. "Is it wrong that I've taken a liking to Narcissa since she saved Harry Potter's life?"

Minerva frowned. "No, Poppy. There is never anything wrong with liking someone. What Narcissa did during the battle is commendable and shows that she is capable of love. I think..." a small smile lit her eyes "...Narcissa will find many people seeing her in an entirely new light. Perhaps it'll enable her to remain on the path of light."

Their eyes met again. "Yes. Somehow, hope doesn't seem as futile as it did a few weeks ago."

Poppy remained busy as witches and wizards visited, asked questions, and left with their inherited offspring; slowly, the hospital wing emptied and returned to its normal purpose. Three weeks later, only the Karkaroff children remained in Poppy's temporary care. *Please let him heal quickly so these children will have a stable home*, Poppy pleaded silently as she tucked Gretl in for the night. The little girl had been the quickest to recover from the ordeal of having spent most of her short life in hiding; her older siblings were still jumpy and plagued with nightmares and wouldn't go even as far as the Great Hall without Poppy or one of the professors.

"Poppy?" Minerva interrupted the Mediwitch's musings and handed her a piece of parchment.

Poppy read and looked at her friend, smiling. "Congratulations. I take it you'll accept?"

Minerva sat down and took a deep breath. "Yes. Hogwarts means a lot to me, but I also feel it's time to make space for younger staff, and now seems to be the right moment with Voldemort gone and our world at peace again. And, Poppy, I'm tired." She looked exhausted and worn. "I've done my duty by our students, and I admit I tire of being responsible for children."

Poppy nodded. "I understand, believe me. Though your responsibilities will be no less as the High Priestess, at least it'll be a different kind of challenge. I can't see anyone objecting to you wanting to leave. It is such an honour to be called to Avalon it would be unreasonable of anyone to expect you to remain at Hogwarts. Who would defy the will of the Great Goddess...?" She stopped to listen for a moment and then called, "Liesl, do come in."

A teenager with jet black hair, dark eyes, and a proud air, entered Poppy's office. "I didn't mean to interrupt," she said, not meeting either witch's eyes.

"It's fine, child," Minerva said, her features softening.

"I... I'm sorry. I overheard Poppy mention Avalon. When we were in hiding, the dream of joining the priesthood one day was what kept me sane, what gave me hope." She cast her eyes at the walls, as if she'd said too much.

"You know," Poppy started, "perhaps it would do you good to spend a while in Avalon." Her eyes sought Minerva's, and she was relieved to see her friend nod slowly.

"I'm not surprised." Minerva turned to face Liesl. "Your grandmother was a child of the isle."

Liesl's eyes lit up for the first time since she'd arrived at Hogwarts. "Really?"

"Oh, yes. I suspect she kept it quiet because..." Minerva trailed off momentarily, then straightened and said, "You won't be able to join before you are of age, but if you're still interested in a year's time, let me know."

"I will," Liesl said, her eyes still shining. "Let it be so!" She offered a brilliant smile and excused herself.

"I do so hope he'll wake up and heal. Not that I hold out a lot of hope that he'll accept the task of looking after the children, but..." Minerva sighed.

"Oh, I think you underestimate Severus, my dear," Poppy said, a wistful smile curling her lips. "Do you really think he'd have stayed here for this long if he hated children as much as he claimed?"

"I've completely bogged up with him, haven't I?" Minerva asked. "No, don't answer that, Poppy. I know I have." She exhaled heavily. "I can only hope to make it up to him... Do you think he'll... you know...?"

"I have no doubt," Poppy said. "He does have a keenly developed sense of honour, and really, he does not hate children. He is quite bearable when he doesn't have to act, trust me. I realise I'm probably the only one here at Hogwarts who's seen him be himself, but yes, he will accept these children, and if he grumbles it'll only be for appearances' sake." A short silence followed. "Mind you, there is no way he can cope with them all on his own. Oh, Merlin..."

"Oh," Minerva started, "I may just have a solution." She thought for a moment and then looked at her friend with a smug smile. "Arabella Figg is thoroughly fed up with living in that Muggle enclave. And since she no longer has any reason to remain there, I'm sure she'll be only too happy to replace her cats with children."

"Excellent," Poppy breathed. "You are a genius, my dear."

And so the wheels were set in motion by a power only a few recognised as the Great Mother Goddess.

I am blessed and cursed, for I was born with a fully intact memory. I know my parentage. I know my path.

I am blessed, for Narcissa sees me as a gift. She so wanted a second child, and I am that to her. I love Narcissa.

I am cursed, for Lucius wants to break all ties with his past, and I am but a painful reminder for him, every time he lays eyes on me. May he come to terms with it, even though I seem to be a hindrance. I love Lucius, for I have much love to give, and he is in need of it.

A/N: Grateful alpha-reading/idea-gauging thanks to Crystal Rose, SeverusLovesUs, peppermint, and clairvoyant. Grateful thanks to Ariadne for beta-reading.

This story is complete and will be updated about two or three times a week.

Overture

Chapter 2 of 8

Muggle authorities should know better than to mess with the wizarding world's greatest weapon, but then, they have no idea that a priestess of Avalon will never bow to them either.

2 - Overture

Whatever you think you can do or believe you can do, begin it. Action has magic, grace and power in it.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Severus recalled, with a surprising surge of something akin to affection, how she'd entered his life full-time some four years previously: "As long as you don't keep cats. I can cope with children. I think I can. But please don't keep cats. When I meet my end, I'll kill Dumbledore all over again for making me play the crazy cat lady, you know." He'd wholeheartedly agreed with her notion about Dumbledore: "Oh, and I'll have to insist on my own bedroom. With a lock. Wouldn't want you or the children to come sneaking in."

Arabella Figg had been adamant about her demands, but it had been easy enough to meet each one. As long as she helped with half the football team left to him by Karkaroff, he'd been willing to meet almost any request short of physical favours, and he'd never had to fear those from Arabella. She'd taken a good week to find suitable homes for her cats and to lock up her Muggle home, and then she'd joined him in the Wiltshire countryside.

Seven children, the youngest not yet four and the oldest not quite of age; none of them used to having a reliable figure of authority...even before their father had been murdered, since he'd sent them into hiding, their mother dead shortly after the youngest child's birth. Arabella had done a fine job keeping them in line, tending to their everyday needs, educating them in everything important not pertaining to magic, and most of all obeying Severus's demands of maintaining discipline. It had allowed him to start, continue, and expand a line of potions that added income to his stipend of the Order of Merlin, First Class, and the small...very small...fortune Karkaroff had afforded him upon accepting responsibility for the late Death Eater's children.

Severus sighed to himself. *What to do, what to do...* The thought of Arabella chasing Dumbledore right now for having to play the crazy cat lady...a Muggle one at that...while watching over the Potter prat almost brought a smile to his face, but he quickly dismissed it. He needed to concentrate on the issue before him.

"Severus!" little Gretl called. "I can't close the buttons on my robe." She sounded whiny, and he sighed as he hurried up the stairs to help her. "What's going to happen to us now that Arabella has passed on?" the young girl asked as if reading his mind, her voice filled with both dread and curiosity, her lower lip quivering.

"I don't know yet, Gretl," he replied, figuring honesty was the best route. "I need to think it over." He let out a sigh. Trust the child to ask so bluntly. Gretl sounded like a Brit these days, unlike her older siblings, who all still held a trace of their Eastern European accents.

"Oh, Severus, please don't let the beldam look after us," the young girl exclaimed, and he looked at her in surprise.

"What on earth do you mean, Gretl?" Severus frowned at her.

Big, fat tears ran down her face as she started to sob. "Arabella always said if we didn't listen to her, the beldam would come to put us in line instead, though Hermann says it's not true."

"Oh, don't mind her; Hermann is right," Severus said absently. "Arabella said that whenever she wasn't sure about things. She didn't exactly have an easy life."

"Did we make it difficult for her?" Gretl looked at him with wide eyes.

He returned to the present, blinking. "No, darling. Of course not. Now, let's find Louisa, and she can read you a story." He picked her up and headed for her older sister's bedroom.

Severus readied himself to leave, giving Louisa some last-minute instructions. "Narcissa and Hermann will be here by lunchtime, and I'll try to be back as soon as possible. If you have any serious problems in the meantime, send your Patronus; you know how, correct?"

She patted his arm lightly. "Of course I do, Severus. We'll be fine, don't worry."

He nodded curtly and turned to hurry across the large garden, through the gate, and Apparated to the Glastonbury Tor.

It was said to be much harder for wizards than witches to be able to adjust their perceptions in order to see the lake and the isle in its midst, and Severus was surprised to see them emerge after a mere few deep breaths until he realised that he must stand right on a ley line; the air was almost crackling with magic. He waved uncertainly in the direction of the island, wondering whether such a vague gesture would suffice to summon one of the isle's residents to collect him.

Avalon was, he reflected, an ingenious set-up. The entire lake was invisible to Muggles; they simply saw the typical rolling hills of the Somerset countryside...fields dotted with cattle, an occasional copse of crab apple trees, the odd farm in a valley with a creek lined by elderberry trees running by, fences made of blackberry bushes, and the occasional shepherd herding his flock. Stories about the legendary isle floated about every now and then, sometimes in the form of a new book, at others, in a new movie. Likewise, festivals celebrating the metaphysical, fuelled by the brusque magic the lake emitted, were thriving in all the villages surrounding the lake, often providing some extra income for witches or wizards sufficiently apt in tarot or rune reading.

Both lake and isle were usually invisible to wizards and witches as well, though witches occasionally broke through the barrier. When a Muggle came too close to the boundary, fog descended over the entire area, and some people had been lost to the mists forever.

Severus breathed out, relieved, when he saw a small boat move in the direction of the Tor. At first, all he could make out was a figure clad in white, her hair surrounding her head like a halo. As the boat drew nearer, he realised a young woman was steering it without wand and seemingly no effort. When she halted the boat, she stood and bowed lightly. "Professor Snape," she said, "Minerva is expecting you." A small smile played around her lips as she gestured for him to enter the boat.

As soon as he sat down, the boat turned and headed in the opposite direction, now bound for the Isle of Avalon. He'd never noticed her casting any spells and studied her curiously as her eyes focused on the shore before them. He suddenly thought back to the end of the war when he was stuck nearly dead in the Shrieking Shack and knew

who she was. "Miss Granger."

"You remember me," she said, her voice quiet and measured.

"How could I forget Hogwarts' greatest know-it-all." He smirked, wondering how a mere four years away from teaching had softened him so much he couldn't even bite a Gryffindor anymore. Perhaps, he thought, it was the atmosphere that was rapidly changing as they drew nearer to the legendary island. It felt, in a way, similar to crossing the Channel from Britain to France, only the shift was much sharper, more palpable, and decisively profound in a manner he was unable to establish precisely. Maybe it was the transition of one era of his life into another, but he found himself incapable of dwelling on the thought.

His mind drifted briefly to his home. Narcissa would have arrived by now, and at least Louisa wouldn't be overwhelmed with adult duties and responsibility; Gretl would be happy to play with Hermann. Finally, he focused on the imminent meeting with Minerva.

Severus started when the girl spoke. "It is a portal, Professor. Many people have experienced deep insights on the short journey between the Tor and the isle."

