

The Wrong One

by Anastasia

An attempt to spy on the spy goes seriously wrong.

Broken Toys

Chapter 1 of 2

An attempt to spy on the spy goes seriously wrong.

A/N: A two-part short and a slight departure from my usual. The second part is currently with my beta. Thanks to Ariadne for beta-reading and for finding Julia Child's stove. Another special thanks to Stephen King for writing the Dark Tower series and for always being willing to hurl a brick at the head of whatever character you may be remotely feeling close to.

Heart stopping short, Hermione crouched as snapping, rustling sounds came from above. Peering up through the lace canopy, she froze, wand trembling.

Snatching something sharp from her hair as fast as it landed, she slowly drew another shuddering breath. Her heart, however, refused to behave and went on beating wildly, hot under wool layers.

Birds on brittle winter branches, her logical mind irritably supplied.

Frowning, she reached her hand out to some low brush, settling it downward. Her inner clock recalculated repeatedly, telling her the same truth: that she had missed him again. Tucking her chin under scarf, she closed her eyes. *Miserable excuse for a spy, you are.*

Sharply whispered shouts cut through her thoughts, and she nearly gasped aloud, halting only by clapping her hands over her mouth.

More branches snapped above.

An impossibly large owl was directly above her, its brightly ringed eyes ablaze in the dark. She met its gaze with panicked eyes as a furious argument in hushed tones raged just outside her view.

The owl tilted its head, slowly spread its wings, and parted its beak in horrifying preparation.

Hot breath was in her ear, demanding simply: "Drop it."

Before she could comply, someone to her right roughly took her wand.

"A poor lost student out for a stroll in the moonlight, hm? Poor, poor thing..." Bella mocked, her laughter dissolving rapidly into manic cackles. Other voices behind joined in mindlessly as Bella held Hermione close, rocking her and stroking her hair.

The deepest shadow moved, then slowly took shape. Twigs cracked under his boots as Severus Snape stepped into view, and Bella clutched Hermione tighter, fingernails twisting in her coat.

"Mine!" Bella hissed under her breath.

Hermione struggled to remain standing and looked into Severus' eyes, pleading - and saw nothing at all.

Only the slightest lift of an eyebrow revealed any concern.

Severus approached and raised his hand, and Bella drew away with a hateful curse.

"You've been following me," he stated, lowering his hand.

Hermione remained silent.

Leaning closer, his eyes glittering darkly, "You are a dismal excuse for a spy, Miss Granger. Deception is born from the heart, not books."

She parted her lips, only producing rapid puffs of breath in the cold.

"Bring her along," Severus said flatly. He turned his back on her and Apparated.

Hermione's arm was violently jerked sideways. Spinning, the moon shot off to the side, then crashed down. Trees blurred, then disappeared, replaced with rough hair against her cheek, fingernails puncturing through her sleeves, dragging, drawing blood, spiraling, screaming filling her ears, and something told her it was her own.

Slamming to the ground, Hermione had little time to catch her breath before the same moon stared placidly down at her; then Bella's face blotted it out.

"Poor thing," Bella said with pity, tutting as she leaned over Hermione. "Dizzy?"

Hermione shook her head. Her hair was rapidly becoming soaked, and the back of her coat was nearly saturated. Patches of melting snow surrounded her, speckled with clumps of tall weeds.

Across a desolate field stood a massive house with a single candlelit window. In its day, it had held its own amongst the most prestigious of mansions. Now, it barely stood, its wooden clapboards twisting as if in resistance against an invisible ocean. Part of the roof had collapsed, taking a chimney-stack along with it, falling inward across the peak and through to the bottom floor. The front walls bowed outward, and wide gaps showed around the remaining windows, all devoid of glass.

Ravens flew into the upper floors as casually as into their home trees, screaming rights of possession from weathered tabletops.

Hermione struggled to her feet and saw Snape striding away through the weeds, his robes dragging, snagging, and snatching free as he moved.