Her almost sad, gentle smile intrigued him, and he wondered what had brought her here. Before he made up his mind whether or not to express his thought, she spoke again.

"Why I'm here matters not; what matters is that I'm here. For me at least." She quieted again and navigated the boat to softly glide onto the dry sand.

Liesl rushed out of the nearby stone hut to greet him. "Severus! I'm so sorry about Arabella's passing. How are my brothers and sisters?" She stepped into his held-out arms and embraced him tightly. "Sometimes I miss you."

He patted her hair. "The children and I miss you, too, sometimes, Liesl. How are you faring?"

"Oh, it is wonderful here. I enjoy every day, well, most days. It is very peaceful, very much unlike anything I remember from Bulgaria." Sadness shadowed her pretty face, but only for a moment.

He marvelled how much of her once strong accent she'd lost over the last couple of years. She didn't sound English yet, but any stranger would merely detect a slightly foreign accent.

"Severus," Minerva said as she reached the edge of the beach where they'd arrived. "It's good to see you."

As soon as a modicum of niceties had been exchanged, Minerva beckoned the group to follow her to a large stone construction visible in the distance. "Let's sit down and have some tea."

Severus was grateful Narcissa had prepared Arabella's body for the burial and set up the altar out in the garden...Arabella's favourite spot near the old oak...by the time he returned from Avalon. He had just enough time to slip into plain, black robes before Minerva arrived with Liesl, the elder dressed in plain, pine green robes of exquisite material befitting a priestess and Liesl in an equally plain robe, this one cotton, of lighter colour. Avalon had certainly done wonders for her self-esteem; he couldn't help wondering if Minerva thought of preparing the young girl for the role as the Lady once she passed. *No, not Liesl. She's probably training the Granger girl for that; she's always been her favourite...*

Gretl approached the priestess, seemingly fearless. "I want to help as well. Don't you think I'm big enough?" she asked, her eyes wide and her expression very serious.

"Aye, lass, you're just big enough," Minerva said, suppressing a smile. "Here, let me transfigure your robes to make you look the part as well." A second later, Gretl was dressed in black and red, her face carrying a proud smile.

"Will you want to bless the Circle as the South?" Minerva asked her, smiling when Gretl nodded enthusiastically.

"Yes. Yes, and I even know the words!"

"Go; join your sisters, then."

Brigitta and Marta, both wearing the traditional black and red robes, were lighting the candles while Minerva swept the Circle widdershins to clear it of any negative influence, avidly watched by the Karkaroff girls. Even Gretl was silent and only nodded in greeting as Louisa, similarly attired, joined the group.

Minerva replaced the broom with a sword and cast the Circle, her arms making one sweeping movement to define the space, intoning, "This is a place which is not a place...in a time which is not a time...halfway between the worlds of the Gods and of mortals."

She stretched her hand out, and Severus took it to let her pull him into the Circle. He offered his hand and brought Louisa into it, who grabbed Gretl's arm. When all were inside the Circle, Louisa stood tall and started, her voice quivering lightly, "I am the West. As the sun sets, so our friend left us. The water of our tears, like the salt water of the sea and the life water of our mother's womb, blesses this Circle."

Gretl spoke clearly, her voice filled with unfamiliar strength for one so young. "I am the South. As life is a day, so our friend has passed into the night. The fire of our life, the memories and courage, the strength given to us by our friend blesses this Circle." She looked proud with her head held high, emitting palpable power, and resembled a miniature priestess.

Brigitta stepped forward next. "I am the East. As all that falls shall rise again, so our friend will be reborn. The air we breathe, this treasure of our life, the compassionate caring we give each other blesses this Circle." She, too, looked unusually proud, though far more timid than her younger sister. The older children were certainly far more scarred from years in hiding than the younger ones.

When Liesl said her words, Severus marveled at the transformation of the girl. She'd left just over two years ago to join Avalon, but it had changed her profoundly. Gone was the coy girl with the incredibly strong Eastern European accent, replaced by a young, beautiful woman whose self-confidence would never again be an issue. Her voice carried strongly as she intoned, "I am the North. As the earth forms us, so our friend shall return to it. Our mother feeds us and clothes us. She gives us everything, and in the end she takes our bodies back. And earth blesses this Circle."

Severus reflected further on the Karkaroff children as the girls one by one said their good-byes to Arabella. Friedrich had left last year to attend the last year at Hogwarts; he had an uncanny ability for Charms that Severus had felt unable to nourish. He occasionally wrote, but was probably the most withdrawn of the bunch. Louisa, though old enough to leave, appeared to have no intention to go anywhere. He was glad for it, for she was the pillar for her siblings; even Liesl still owed her regularly.

Something in the corner of his vision interrupted his reverie, and he realized with a start that Minerva had raised her arms now and begun to draw down the moon. He took a sharp breath and concentrated on drawing down the sun, then intoned, "You are the goddess, as are all women. You give birth, feed the children from your own body. Then you take them back to your womb for a new birth. World without end, eternal creation."

Minerva's lips quirked upward as she nodded almost imperceptibly. "You are the god, as are all men. You are born. You live, you die, only to be born again. All father, all destroyer, ruler of the land of the dead."

He hid his sneer. *Ruler of the land of the dead. Indeed.*

Then, in unison with the priestess, "Birth and death. Birth and death. Birth and death."

The girls unfolded the cloth, and as they started to slowly wrap Arabella's body for its final journey, Brigitta said, "The sun will rise again."

Gretl added, her voice grave, "Life continues."

Louisa chimed in, "Love is all that we can be sure of."

Finally, Liesl said, as she carefully completed the wrapping, "Only the Mother is eternal."

Minerva motioned to Liesl, and the two picked up the body, now lighter in both weight and energy, for the ritual had enabled its soul to depart completely, and exited the Circle, Minerva nodding lightly towards Severus, who started to dismantle the Circle by first ushering out the girls.

Narcissa was waiting in the living room and offered a tentative smile when Severus entered. "How did it go?"

"All right. Minerva and Liesl took her body for burial on the island."

"Oh," Narcissa said softly, then added, "Lucky Arabella." Her eyes met his. "Aren't you going back to Avalon? Lucius is not expecting me back tonight; I can stay here."

"Yes. I should go," he said. "Are you sure it's all right with Lucius?"

Narcissa waved her hand dismissively. "He knows what happened, and he knows how you feel about leaving the children alone. Yes, Severus, go."

He murmured a thank you on his way out, rushed to the gate, and Apparated back to the Tor where a boat was already waiting, manned by a woman unknown to him, who took him back to the isle without speaking a single word. He was grateful for the silence.

When the small group congregated in the stone house after the burial to share supper, Severus said, "Thank you, Minerva. I had no idea how to deal with it all." Exhaustion washed over him in such strong waves he found it hard to focus on the simple, yet tasty food in front of him.

She patted his arm. "You are welcome. Now, what are you going to do? Have you found someone else to look after the young ones?" She poured the tea and handed him a mug, which he took gratefully.

"No. Narcissa agreed to come over every day, but it is more to humour me than anything else. I cannot expect her to keep it up for any length of time. But frankly, who would want to work for me?"

"No, you can't ask Narcissa in terms of a permanent arrangement. Looking after Hermann is probably close to what she can manage on top of Lucius..." Minerva looked at him. "Severus, you're a war hero. Surely, if you put an ad in the *Prophet*..."

His bitter laugh cut her off. "Yes. If I put an ad in any paper, I'll have a bunch of witches lining up who're all after my so-called hero status. They have no interest in children!" He joined in with Minerva's heavy sigh.

"I..." Minerva stood up. "Excuse me for a moment."

He nodded curtly and turned his attention to the tea in front of him. *I wish Arabella hadn't died on me... Merlin, how will I cope with looking after the children without any help?* Kurt came to his mind, the natural rebel; then Marta, only a couple of years older than Gretl but utterly determined to get her way with everything. He blamed it on the fact that all the children had been in hiding for so long, and Marta had never had a chance to live out her terrible twos or threes, but Arabella had coped ever so well with it all and shielded him from any major confrontations.

"Severus," Liesl said softly, as if afraid to catapult him out of his thoughts, "would you like me to return to look after my siblings?"

He looked at her, then shook his head. "No, Liesl. You deserve the life you want, and I have no doubt it excludes looking after your siblings until they're grown." He met her eyes. "Believe me when I say I know what it's like to be where you don't want to be, and you deserve better." He was rewarded with her bright smile.

"I shouldn't be, but I *am* glad you know and understand, Severus," she said. "I'll be forever grateful that you let me come here." Her smile now made the entire world look brighter.

"Don't mention it," he said gruffly, utter loss at how to react to her gratitude overwhelming him.

"Sir?" The Granger girl had appeared in the door.

I'm glad Liesl is happy on the isle of Avalon. Of course I've always known it's her destiny; she came into this life with the agreement to become a priestess.

I want to embrace Narcissa for comfort, give her many advance hugs so to speak, for she is in for a very rough time. She's finally having a reprieve where Lucius is concerned; he cannot help but accept me, if not love me. But the next few months will be rough for both of them, and I cannot help it. I need to concentrate on Gretl; my dear Gretl, my soul mate.

A/N: For alpha and beta reading thanks, please see chapter 1.

Reviews are love.

Hermione

Chapter 3 of 8

Muggle authorities should know better than to mess with the wizarding world's greatest weapon, but then, they have no idea that a priestess of Avalon will never bow to them either.

3 - Hermione

It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what

is essential is invisible to the eye.

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

Granger entered the room but didn't sit down. She acknowledged Liesl with a brief nod and smile and then addressed him. "Minerva said you need someone to look after the children until you make a more permanent arrangement. I'd be happy to help out for a couple of months until you find someone."

Severus considered briefly. It would solve his dilemma. He wouldn't have to impose on Narcissa, not that she'd ever refuse him. And he'd have enough time to vet any applicants. What was best, he had no doubt Miss Granger would take over some of the magical education, something Arabella had never been able to. It would free him to engage in more research. "Miss Granger, I'd be most grateful."

That hint of a smile he'd noticed on the boat darted from her lips to her eyes and back again. "I'll get ready then." She left as quickly as she'd arrived.

"Some more tea?" Liesl held the teapot above his mug, ready to pour.

He nodded. "Thank you." Gathering resolve, he asked, "Tell, Liesl, what is it about Avalon that turns awkward girls into such self-assured women?"

He was surprised when she laughed. She quickly turned serious again, though, and said, "It's everything. The revelation that this planet is a matriarchal one, contrary to what most of the world is trying to tell us. It's the fact that I can speak about anything; I don't need to hide. And, oh, Severus, it's love! Hate, even indifference, is entirely absent here on Avalon." Her expression was one of passion...a kind he'd never seen on anyone before.

The Granger girl reappeared, this time wearing ordinary, everyday clothes. Her cloak displayed a few strange symbols at first sight, but when he looked again, it was a plain dark blue. "I'm ready whenever you are," she said.

Severus stood and addressed Liesl. "Well, I'll be on my way then." Awkwardness engulfed him. She'd been gone two years and had only spent a total of two years with him, but he felt somehow connected to her, just as he felt to all of *his* children these days. But then, his life had never been ordinary.

"Goodbye, Severus," Liesl said softly and rose to embrace him. Then she turned to face Hermione. "I'll miss you."

The girl smiled. "I'll miss you, Liesl. But I'll be back in no time."

Liesl closed her eyes as she embraced the young priestess. "Yes," she whispered, "though not for long."

Hermione frowned, but relaxed almost immediately. "Keep practicing your scrying," she said and smiled at the younger girl. "You've seen the troubles ahead, yes?"

Liesl nodded, her expression grave. "How could I not? Though I have no doubt the Lady will know what to do..."

"Yes. Keep in touch, Liesl," Hermione said and joined her former professor on the boat, waving goodbye.

Hermione learned quickly that Severus ruled his home with a firm hand, but at the same time had managed to garner the trust of the children. He'd taught them well, instilling the joy of learning in every single one. The ones too young to wield a wand knew nearly as much as the older children about magical subjects, and Hermione soon stopped wondering why the teenagers had never attended Hogwarts; they'd learned more from Snape than they could have done at school.

She grew used to being surrounded by inquisitive children and enjoyed sharing her knowledge of earth magic, especially with the girls, and Transfiguration, with Louisa. "Have you looked into becoming an Animagus, Louisa? You surely have the talent!" she said a few days after her arrival and was rewarded with a bright smile.

"I would love to become an Animagus," admitted Louisa. "I've not taken the subject up with Severus because I know he's not very interested in it. I think Transfiguration was his weakest subject at school." She grinned sheepishly when he cleared his throat.

"I heard that, young lady." The smirk on his face belied the severity of his tone. He turned to Hermione. "I have no objections if you wish to guide Louisa in that respect."

The doorbell interrupted the conversation, and he muttered, "That's Narcissa. Excuse me," leaving Louisa and Hermione alone to discuss how best to approach their Animagus studies until Gretl appeared with Hermann, demanding to go for a walk to watch the harvest moon rise.

The days were becoming shorter, and Earth was busy readying herself for the months of sleep ahead. Hermione waved her wand to listen to any children's sound, but all was finally quiet. She donned her cloak on her way out into the grounds, towards the stream that formed the boundary of the property.

Reaching its bank, the young priestess pulled a small candle from a pocket and lit it, then placed it on the ground. She raised her arms to summon the wind and knelt in front of the candle, breathing deeply the cold air the northerly breeze was generating. "Goddess, grant me clarity of mind." Hermione continued to plead silently. *Breeze from the North, help me disperse my untoward feelings, uncalled-for jealousy, and animosity towards an undeserving one.*

Gretl's voice jerked her out of her prayer. "Hermione? I'm in love. Hermann and I will get married as soon as we're grown up. What are you doing outside so late?"

Hermione, ripped out so unceremoniously from her meditative state, was unable to hide a smile. Gretl sounded so serious, but she could never stop her natural curiosity about everything from taking over. "What are you, young Gretl, doing outside so late?"

Unperturbed, the girl replied, "I was looking for you to tell you all about my handfasting plans, but you weren't in your room, so I thought you might have gone outside. And then I saw the candle light when I opened the door, so I came here."

Glad she'd had the insight of conversing with the deities in silence, Hermione blew out the candle, blessed the earth and the stream, and turned to Gretl. "Right, Gretl. Now, tell me while we walk back inside. I'm all ears." She steered Gretl away from the stream onto the path that led back to the house.

"I love Hermann. He is very beautiful, and I think he loves me as well." Gretl sounded matter-of-factly, and Hermione marvelled at her straightforwardness. The youngest of the Karkaroff children had proven to be the most knowledgeable about elemental magic save Liesl, and she already knew a number of rituals her older siblings did not.

"I told Marta earlier, but she laughed at me," Gretl continued. "But what does she know? I don't think she's ever been in love before."

Hermione suppressed a laugh. "And you have, Gretl?"

"No, but I am now," the girl supplied in a serious voice. "What were you praying for, Hermione?"

Hermione wondered how long Gretl had been watching her and was again glad most of her prayer had been silent. "Oh," she said lightly, "just general things." They'd reached the door now, and Gretl's eyes widened as light fell on them.

"Hermione, look at your cloak! It's showing runes!"

Hermione looked down and nodded. "So it is. Now, off to bed with you; it's late!"

Thankfully, the girl did not protest and cheerfully bade her good night.

Back in her room, Hermione examined the runes, which were slowly fading again. *Gebo... a gift? I wonder... Hagalaz... oh, no. The last time this rune showed up was in the last month of the war. What is destructive now? Unless it means my obsession with Professor Snape... But no. That wouldn't make sense... Raido, reversed. Disruption in travel?* She perused the cloak, but there were no other runes, only these three repeatedly until they faded completely, and the cloak looked once more like an ordinary piece of clothing.

Hermione smiled politely at Narcissa when she entered the living room and turned her attention to Severus. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes," he said and motioned for her to take a seat. "How is the Animagus training coming along?" He cast a wry smile her way. "Is Louisa still up to it?"

"She's doing great. Perhaps we'll both manage to transform before the year ends." Hermione chose a chair, since Narcissa was occupying the sofa. *Why is she here again? No day passes without her popping in*, she thought and immediately made an effort to suppress her irritation at the Malfoy woman and instead concentrated on what her employer had to say.

"Narcissa and Lucius are hosting an informal dinner party on Halloween. They'd like the children to attend as well so Hermann has some playmates. Would you be able to join?"

Hermione's mind whirled. *Why is he asking me in front of her? Surely he knows her sister tortured me there!* Her smile a very tight one, she said, "I am able to, yes."

His face was a mask of indifference. "Miss Granger, my apologies. I should have pointed out that Malfoy Manor has been completely refurbished since... your ordeal some years ago. And the dinner event will take place in the grounds."

How very thoughtful... "Yes, I'll accompany the children," she managed to say, then rose in a hurry. "If you'll excuse me, please." Hermione rushed out and barricaded herself in her room, glad it was late in the evening and all children were asleep or at least not wanting her attention.

What is happening with me? I have no reason to dislike Narcissa. She's been nothing but courteous to me, and she clearly looks after Hermann very well; he's such a lovely boy. Hermione sighed. *I must not have this silly crush... My destiny is with Avalon.*

It was hard to find sleep that night and even harder to rise in the morning. The hardest task was to purge the blonde, regal witch from her mind.

Halloween dawned, the weather was unusually cheerful, and Hermione dreaded the evening. *What will I wear?* The solution to that problem came from an unexpected source.

"Hermione?" Louisa knocked on her bedroom door.

"Come in, Louisa," Hermione said more optimistically than she felt.

The girl entered hesitantly and sat down on the edge of her bed. "I... I was wondering if you would wear your burgundy robes. I, too, want to wear my burgundy ones, but Severus is all about green, and if you wear yours, I'll feel so much stronger about wearing mine."

Hermione thought for a moment. "Yes, why not? In fact, I think that's an excellent idea. The Malfoys, I have no doubt, are all about green as well, and burgundy will provide a pretty contrast!"

Gretl burst into the room. "Hermione! Hermann so loves green! Do you think it's all right for me to wear my green robes?" She twirled, showing off her pine green robes.

"Oh, you look beautiful, Gretl," Hermione said, and Louisa nodded. Before she could utter another word, Kurt ran in and stopped abruptly upon seeing two of his sisters in the room.

"Uh... I was wondering..." He blushed furiously.

"Which robes to wear, Kurt?" Hermione asked, smiling. "I dare say you look dashing in these navy blue ones, sir."

Gretl and Louisa nodded. "You look simply fabulous, Kurt," Gretl said and giggled. "I'm sure Narcissa will notice you."

His blush deepened even further, and he made a beeline for the door, uttering, "Thank you," on his hurried way out.

Louisa and Hermione laughed, and Gretl grinned widely. "I think he likes Narcissa. I'm not surprised. She has such lovely hair and always says nice things."

Hermione held her tongue. "All right, girls. We've not had breakfast yet!" She headed for the kitchen with the girls in tow and was grateful and disappointed Severus was not there.

They ate buttered toast and drank tea in silence until Severus walked in. "Are you preparing for a funeral or something?"

"No," Gretl said sternly, "we were discussing clothing and became very hungry, so we focussed on eating."

"Oh, I see. I trust your clothing dilemma was resolved? We do not have time to buy new robes for you before tonight."

"It's all settled, Severus," Louisa said, smiling at him.

Hermione only noticed now that Louisa had changed the colour of her robes to a dark blue. She figured he really didn't like any shade of red.

As the sun set, everyone in the Snape household gathered by the front door, and together, they made their way to the front gate to Apparate to Malfoy Manor.

My beloved Gretl... I seem far too young to know my destiny, but I cannot help it; I was born with my memory intact, a blessing not many humans experience in this day and age, wizarding or not.

The wonderful thing is that Gretl is slowly regaining her memory as well.

The downside to the memory is that I know we are all in for a very rough time, some rougher than others. It saddens me, for it seems to make my coming into this life futile. But there is Gretl, and I shall be content for now.

Reviews are love and inspire the Muse.

I Have Confidence

Chapter 4 of 8

Muggle authorities should know better than to mess with the wizarding world's greatest weapon, but then, they have no idea that a priestess of Avalon will never bow to them either.

4 - I Have Confidence

In everything natural there is something marvellous.

Aristotle

Hermione suppressed a shudder at the horrific memories floating to the front of her mind as she walked through the gates into the grounds of Malfoy Manor, but was soon distracted by the setup of the *informal* dinner. *If that's informal, what do they do for a formal dinner?* she wondered.

A large, green tent covered at least a quarter of the vast grounds, its interior split into an eating area on one side and a space for dancing on another; a bar took over an entire corner. The tables were of varying sizes, some seating only two or three, others providing enough seats for ten people.

When Hermione sat down next to Gretl, who had demanded she be her chaperone for the evening, she realised Warming Charms had been cast over the dining area. House-elves were entirely absent, though she had no doubt they'd been the ones busy in the kitchens.

Dinner appeared magically on the tables, its quality impeccable, but Hermione only picked at her food. Something felt off, though she was unable to place it. *Need to get a grip*, she thought, annoyed with herself for not controlling her emotions when her glance fell at the central table, which was occupied by the Malfoy couple, Draco, and Snape. She forced her attention away from it and back to the children, ensuring all behaved.

As dinner came to an end, an orchestra started to play, and couples gradually made their way to the dance floor. She noticed with amusement Kurt's eyes following Narcissa, who was now dancing with her husband.

Looking impeccable, elegant, even regal, the blond couple took over the dance floor, first moving to the rhythm of a rumba, then a foxtrot.

"They look so beautiful," Louisa whispered, but her eyes sought out the youngest Malfoy and came to rest on his form.

Before Avalon, Hermione would have readily pointed out that their beauty was merely outward, and deceiving at that, without giving it a second thought. Now, she said, "As do you, Louisa," and smiled at the girl, whose eyes were widening.

"Would you care to dance, Miss Karkaroff?" Mr Malfoy bowed in front of a blushing Louisa.

"Oh... o...of course, Mr Malfoy. I'd be honoured." She took his proffered hand and followed him.

Hermione gazed at the dance floor. Severus was now dancing with Narcissa...a Viennese waltz. They made an equally remarkable couple, Hermione thought without enthusiasm. She was almost glad when Kurt interrupted her thoughts.

"Hermione, you can dance, can't you? Will you teach me?" he asked.

Why not? It will divert my attention, she thought and rose. "Of course. Let's go to the edge of the floor so we don't disturb any of the dancers."

The orchestra was now changing the tune to a slow waltz. By the time it was finished, Kurt had the hang of it. "Oh, that's so much fun!" he exclaimed when the music ended, excitement written on his face.

"Dancing can be fun," Hermione agreed and was thankful when another slow waltz started. Kurt was a fast learner, and she'd not danced for years; they were on fairly even footing.

Hermione started when, just as the music was ending, a hand touched her shoulder. "Care to dance, Miss Granger?" Turning to Kurt, Severus said, "Why don't you find Louisa and dance with her." It sounded like an order rather than a question, and Kurt obviously thought so as well, for he hurried off without protest.

The music started to play again, and Hermione panicked for a moment as she recognised the cha-cha. It had once been her favourite dance, she remembered. She could do it. Even with him.

Especially with him. The proximity to him made her tremble, but the moment he led her, she felt as if ensconced in a safe cave where no evil could reach. He was a fine dancer. *But I'd probably think that as long as he doesn't step on my toes...*

He chuckled lowly. "No mind reading tonight?"

She managed to shake her head. "No. I do try to avoid it, even more so when there are crowds of people."

"Hm, yes. Makes sense," he agreed and went quiet again.

She wasn't sure whether he enjoyed the dance with her...if he enjoyed anything with regard to her...but it would make a lovely memory for the days when she returned to Avalon, would perhaps help her to adjust to life on the isle again until her crush was overcome, and then she would smile at herself for being a silly young girl while preparing for the Solstice festivities.

Suddenly, she heard Minerva's voice...faint and far away...and wondered why the Lady was calling her and how to find a quiet space so she could listen properly; at the same moment Lucius interrupted their dance.

"Miss Granger, my apologies. Severus, something is going on. Can you check the spells, please? I know we put Warming Charms in place, but the dining area has gone

freezing cold. And the glasses aren't refilling themselves. I know we cannot possibly have depleted our stocks."

Something was off, definitely off. A feeling of dread washed over Hermione. "I'll gather the children," she said and turned to head towards the table. They were huddled close together with their cloaks on, except Gretl and Hermann. "Where did Gretl go?" Hermione asked Louisa.

"She and Hermann wandered about," Louisa said. "What is it, Hermione? Something is wrong."

"I believe so, yes, though I can't pinpoint it. Can you use your wand, Louisa?"

"You know I usually can. But I failed at a Warming Charm a minute ago." Louisa took her wand out and cast the spell. Nothing happened. She looked miserable. "I don't want to lose my magic," she whispered.

Hermione shook her head and took her own wand out, casting a spell. Nothing. She frowned. "It's not you. Something...or someone...is messing with the magic." She faced Louisa. "Walk deosil through the tent, and then come to the door and let me know whether or not you've found Gretl and Hermann. Minerva contacted me a bit ago, but I need somewhere quieter to actually communicate with her." She stroked the young witch's head in blessing and left to go outside.

As soon as she stepped outside the tent into a clear night with a sky splattered with stars and a slowly waning moon, she knew something was wrong. Very wrong. It had been impossible to perform a simple spell inside the tent, yet the noise outside had never entered it. Something was missing in the air, despite the racket, something Hermione had felt more than heard since she could remember. *Magic, where art thou?* She blinked as she looked around, her goal to communicate with Minerva forgotten. There, on the once immaculate lawn parked two helicopters with engines causing enough noise to deafen an entire army.

Hermione narrowed her eyes, then blocked out the noise, the worry over what was happening, the fear of not finding Gretl and Hermann, and concentrated inward.

Hermione! There is tremendous danger. The Muggle government is plotting to eliminate magic. Minerva's voice was faint, but Hermione managed to hear her at least.

The magic is off here at Malfoy Manor, and two Muggle helicopters have landed on the grounds. Hermione's eyes widened when she spotted Gretl and Hermann struggling in a bulky man's arms in the open door of one of the choppers. *Oh, Merlin. Gretl and Hermann have been kidnapped. They're inside a helicopter.* She started to run towards the helicopters.

Hermione! Summon your powers! Our magic cannot be disabled by any means...

Hermione stopped abruptly. *Idiot*, she chided herself, taking deep breaths. It took a moment to gather the concentration needed; then, she summoned the East wind to counter the storm the blades of the choppers were causing.

A breeze suddenly started, from the opposite direction of the chopper blades', and gained rapidly in strength. The bulky man yelled into a megaphone someone was holding in front of him, "Surrender your wands, and you can have your prats back! Tell everyone inside to surrender their wands. We know there are fifty people in there, and only four of them are too young to carry wands. I want to see forty-six wands, and you'll have your children back."

The wind was howling. Hermione called upon the goddess to disable the engines. Her head felt as if it were about to explode. Silence would be calming and enable her to call for help if needed. *Help? The Great Mother will help me, no matter the noise.* A soothing wave of reassurance washed over her.

She'd nearly reached the chopper now. Concentrating with all her might, she addressed Gretl and hoped the little girl would hear her *Gretl! Kick him in the stomach. He'll let go of you, and you'll fall directly into my arms.* She looked at the girl above her.

"Kick him, Gretl!" Hermann yelled suddenly, and both children kicked the man, one in the stomach, the other lower down. With a yelp, he dropped both, and Hermione only just managed to catch one in each arm before collapsing in a heap on the ground. "Are you okay?" She looked from Gretl to Hermann.

Both engines stopped, and the sudden silence was almost as deafening as the noise had been. But then, gradually, a barely audible humming returned to refill the air with magic. Hermione sighed in relief.

"We're fine," Gretl and Hermann said as one and scrambled to stand. Hermann held his hand out to her in an offer to pull her up.

What a sweet, sweet boy... Hermione took his hand, but rose on her own strength. "Right. Now, stand behind me. We'll go back to the tent in a minute." Hermione concentrated once more and this time Summoned the fog.

The Easterly breeze obliged, brought the fog in a gesture of camaraderie, and then settled into a quiet, gentle blowing. The fog delivered ice-cold air, making Hermione shiver. "Come," she said quietly. "Let's go back inside."

They turned away from the fog, and Hermione started. The entire party was standing in front of the tent, mouths open, eyes wide.

Lucius ran towards them, his wand in front. He stopped and cast a silent spell that blasted both helicopters, then threw *Scourgify* to return the lawn to its former perfect condition.

Thank Merlin, the magic is fully back. A small voice added, *For now*, but Hermione decided to ignore it. For now.

Narcissa and Severus ran towards them, met a few feet in front of her by two children running to their respective foster parents.

"Cissy!" Hermann flew into her arms and hugged her tightly, burying his head against her shoulder.

"Severus!"

"Gretl! Merlin, you gave me a fright," Severus chided and held her close.

With the children safe, Hermione knelt on the ground, making another effort to contact Minerva. *We are safe. For now. The magic is back. Mr Malfoy blasted the helicopters with his wand.*

We'll talk tomorrow. I'm proud of you, child. Minerva's voice sounded reassuring.

"Are you all right, Miss Granger? Let me take you inside. It's cold out here." Mr Malfoy gently pulled her up, cast a Warming Charm, and steered her towards the tent.

She ignored the fact he was a Malfoy, grateful she didn't have to walk unaided in her exhausted state. They slowly followed Narcissa with Hermann and Severus with Gretl back to the tent, and Hermione collapsed on the nearest empty chair, burying her head in her arms as fatigue washed over her, her thoughts an undefined stream of blur.

A hand tugged gently at her shoulder. It wasn't a hand she wanted anywhere near, but she was lucid enough to hide that notion.

"Hermione," Narcissa said, "I know you must be utterly exhausted. But there are fifty people here very keen to find out what happened before they're willing to leave."

Hermione looked at her as if for the first time. This wasn't the woman she was jealous of; this was a caring woman, compassionate not only for a child foisted on her but considerate for anything she deemed important. Her blue eyes weren't cold at all. "... Minerva..." Eventually, she managed to convey to Narcissa what she knew and then

watched in wonder as the older witch spoke to the audience.

"It looks like we all could do with someone knowledgeable in elemental magic, since they cannot disable that," Narcissa finished her speech.

Severus turned up with the children in tow. "Come. Let's go back home."

Well... we survived a first test. I think Gretl doesn't remember quite so much yet; I heard Hermione speak loud and clear to her, and yet, she didn't react at all. Maybe it was just the shock.

Oh, finally! I think Severus has discovered Hermione. Or she him. Whichever way, it's fine. Still dreading the near future.

A/N: Grateful thanks to astopperindeath for the beta of this chapter.

The Lonely Goatherd

Chapter 5 of 8

Muggle authorities should know better than to mess with the wizarding world's greatest weapon, but then, they have no idea that a priestess of Avalon will never bow to them either.

5 - The Lonely Goatherd

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I / I took the one less travelled by, and that has made all the difference.

Robert Frost

It was still dark when Hermione woke up, memories of the previous night flooding her mind. Rain was pounding against the windows, and she snuggled deeper into the blanket. *Don't want to get up just yet*, she thought sleepily and started when someone knocked on the door.

Louisa walked in with a tray. "Severus sent me up. He said you must eat." She sounded stern.

"It's early, and I had dinner last night," Hermione protested, though as the scent of the carrot soup, delicately spiced with ginger, its aroma enhanced by coriander, reached her, she realised she was hungry.

Louisa laughed. "Hermione! It's gone four o'clock!"

Hermione blinked, then groaned. "I thought it was still morning. How long was I asleep?"

"Well, we got home around three in the morning. We all slept in, and you did incredible things last night, so the least you deserve is some uninterrupted sleep." Louisa handed her a bowl with the fragrant soup, and Hermione took it gratefully.

As her stomach gradually filled, her mind put the jumble of thoughts into order *I must go and see Minerva...* As soon as the contemplation was complete, though, she knew she didn't have to go.

Hermione hurried through the remainder of her meal, noticing Louisa watching her carefully. "I'm fine, girl," she said.

"I know you are, Hermione. But there is something..." Louisa's voice drifted off.

Do they all have the Sight? Hermione wondered, exhaling. "Minerva is on her way. She'll be here shortly. In fact..." she threw the covers off "...I should get ready now to look presentable for the Lady."

Louisa rose immediately. "Did you have enough to eat?"

Hermione smiled. "Yes, thank you."

The younger witch picked up the tray and turned to leave, and Hermione determinedly left the warm comfort of her bed and headed for the bathroom.

Donning an undyed woollen robe, Hermione went to the kitchen to make some tea. She was thankful that Severus, too, preferred the Muggle method of brewing it; heating water with magic adjusted the taste in a manner similar to microwaves, something Hermione had never appreciated.

The tea was just ready when someone knocked at the door. She heard Snape's fast strides and reached for another mug.

Severus entered the kitchen with Minerva, and Hermione bowed to her. "My Lady. I hope your journey was peaceful."

"Child. It's good to see you." The priestess smiled and dismissed formalities by pulling Hermione into an embrace.

It was good to feel the elder's love. Hermione hadn't realised until then just how exhausting the previous night had been. She took a deep breath, trying her best to not fall apart. "Tea is ready." She motioned for Minerva to choose a seat at the table.

"We should go to the living room, you know," Severus stated, hesitance evident in his voice.

He was met with smiles. "Oh, no, thank you. The kitchen is the heart of a home; I will be most content here," Minerva said and sat down nearest to the hearth. "'Tis cold out, I must say. Even Apparating doesn't stop the chill from going straight to my bones." She shuddered lightly as she rubbed her hands in front of the lively fire. "But then, I doubt it's a natural chill..."

She motioned for Severus to join the table. "You may as well hear it, Severus." Her priestess status alone did not allow for refusal, and he sat down.

"Hermione, I take it you don't read Muggle papers." Minerva dug out a copy of the *Sunday Times* from her pocket, folded to show a picture of Hermione, obviously taken the previous night from one of the helicopters as she'd approached the children.

Hermione glanced at it, read, and did a double take. "What?" She laughed. "They call me *terrorist* for saving two innocent children? That's ridiculous! And *heavily armed*? I didn't know carrying a wand when the magic is disabled qualifies as heavily armed!"

Severus shook his head and snatched the paper from her and read, a sneer spreading across his face. "Ludicrous." He faced Minerva. "You know more."

Minerva nodded gravely. "Yes, indeed. That's why I'm here." She took a deep breath, caressing Hermione's hand. "The current Muggle Prime Minister..." her voice turned to a whisper "...is a Squib. He hates our world and wants to take over and ban wand magic. In fact, I have reason to believe he was brought into the position to enable those dark powers to find our world."

Hermione gasped; Severus cast his eyes downward. "So my hunch was right."

"Indeed, Severus," Minerva confirmed. She turned to Hermione again. "He is the illegitimate offspring of one Guinevere Prince and Abraxas Malfoy."

Hermione's widened eyes met Snape's. "Oh, Merlin..."

"Yes, Miss Granger, an unfortunate union between my mother's sister and Lucius's father." His voice was grave, and her heart went out to him.

"It's not your fault, you know," she whispered.

His laugh sounded bitter. "No. But it leaves a stain nevertheless."

"Oh, please, Severus," Minerva said. "You know the old ways. It does not leave a stain on you at all. You've done more for the wizarding world than anyone I know except, perhaps, Harry Potter, but you do not wish to hear that."

"No. I do not." He looked mutinous.

Minerva smiled as she turned back to Hermione, but quickly turned solemn again. "So we have a Squib Muggle Prime Minister, who is hell-bent on banishing magic. He has enough funding to infiltrate our Ministry, and he's obviously done so already. He cannot, however, use that nasty Muggle technology to mess with the magic of the Goddess." She nodded at Hermione's widened eyes. "Yes. If we succeed in teaching earth magic, at least the basics of it, to all communities in our world, he will not succeed, no matter how many wizards he's bought in the Ministry."

Hermione took a deep breath. "What do you wish me to do? I will do anything needed."

Minerva touched her arm. "Yes. I know, Hermione. I want you to stay here for now. Teach the children as much as possible. I have no doubt they'll learn fast. After all, they, too, are children of the Isle."

She turned to Severus next. "I'll have Liesl go to Hogwarts to teach earth magic as an extra-curricular subject. I will go myself once a week as soon as I Summon protection for the most important places. You need to learn more and then share your knowledge with your friends."

Severus nodded curtly, and Minerva turned back to Hermione. "Will you please inform Ginny Potter if she doesn't know already? Potter is as much at risk as you are. Which brings me to another subject." She frowned and took a deep breath.

"Hermione, you are safe here. I ensured that as I came in. You are also safe, of course, in Avalon. But if you go out anywhere, be very careful."

Hermione nodded slowly. *Why? Why me?*

"Because you have chosen this task, Hermione," Minerva said, her voice filled with a brand of urgency Hermione had never heard before. "I will not ask you to teach Narcissa, but if you have it in your heart..." She didn't need to finish the sentence.

"Of course," Hermione whispered. She glanced at Severus. "Would you please tell Narcissa?" The thought of herself having to tell the blonde witch devastated her.

"Yes. I will. In fact, I'll Floo-call her now." Severus exited the kitchen in a hurry.

Hermione buried her head in her hands on the table.

"Hermione." Minerva's gentle voice penetrated her to the core.

"No. No, please, don't."

"You are a priestess, Hermione!" the Lady reminded her harshly. "Look at me!"

Hermione lifted her head wearily to face Minerva. "I..."

"Child... Love is *never* wrong," the Lady started.

"No... only futile." Hermione sighed heavily.

"Why do you think so?" Minerva asked, raising her eyebrows. "I was not under that impression at all."

Hermione was relieved as well as bothered to see Severus walk into the kitchen followed closely by Narcissa, who bowed deeply when she saw who sat at the kitchen table.

"Merry Meet, Narcissa," the Lady offered and stretched a hand over her head in blessing.

"Merry Meet, my Lady. It is an honour to see you again," Narcissa returned and straightened.

"I trust Severus has already told you."

The blonde nodded. "Hermione is in danger, as is the entire wizarding world. From Muggles no less." She sneered, and Hermione noted with a stab that even with such an unsightly expression the witch looked spectacularly elegant. "All courtesy of my father-in-law and his illegitimate offspring. May he rest in peace." She could not have sounded less genuine if she'd tried, Hermione thought.

Minerva bestowed a smile on her. "If we all work together, we'll rise triumphant once more." Her smile faded as she continued. "Hermione has agreed to teach elemental magic, and I suggest you'll find friends who are willing to learn from you. The more witches, and wizards, are capable of our magic, the better our chances." The Lady sighed deeply and added, "We may have to restore the full Beltane Rites, for their magic is more powerful than any other."

Narcissa's eyes widened, as did Hermione's. *No. No! I will not lie with some stranger I'll never know!*

Severus frowned deeply. "You mean the hunt for the stag? Only if we have not changed the situation by then, no?" The practice of crowning the hunter of the stag as the Horned One had long been abandoned; killing for merely ritual purposes was barbaric, it had been decided, something the uncivilised folk engaged in. The Gods had rewarded the abolition of the practise with hundreds of years of peace and continuous abundant harvests on the Isle. For reasons nobody save, perhaps, a high initiate knew, the deer population had never grown out of bounds, as if the Gods had shown their approval of the abolishment thus.

"Indeed, Severus. But I'll be pleasantly surprised if this situation resolves quickly." Minerva finished her tea and stood, facing Hermione. "Walk to the gate with me, child. I wish to speak with you."

Hermione barely managed to hide her panic and rose. "Certainly, my Lady." She exited the kitchen and waited at the front door until Minerva had said her good-byes; then, together, they walked towards the gate.

"When I invited you to Avalon, it was first and foremost because I thought you needed healing. Healing from a childhood lost to war, healing from your deeds where your parents are concerned...and I *know* you not only meant the best for them but it was the best solution...and healing from your ill-fated relationship with Mr Weasley. We women are vulnerable, even more so when we're young and haven't had time to grow up, Hermione, and you needed a period of healing." Minerva shot a sharp glance at her. "Did you not?"

"Yes... yes, I did. And I'll be forever grateful you provided that," Hermione said, her eyes now meeting her mentor's. "I had planned to take the vow, to live my life, every step of my life, in the service of the Goddess," she whispered. "How can I now? I..." sobs interrupted her words "...if I'd known I'd fall for him, I would not have come here." She straightened. "Alas, he and Narcissa seem to get along very well, so I'm sure I'll get over this silly crush."

"Don't be daft," Minerva said in her typical Head-of-Gryffindor voice. "What makes you think that?"

Hermione stared at her. "She is here almost every day. They spend hours together, talking, he cooks for her, they go for walks..."

"Did you ever see them kiss? Or be otherwise intimate?"

Hermione thought for a moment. "N... no... I have not. They laugh together, and she stands very close to him when he cooks her favourite meal, but no. They always behave properly."

"Look at me, Hermione. Does that sound like a couple having an illicit affair?" Minerva's face softened to a smile.

"I don't know," the younger witch whispered. "How can I know?"

"Exactly. You cannot. So what makes you believe they are?" She grabbed Hermione's shoulders. "Do not make excuses for your feelings, child. Watch Narcissa and Severus for what they are: very close friends. Lucius was not happy about Hermann entering his life, and Narcissa needed a friend who would not judge her for either past misdeeds or the decision to provide a family for Hermann. Severus fit that need. Now, I must leave." She cast a blessing on the younger witch and disappeared, leaving behind a young priestess with more questions than answers.

Being born with a complete memory is not easy at times. It breaks my own heart to see Hermione so crushed. She knows, somehow, that Severus has an interest in her, yet she is so misled about Narcissa's interest in him. I do not know why she can't see the truth. Narcissa was born to love Lucius, and she would die if she stopped. Her heart belongs to Lucius, and Severus is merely lucky Lucius likes him enough to share his wife's time with him. I suspect my arrival made him realise that just because Narcissa likes someone, or even loves someone, doesn't mean her love for her Lucius will deteriorate. It never will. He is lucky he is not aware of his true power over her; it could generate bad karma for him.

A/N: Grateful thanks to blue_paris for the beta.

Reviews are love.

Climb Ev'ry Mountain

Chapter 6 of 8

Muggle authorities should know better than to mess with the wizarding world's greatest weapon, but then, they have no idea that a priestess of Avalon will never bow to them either.

6 - Climb Ev'ry Mountain

There are two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.

Albert Einstein

The magic was back for now, the blasted helicopters gone, but Hermione had no doubt this first disabling of magic was only the beginning. She walked slowly back towards the house. The rain had finally stopped, and there were more puddles on the uneven ground than she could count, each one offering ideal conditions for scrying.

Hermione chose one body of water...the size of a large cooking pot...and bent down, carefully avoiding the cold, wet ground. "Show me," she whispered, then remembered, ashamed, to give proper thanks and bless the work space. She stared at the water and first saw Minerva arrive safely in Avalon. "Thank goodness you're safe." *She never thinks of her own wellbeing. Or perhaps she knows that she's protected wherever she goes.*

Pink, hideous pink, suddenly flecked the surface of the puddle, and a figure slowly emerged. "Certainly, sir. I can arrange for that, although I do have a price," a voice Hermione would recognise anywhere said, a saccharine-laden, insincere, simpering voice. The shape of a man now began to show, obviously a Muggle, wearing an expensive suit and a distasteful expression.

"Name it then, witch!" he demanded with a measure of scorn that beat any Malfoy or Snape sneer she'd ever seen.

Said witch appeared entirely unfazed by his demeanour. "If you catch Potter or Granger, I want to be the one to interrogate them. With no restrictions and with unhindered use of magic."

The Muggle laughed. "That's not a problem. Our electro-magnetic radiation allows for precise pinpointing. It makes no difference whether we disable magic over a square mile's radius or a square inch's. How do we find those two?"

"I will provide you with photographs and their addresses. Neither goes out much, so it should be a fairly easy catch even if some waiting is involved. And ensure the magic is disabled in their respective surroundings." Her face contorted into another cold smile, making Hermione shudder, and then the water was once more clear and dark, with just light ripples from the mild breeze, the vision gone.

Hermione slowly rose and returned to the house, her mind whirling. As she walked past the kitchen door, it opened, revealing Narcissa.

"Hermione! Are you all right?" the witch asked, her voice filled with concern.

"I..." Exhaustion washed over her, and Hermione was grateful as Narcissa steered her firmly into the kitchen and onto the nearest chair.

"What happened?" Turning to the dark wizard who was now rising from his seat at the table, she said, "Severus, please make some tea."

"After I saw Minerva off," Hermione started and relayed her decision to utilise one of the rain puddles to do some scrying and what emerged. "I have no idea what the Muggle asked of Umbridge, but I don't think it matters much."

Narcissa stared into the fire and, after a long silence, said, "No. He wanted locations. Which means they probably start with wizarding villages to disable the magic. Are there ways to protect our homes? The manor is well warded, but if they can disable the magic with means of Muggle technology, I don't hold much hope." She looked enquiringly at the younger witch.

Hermione gratefully lifted the steaming mug Severus put in front of her. "Thank you." The heat felt good in her cold hands, and the scent the tea emitted lifted her spirits. She took a few deep breaths inhaling it before replying, "Yes. We can create at least a modicum of protection for any space. There are rituals, some simple, some more complicated. Most require one or three women, so we'll have no problems protecting your manor or this residence." She turned to Severus, who was now sitting on the other side of Narcissa. "Minerva ensured this home is protected when she visited tonight."

Severus nodded. "She mentioned something..." His head flew back to the witch on his other side. "Narcissa, arrange with Hermione to protect the manor. We need to take precautions, and it's likely to become more difficult for her to travel, since her picture is already spreading across the Muggle media."

Narcissa glanced at Hermione. "What do you need?"

Hermione drank the rest of the tea, then said, "You, myself, and we can ask Louisa to join; she is old enough. A broom, some salt. I'll use my own athame." A small smile played around her lips. "And intent of course."

Narcissa returned the smile hesitantly. "Of course." She rose. "I better get back home. It's late."

Hermione, in an automatic gesture for someone with troubles, stretched her hand out in blessing the older witch, then bade Severus good night and fled to her room.

It wasn't early by anyone's standards, but she'd slept most of the day away and was anything but sleepy, if worn. Besides, there were many things to think about, so she lit a fire and sat down on the rug in front of the hearth, reflecting on the recent events until her attention focussed on the day ahead. *I'll have to enter Malfoy Manor... Goddess, help me be strong...* Spending a few hours on the manor's grounds was one thing, but the thought of physically entering the manor made her shudder.

Calm down, a gentle but firm voice instructed her mind. *The Gods will not allow the despicable plans of a few to come to fruition, and that manor holds no threat for you.*

Hermione felt somewhat calmer. She didn't recognise the voice, but knowing it came from the isle sufficed, and she relaxed deeper into the thick, woollen rug, her shawl still pulled tightly around her, as if to ward off the cold, which had long since dissipated with the lively fire.

Staring into the flames, she soon felt a pull and was not surprised to see her body still on the hearth rug when she glanced back. She exited the house...and found herself not in the large garden but on the shore of an ocean in broad daylight.

"And again we've survived the downfall of a world," he said. He wasn't Severus, but his eyes were, as was his voice, smooth, silky, his words delivered in a regretful timbre.

"So we have. And will again," she offered and was grateful he was by her side, his arm around her shoulder as they watched the ashes of Mu fall into the ocean.

"Yes, again and again. Until... My love, there will come a time when we'll rise triumphant and overcome the evil that has befallen our beloved planet."

She nodded slowly. "May this day arrive soon." She noticed, looking around, it was almost barren land. Too much sand on the ground, no growth save a few cacti...prickly like his current personality, she thought with a hint of amusement.

"When we are together again and visit this place once more, know the time has arrived, my love." With a last nod, his hand stretched out over her head in blessing, he faded, and so did the scenery.

Next, she found herself in an icescape. A piercing blue sky and bright white land penetrated her eyes as the cold did her body, making her shiver.

"And yet another continent has sunken." His voice sounded regretful, and her heart went out to him as she observed his features. This wasn't Severus either, though his voice was the same. "One day, we'll meet and work together and succeed in banishing the forces of destruction," he continued as he embraced her, and she felt at home in his arms.

Hermione felt herself fade until the landscape changed again, this time to one she was familiar with.

"I'm so glad we've had a reprieve," he said, his eyes still pitch-black, his voice still silky. "There are hard times ahead of us, my love. Not in this life, but in future ones..."

"Yes," she agreed. "It's been good to have a break here in Avalon, even if the future does look gloomy." Her eyes met his as his arm wrapped around her. "Oh, my love. I wish we could be done here and simply be at peace." Her head lay on his shoulder, and she was engulfed in comfort.

It lasted all but a second, for she was catapulted rather violently back into her body in front of the now dying embers.

"Did I do something to upset you?" asked Severus, looming over her with a concerned face.

Hermione pulled the shawl closer around her, feeling cold. "No, you never. I... I felt unwell."

"Are you certain it is not because of... other reasons?" he asked, though his voice held no bite.

Please go away... "No... sir. I have no reason to hide anything." She was unable to meet his eyes.

He sat down next to her. "Why do you suddenly prefer such a formal address... when we've been on familiar terms for quite some time?" *Hermione?* He threw a couple of logs onto the embers and used his wand to kindle the fire.

To avoid more familiarity... Warmth infused her, though she was sure it did not come from the burning wood. "I don't know what you mean..." She managed...barely...to avoid adding sir.

"Did or did you not just remember several past lives, Hermione?" His voice held a heightened air of interest.

Hermione averted her eyes. "I did." It was barely a whisper.

"Look at me." He moved his hand to her chin and tilted her head.

"Hermione."

The expression on his face made her gasp. "Oh..." In a moment of complete darkness, she blurted, "I thought you were interested in Narcissa."

He laughed, but stopped abruptly when her expression changed to...was it relief? "What?" It sounded incredulous.

She blushed and looked away and hoped he'd just leave. *No. Please stay...* His presence unsettled and calmed her all the same.

"Hermione. Look at me." His tone wasn't demanding by any means, but she could not help obeying his words and met his eyes again. He held her glance before continuing to speak, his tone soft now. "If anyone had ever believed you and Potter were together, what would you have thought?"

She laughed then. "Harry is like a brother. That's just... ew." Her eyes widened at his smirk. "Oh..." She looked away, feeling silly.

"Foolish girl," he said softly. "Both Narcissa and Lucius have been friends since my teenage days at Hogwarts, oftentimes my only friends, but when Hermann entered their lives, Narcissa needed some support, for Lucius was not keen on the boy, and I needed help because I had no idea how to raise children." Her eyes met his again, and her breath hitched when his hand rested on her chin and then tilted her face towards his own as he bent down.

His lips met hers. *So soft*, she thought in wonder and was overcome with a sense of acute loss when he moved.

"When you first came here, I realised how much you've changed since your Hogwarts days. Of course, everyone grows up; some sooner than others, but there was something about you..." He was holding her now like some treasure, his chin lightly resting on her shoulder. "And then the dreams started. Not really dreams, I figured; it was more as if my soul travelled to times past, and you were in each one..."

"You, too?" she asked. "I don't remember any dreams, but just now, before you turned up, I saw us in many lifetimes."

He nodded. "Narcissa suggested my dreams were memories from previous lives..." He turned to face her, and his head lowered once more until their lips met, and then his tongue slipped between her lips.

There were fireworks suddenly, in her head and in her stomach and somewhere else, some place deep inside she was unable to define.

When they finally parted, Severus whispered, "I didn't know I was missing something in my life, but I think I've found it."

Reviews inspire the Muse. Really, they do.

So Long, Farewell

Chapter 7 of 8

Muggle authorities should know better than to mess with the wizarding world's greatest weapon, but then, they have no idea that a priestess of Avalon will never bow to them either.

7 So Long, Farewell

I don't judge people...if you judge people, you don't have time to love them!

Mother Theresa

Waking up, still on the woollen rug in front of the fireplace, next to Severus, beat every sensation of joy Hermione had ever experienced. Her heart swelled as she looked down herself and saw his arm wrapped around her midst. She lifted her head to look at his face and smiled when he opened his eyes.

"Good morning," he said and pulled her closer. "My love..."

"It is a good morning," she agreed and placed her head against his chest, tracing random patterns with her fingers while watching the flames play. He had kept the fire going all night.

Severus pulled her closer. "Isn't it..." he mused. "Who would've thought...?" Then he tilted her head upwards. "What are you going to tell your friends, Hermione?"

She shrugged. "What else but the truth? If Harry doesn't understand, Ginny will make him. I've not had contact with any other Weasleys or

other wizards since I moved to Avalon. Life on the isle is tranquil and doesn't really lend itself to socialising." Then, she smiled. "Severus, I don't care what other people think about us. As long as you and I are happy, that's all that counts." A Warning suddenly entered her mind, and she shuddered. "Severus?"

"What is it?" He looked at her, frowning.

"I think things are about to get... problematic." Hermione had barely finished when the door opened and Louisa stumbled in, tears streaming down her face.

"Hermione! I think the Malfoys are in trouble!" The girl knelt down in front of Hermione, completely oblivious of the unusual presence of Severus.

"Explain, please," Hermione straightened.

"I... I had a vision," Louisa started and was interrupted by her own sobs.

Severus and Hermione rose and then sat down on either side of Louisa.

"What happened?" both asked in unison.

"Draco..." Louisa uttered and collapsed against Hermione's shoulder.

Images flooded Hermione's mind, and she stood up, horrified. "We need to go there. Now. Let's meet in five minutes at the front door. Louisa, get your sisters ready. Severus, please get the boys ready." She was oblivious to her own authority, but both stood immediately and turned to leave.

"Five minutes," Severus said, stretching his hand out towards her.

She took it. "Yes. I'll meet you at the door. I need to get dressed." With a lopsided, hesitant smile, she let go of his hand.

Doing her ablutions automatically, Hermione ran through her mind what she'd seen and dressed in Muggle clothing: jeans, t-shirt, woollen jumper. On her way out, she threw on her cloak to keep warm and rushed to the door. It took barely a minute for all five children to turn up...Severus was already there...and she said, "Let's leave. We'll have to Apparate nearby."

They rushed to the gates, grabbed each other's hands, and Apparated, landing at the top of the lane leading to the manor where eerie silence met the group.

Kurt looked around. "There is something wrong." His eyes sought Hermione's. "We normally land much closer to the manor."

"Yes, Kurt. The magic, I think, has been disabled, unless it's my inability to cast it. Try, everyone!" Hermione said.

Nobody's wand worked, and Hermione was overcome with dread.

Remember why you are where you are! came Minerva's voice, making her straighten up and be fully conscious of her priesthood.

"Come. We'll go up to the manor and knock on the door." If her words hadn't done it, her appearance certainly did, for she'd turned into a priestess of Avalon, and everyone followed her without questioning towards the gate, which opened readily, and then up the stairs to the front door.

She knocked and willed the sound to carry, ensuring whoever was there would hear it.

A Muggle in police uniform opened the door, sneering. "Who are you? And how did you find this place?"

Hermione, in one swift movement placing the children behind as Severus moved to stand next to her, smiled politely. "Sir, I believe you wished us ~~to find~~ this place. We are here to see the Malfoys."

"The Malfoys? You mean the blond couple? They've been taken into custody under the Terrorist Prevention Act," the policeman returned with a disturbingly smug expression.

Hermione groaned inwardly. *Just how far will this Muggle government go to stop our magic...?*

Gretl's outcry of "Hermann!" followed by a heart-rending sob interrupted her thoughts, and she turned to the small girl. "It's okay, Gretl. We'll find him. I'm sure this nice police officer will let us know what happened to Hermann."

Hermione turned back to the officer and smiled. "Won't you, sir? Hermann is Gretl's friend, and it will calm her to know that he is fine." She willed a modicum of conscience on the man.

"He's been taken into foster care by a family in Glastonbury, madam, and that's all I can tell you."

"And would you be able to tell us where the Malfoys are being held?" she asked.

"All terrorist suspects are moved to Holloway Prison while awaiting trial. Don't you read the papers?" He sneered again, and Hermione realised he was reaching the end of his patience the same moment as she felt Severus tug her sleeve.

We need to leave! "Right. We've bothered you enough and better return home, then. Thank you for your time, officer." Hermione turned, nodding towards the lane as she glanced at the children.

In hurried strides, the group descended the stairs and rushed back to the path leading to the gate and beyond. Nobody spoke until they reached the top of the hill.

"Quickly. Let's get outside their wards so we can Apparate."

Someone called from the gate. "Oi! Come back! I know who you are!"

Hermione looked at Severus. "What now?" The moment she'd said it, though, she could feel the magic humming again. "Okay. Let's get out of here. Hands, everyone!"

Seconds later, all landed safely outside the gate of Severus's home. "Quickly, let's get back in. I don't know how far the elemental wards reach outside the property." Severus pulled Gretl along at first, but soon lifted her up to carry her the few yards to the gate. The other children ran towards their home as fast as their young legs could carry them.

Once they'd all reached the safety of the house, Severus turned to Hermione. "Do you realise the danger you were in? If they'd caught you, you would be joining Lucius and Narcissa! How could I have allowed you to go out?" He shook his head, his expression one of despair.

Hermione's hand rose to gently stroke his face. "It's outside your control, Severus. I should have thought to at least put some kind of glamour on my person so the Muggles won't connect me with the picture in the paper. Alas, for now we are safe."

He nodded, still frowning. "For now. But the moment we leave here again, we won't be, and nor will the children." Severus turned to Gretl, who'd started sobbing again.

"Gretl, Hermann will be fine," he said, but Hermione was unable to detect any reassuring nuance in his tone and not surprised when the girl's sobs intensified. He lifted her into his arms again and faced Hermione. "Any suggestions?"

With sudden, uncanny clarity, Hermione knew what to do. "Yes." She stopped for a moment to collect her thoughts. "First of all, we need to ensure the children's safety.

Then we need to get in touch with Harry. And then get the Malfoys out of jail. And move Hermann to safety as well."

"Oh, easy, then," he said with a sneer.

"No," Hermione returned, "but doable. Let me take the children to Avalon. There is no safer place. Then I'll try and track down Hermann, and if...when...I find him, I'll take him to the isle, too. In the meantime, you could contact Harry, find out if he knows anything...I'm sure Minerva already told him he's Umbridge's target...and then find a way to get Lucius and Narcissa out of Holloway." She swallowed. "Not easy, no. But if we don't try, they'll win."

"Hermione." He extended his free arm and pulled her close, holding Gretl still in his other arm. "How are we to contact each other? We cannot rely on owls."

"No." Hermione sought eye contact with him before continuing. "I don't know how or if Legilimens works where the magic is disabled, but try and connect with me now." She opened her mind to him and felt his gentle prodding. "Yes, like that," she said, her voice softening. "Remember that... sensation you've just had? Seek it, and I will hear you in my mind. It is the best we can hope for if owls don't work." She closed her eyes at that. *May it work for us...*

He offered a curt nod and then turned to Gretl. "Young lady? I need you to be strong. You heard what Hermione said."

Gretl looked at him through teary eyes. "I did. I need to take my fluffy kneazle and the brown fluffy squirrel that Hermann loves. Then I'll be ready." She ran off to her bedroom the moment Severus put her back on the floor and returned a minute later with her two toys. "I'm ready," she said, facing Hermione before turning to Severus. "I'll miss you."

"And I'll miss you, Gretl," he said. "Hopefully, it won't be long before we're all back together." Then he turned into the teacher used to giving orders that left no room for disobeying. "All of you: I want you to go to your rooms and pack a week's worth of clothing. Louisa, pack enough for Gretl as well; she'll help you. And I'd like five minutes alone with Hermione. Go!"

Each one rushed to their feet and left. Severus turned to Hermione. "So I've found you only to be away from you."

"My love." Hermione's eyes sought his and rested there. "It won't be for long." She tried to convince herself, though every single day was one day too many to be separated from him, now that she knew he returned her feelings. "I wish there were a better solution..."

"You're right to take them to the isle." He pulled her yet closer and tilted her head for a kiss.

"Severus..." she whispered.

The children returned too fast, their energy penetrating the brief tranquillity she had found.

Louisa looked at Hermione. "I want to know where Draco is. It did not sound as if he was arrested along with Narcissa and Lucius."

"No, I don't think he was, Louisa," Severus said. "Surely, that policeman would have rubbed it in if he had been arrested. Perhaps he was not there when the manor was invaded. Though why you'd want to know about the prat is beyond me."

Louisa's face, as tear-stricken as her little sister's, fell. "Is it wrong to like someone? To fancy myself in love? I'm nearly seventeen, you know."

Hermione smiled. "Love is never wrong, Louisa, no matter how young or old you are." The smile turned into a frown as she thought of the dire situation with renewed vigour. "I promise I'll let you know if I find out anything about Draco's whereabouts. But now, we must get ready to leave. You'll be safe in Avalon, and as soon as we restore our world, either Severus or I will come back for you."

Some more shuffling between the children, a quickly cast glamour to change Hermione's hair colour, another longing look between Severus and Hermione, one last blessing, and she and the children left for a journey filled with uncertainty.

Here I am, in this sterile Muggle home, and I can't help but curl my lips and maybe take a leaf out of Severus's stance and sneer. This bedroom is so impersonal, and so are the foster parents. They strive to be the picture-perfect parents. In terms of government...Muggle government...ideas, that is, and all I want to do is sneer. I miss Narcissa's love, and I miss Lucius's reluctant love, which I know is there if only he allows himself to put aside prejudice. And he will, oh, how he will. I have faith, though, that I shan't stay here for long, for if I do, it will kill me. I miss Gretl, I miss Narcissa, I miss everyone, and I am not happy.

A/N: Reviews are love, and the world needs love, don't you think?

Edelweiss

Chapter 8 of 8

Muggle authorities should know better than to mess with the wizarding world's greatest weapon, but then, they have no idea that a priestess of Avalon will never bow to them either.

8 Edelweiss

I would rather have a mind opened by wonder than one closed by belief.

Gerry Spence

Relief washed over Hermione as they all landed right by the Tor in Glastonbury. The magic hadn't been...yet...disabled there.

She headed for the lake and smiled as the children oohed and aahed once it became visible to them.

Louisa suddenly looked happier, and Hermione wondered if her Sight had reassured her.

The young priestess summoned a boat, which arrived almost instantly, and ushered them all into it, helping Gretl as she stumbled. The fog was the most intense she'd ever seen between Glastonbury and Avalon. *The worlds are parting again...*

The barge made its way slowly but steadily towards the isle. The children sat in awe, their eyes wide, as Hermione lifted the fog with one swift movement and the beauty of the island was revealed before them.

The grass was still green here, the temperature more summer-like, and cows and sheep and goats and horses grazed peacefully amongst to each other. Trees displayed their stark winter nakedness, yet everything seemed milder and filled with life.

Minerva was waiting on the beach and helped Gretl out of the boat. "Thank you, Lady." Gretl bowed, and Minerva smiled down at her before turning to greet Hermione.

"Come, let's go inside and have some tea, and you can tell me the details." She led the way to the small house, motioning for a young priestess to prepare tea as she entered the kitchen, and then gestured to the table. "Sit down, everyone."

Minerva was silent while Hermione relayed the events of the morning, with occasional additions thrown in by Louisa, Kurt, and Gretl. Finally, when all had been told, she turned to Hermione. "Yes, you must find Hermann. It would not do to leave him in the care of ignorant Muggles. I presume you know where to look for information?"

At Hermione's brief nod, she continued, addressing Louisa. "Hermione is right. Mr Potter may even know Draco's whereabouts. I know they've been building something akin to friendship since the end of the war. I also hope Harry can pull some strings at the *Daily Prophet*. It is becoming vital that the entire wizarding world be informed of this abomination. Trying to take our magic away!" Minerva shook her head in indignation.

After a short silence, she addressed Hermione again. "How is your Animagus training coming along?"

Hermione glanced at Louisa, smiling. "We've been practising, and I think under normal circumstances, another week or two and we would both succeed."

Minerva nodded. "Good. We can spend the daylight hours to further your training." She turned to call a young priestess and asked her to show the children around the isle.

Soon, the Lady, priestess, and young witch headed for a lawn not far from the beach. "It'll be easiest to practise in a wide-open space, unless you already have a definite idea what your form is," Minerva explained.

The sun moved unnoticed across the late autumn sky, watching as Hermione and Louisa practised to become Animagi, and eventually set in the far West, leaving a bluish-purple sky behind as twilight slowly set over the country.

"Try once more, both of you!" Minerva exclaimed, excitement evident in her voice. "I could feel the shift of energy just now; you're almost there!"

Hermione took a deep breath, concentrated, and cast the spell for what felt the millionth time. Then, for a moment, the world stopped spinning. *I did it! I think I did...A wave of utter panic washed over her.*

She took a few tentative steps and realised she couldn't walk as well as in her human form. Water didn't seem attractive except for, perhaps, catching fish *Fish*? She'd never liked fish before, but the idea of catching fish suddenly appealed. There was one more option left.

She flopped and was amazed to find she had wings. Next, she tried to flap her arms and was shocked she could, lifting up a few feet before falling back onto the ground. *Oh, Merlin, I'm a bird!*

When Hermione attempted to soar up into the air, tentative hope transfigured into firm knowledge. *Yes!*

Looking down below, she saw the lawn and the beach, the smallest dragon she'd ever seen, and the Lady of the Lake, who expressed her joy by clapping wildly and laughing delightedly and transforming into cat and back into human. "You both did it!" she exclaimed, clapping again.

The dragon suddenly spread its wings and rose rapidly upward until it'd reached her. "We did it!"

Hermione didn't hear the words, but they were as clear in her mind as if they'd been spoken to human ears. *How intriguing...* She tried to smile at the dragon, but then remembered that, as a bird, it was probably impossible to actually show emotions on her face.

Strangely enough, the dragon managed a crooked smile. Hermione soared to new heights. It was so easy to fly higher and higher, to kiss the few cumulus clouds, to bid the sun goodnight, to embrace the dark that made no difference to her sight. *Oh, look! A pine tree! I've never seen any in Avalon before!* She exclaimed to her dragon companion and headed straight for its crown to sit down on.

It felt delectable, it smelt scrumptious, and she realised that, right now, life was delicious. *Oh, Louisa, isn't life wonderful?* she exclaimed.

The dragon, who had found a strong branch just beneath the tree's crown, laughed. *Yes, indeed!*

We've done it! Hermione rejoiced. Then the high of her first transformation dispersed rapidly. *We need to get back!*

We do, yes.

Together, Hermione and Louisa flew back to the lawn where Minerva still stood and landed within feet of each other.

"By Merlin, you've done it!" Minerva cried. "I knew you would! Well, well done!" She stepped towards the girls and pulled them into a tight embrace.

Then, turning to Hermione and sobering quickly, she asked, "Are you prepared for the task ahead?"

Hermione nodded slowly. "The Muggle public offices are closed for the day, and most are cleaned early in the morning. By the time I get there, I'm certain any overzealous civil servant will have gone home, and I'll have plenty of time to go through the files to find out Hermann's whereabouts."

"Let's have a bite to eat first," Minerva suggested, and together, they slowly walked back to the house where a simple meal of scrambled eggs on toast with some greens awaited.

When Hermione stepped back outside, ready to leave for the social services, youth division, office in Glastonbury, dense fog had descended over the lake and beyond, in the direction of the Muggle town. *There must be Muggles about...* she thought warily. It was hard to even make out the boat only a few yards away.

"Hermione," the Lady said, "be careful," and stretched her hands out in silent blessing.

Hermione nodded, bowed, and pushed the boat into the water, then stepped inside. The journey seemed slower than usual, but she had no doubt it was due to the anticipation of her task ahead rather than the fog. She'd made the journey across the inland sea in moonless as well as foggy nights before, and it had taken no longer

than during daylight. *Or perhaps it is because the worlds are parting again...*she mused and shivered at the thought of the isle disappearing permanently in the mists, as it had before for hundreds of years.

Hermione heard the Muggles even before she reached the bank. Scraps of conversation drifted to her ears, causing a deep frown to form on her face.

"I'm sure it's here! The old biddy told me!" one said, sounding annoyed.

*Ah, yes, Dolores Umbridge. I hope someone will enlighten you as to what he's just called you...*Hermione thought grimly.

"Did she bother to point out that we can't disable the magic here?" another asked, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

Oh... now that's interesting! Suddenly, Hermione remembered a lesson from the earliest days of her priesthood training, the only lesson ever held right within the ring stones located in the centre of the isle. *This, the Lady's voice echoed in her mind as if she were standing right before her: Britain's most powerful magical point. Ley lines connect these stones to the Tor, to Stonehenge, to the Externsteine in Germany, even to the Great Pyramid in Egypt and Macchu Picchu in Peru.*

Of course, Hermione nodded to herself, *ley lines, and we're standing on one right here. I wonder if that's why they can't stop the magic. Hm.* She made a mental note to look into ley lines from a magical perspective.

"N...no, she didn't. I wonder if she knows at all; not like she's all that familiar with, what'd she call us? Muggles or something," the annoyed voice said.

Muggles indeed, Hermione scoffed and disillusioned herself in the manner of a priestess, but then cast a Disillusionment Charm with her wand for good measure.

Once back on firm ground, Hermione disillusioned the boat and then made her way swiftly towards the Tor and into the village, carefully skirting around the two Muggle men, who were now complaining about the fog.

Once past the Tor, the fog lifted a little. Hermione was grateful, for she didn't know Glastonbury all that well, and too dense a fog would have prevented her from reading the map the tourist office handed out all over the town.

She found the Child Protection Services department of Her Majesty's Public Services without trouble...it was just off the High Street...and a simple *Alohamora* granted her entry the moment she'd ensured the building was empty. Hermione concentrated, feeling with her Sight, and quickly found the right office and started looking at files piled on the only desk in the room.

The first batch she investigated contained the day's cases, and her eyes flew over each page, searching for Hermann's name. Finally, when she reached near the bottom of the pile, his name stared at her. The notes accompanying his name made her head shake. *Narcissa and Lucius Malfoy, parents (suggesting DNA testing here; the boy has pitch-black hair whereas both parents are platinum blond and he looks nothing like either parent; the only resemblance to his "mother" is his prettiness), alleged "wizards," apparently able to cast "magic" (who'd have thought such nutters survived the Hippie trend). Temporarily placed with professional foster parents, Sheila and Colin Johnson, fifteen, Pendragon Park, Glastonbury (see foster parent files for further information) until longer-term solution is found.*

Hermione snickered to herself as she wrote down the address and pulled out the map. *Magic is still unreal for most Muggles. Will it ever change...?* she thought before concentrating on finding *Pendragon Park*. It was on the edge of town, in the opposite direction of the Tor, probably a good ten-minute walk. She looked at her watch. *Nearly eight. Hopefully, Hermann will be in bed but not asleep yet...* Sending a plea to the Goddess, she exited the building and started walking down the deserted, still foggy street.

Occasionally, Hermione cast a spell to see if the magic was holding up; she had no idea how far the protection of the ley lines...if that was what prevented the disabling of magic...spread.

When she reached Pendragon Park and started looking at house numbers, it was suddenly very quiet, and there was an eerie silence about like the one she'd felt near Malfoy Manor earlier.

Hermione took her wand out, cast *Wingardium Leviosa*, and slowly nodded to herself. *No magic here...* She stopped briefly, taking a deep breath, and considered different scenarios. Then, thinking, *Nobody should see us. It's too cold for people to stand outside, and if Hermann remains quiet, nobody will notice any commotion outside... If things go awry, we can hope to make it back to where the magic works; it can't be more than a hundred yards,* she started walking again, now briskly, until she reached number fifteen, Pendragon Park.

A sigh of relief escaped her when the house came into view. It was an unconverted Victorian, and chances were that the bedroom Hermann was assigned faced the front.

Hermann... can you hear me? Look out of the window so I know where you are!

She stood in front of the house. There was some light emitting from the ground floor, but upstairs was all dark. *Please, Hermann!*

After what seemed a very long wait, Hermione finally saw some movement behind the dark window upstairs. Her heart leapt when she recognised Hermann waving at her, smiling. He had difficulty with the window, but eventually managed to yank it open.

"I have a sheet fixed to the shelf and can climb down some," he whispered.

Hermione nodded and held her arms up in readiness to catch him, watching his descend on the bed sheet until he reached the end only a foot above her. She caught him deftly, put him on the ground, and whispered, "Quickly, let's get to where the magic works." Taking his hand, she hurried back towards the main road and only slowed down when the low hum announced the presence of magic.

"Thank you, Hermione," Hermann said. "I knew you'd come for me." The events of the day seemed to be catching up with him; he sounded weary.

"I'm so sorry you had to go through such an ordeal, Hermann." She smiled at him. "It'll all be all right. Gretl and the other children are on the isle with the Lady, and hopefully, we'll hear from Severus soon. He's gone to try and get Narcissa and Lucius out of jail."

His face lit. "I'll be happy to see Gretl again. And *know* Severus won't stop until he's found a way out for them."

His hand still clutching Hermione's, they walked at a slower pace now up the hill, with the fog intensifying as they neared the Tor. "There were Muggles around the lake shore earlier, so we'll have to be as quiet as possible," Hermione said.

Hermann grinned at her. "How about casting a *Muffliato*? The magic is working here, you know."

"Oh, silly me," Hermione said sheepishly. "It's been a long day..." She quickly cast the spell, noticing the magic was almost forcefully strong near the Tor.

The Muggles seemed to have left the area, for the only sound that rang through the air was the hum of magic and the occasional rustle from a gentle breeze.

Hermione breathed in relief when the lake became visible to her. Almost immediately her hairs stood. Someone was nearby, and though she did not sense danger or malice, it was prudent to investigate. She silently cast a Revealing Charm and startled.

"Who is there?" Draco Malfoy asked.

Hermione cancelled the Disillusion spell.

"Grang...Hermione," Draco Malfoy said and smiled when his eyes fell on her companion. "Hermann! I'm so glad you're all right!"

Hermann flew into his outspread arms and hugged his stepbrother tightly. "I was worried where you'd gone!"

Draco laughed. "Oh, I sensed danger, and Mother had told me weeks ago to disappear if the magic stops working. I think I only just made it through the Floo." Then he turned to Hermione. "Severus told me to come here and wait until we hear from him or Potter."

"You went to Harry's? Did you see Severus, then?" Hermione couldn't help asking.

Draco smirked. "Severus turned up around lunchtime, informing us what happened at the manor after I'd left. Potter and I tracked down Patil at the *Daily Prophet* and filled her in. She promised to put it on the front page in tomorrow's paper. Then we went to see Skeeter, who apparently has some renegade Squib friends who are assimilated in the Muggle world and are looking for ways to stop the government from running such a police state. Must be really bad... Oh, and Ginny went to see old Lovegood, who also promised to run a prominent feature on Muggles trying to steal our magic. And then I came here in the hope that someone would have pity on me and take me over to the isle. Severus said his entire brood is staying in Avalon." He looked awkward now.

If exhaustion hadn't washed over her at that moment, Hermione would have teased Draco. *So he does like Louisa... She'll be pleased.* Instead, she merely offered a weak grin. "Let me find the boat."

It took mere seconds to locate the boat once she'd cancelled the protective spell from earlier. Half-way through the lake, it took all her power to lift the fog enough to reach the beach of the isle, and when the boat finally hit sand, she stepped onto firm ground and sank down, grateful this horrid day was finally ending.

Minerva came rushing out of the small house, Gretl holding on to her, struggling to keep up. "Hermann!" she squealed and let go of Minerva's hand to run the few steps.

The Lady watched with a smile as the children embraced each other before she turned to greet Hermione and Draco and ushered them all inside. "It's cold out here; let's warm up and have some tea."

Louisa's eyes widened when she saw Draco. "I was so hoping you'd be all right, Draco," she said softly and blushed at his smirk.

"I am fine. Even more so now," Draco said and sat down next to the chair she'd occupied a moment ago. His eyes followed her.

Louisa busied herself making tea for all while Hermione told Minerva about the smooth rescue mission. "I need to look into ley lines. It looks like their measures don't work on them," she finished.

Minerva nodded slowly. "I've been wondering about that. The Malfoys' home is not near any of them, and it seemed to be easy for the Muggles to stop the magic flowing around there." Then she gazed at Hermione. "You need some sleep. It's been a long and eventful day, and you'll do no good if you're exhausted."

Hermione knew Minerva was right. She also knew arguing with the Lady of the Lake was futile. Allowing a sigh to escape, she nodded. "Four hours. Then I'll figure out how to help Severus."

"Go, sleep, child. I'll see what I can find on ley lines in the meantime," Minerva said and pointed to the door leading off the kitchen. "Use the guestroom...no need to go back to the Maidens' House, dear."

Sorry about the delay, but RL has kind of taken over lately. Back now, with one more chapter to go (and it's written). Would love to know what you think of the tale!