Suddenly Hermione's throat shut.

"Don't you mind him any, dearie," Bella hissed as she raised Hermione's scarf into view, methodically twisting it around her fist, her grin widening with each turn. "It's me you need to worry about."

With a sickeningly cheery smile, Bella announced loudly, "Step lively, now! Off we go!"

Taking off at a near run, Bella dragged Hermione across the field, laughing wildly as she wove her way through dead trees, past Death Eaters who simply trudged in the moonlight, irritably pulling their robes free as they walked.

Hermione clutched at her throat, trying frantically to wedge her fingers under her scarf to gain room to breathe, only to be jerked harder each time, which forced her to throw her hands out and stumble. With every jerk on her scarf, it slipped tighter, while Bella shouted between gales of laughter, "Mustn't be late! Move along! Move along!"

As they passed Snape, he sneered and drew his wand.

Hermione pin-wheeled her arms awkwardly but was unable to catch her self as her disappearing scarf left her falling flat on her face in the wet grass.

Looking to her side as she rose to her hands, she saw black robes pass by without stopping and heard his voice clearly over Bella's disappointed whine, "Get up."

Halfway to her feet, Hermione was shoved from behind, soft laughter rippling through the crowd as she struggled to remain standing. An arm was thrown around her shoulders, painfully tight, making walking near impossible.

"Oh, dear, did you dirty your proper clothes? Don't fret none, now," Bella said as she roughly brushed clumps of grass from Hermione's coat, her eyes flicking toward Snape's back as he strode toward a door that was hanging by one failing hinge and started up the stairs. "We're a less formal lot, you see. A little mud here or there does us no harm."

Hermione watched Snape reach up, throw open the door, and take a large step over a gaping space where three steps were completely missing.

Bella dragged Hermione up the stairs by her sleeve, catching the door as it began to swing shut and shoving it to slam into the side of the house. Hermione caught sight of the gap, but had no time to negotiate it properly, leaving her to lurch awkwardly into the threshold and slide along the wall - and nearly into Lucius Malfoy.

"Even *you* can see this is the wrong one, Snape," Lucius said, reaching out to prevent full contact with Hermione. His lip curled as wet grass came off her shoulder onto his fingers.

Severus halted in the dim hallway and turned, his eyes taking in Hermione's ruined state. "It was a mistake."

Lucius sniffed, shaking dirt and grass from his hand, his irritated expression deepening as Bella passed by clutching Hermione's hand and pulling her along down the hallway, swinging her arm like a giddy schoolgirl. "Clearly." He sniffed again.

Bella's voice echoed through the hallway and up into the clear night sky as they wound along a narrow path through the wreckage of the collapsed roof. Twisting Hermione's wrist behind her back, Bella shoved her roughly forward, wrenching her arm higher if she dared slow.

Turning a corner, Bella giggled as she took a skipping step and snatched a candelabra, dragging it down from the wall of debris.

Hermione barely had time to duck as the heavy metal swooped over her head and flew upwards. Candles appeared in its holders, and flames burst from each, one by one.

Shadows climbed every corner, coating cold, ragged drapery. Worse were the endless pairs of eyes staring down from the brittle edges of upper floors, disappearing whenever light passed over them.

Ahead, Hermione saw Snape's robes sweep around another corner where the house once again retained its proper shape. Portraits, not of regal long-departed occupants, nor of sleepy wizards, but of horrific scenes of murder and executions occupied the walls; most of them twisted to hang upside down. A floor rug, burnt at its edges, seemed to mark the final path they were all following.

Entering the clear hall, Bella swung Hermione around, her free arm flung out like a ballroom dancer, then violently pulled her in to clutch her around the shoulders. "Listen closely!" she whispered through a gritted smile, gripping Hermione's throat tightly, forcing her head to the side. "It's the Dark Lord's voice. He is here, and you shall be our very special guest!"

Hermione could only gasp, clawing at Bella's fingers as her grip twisted. She was slammed backwards into the wall, sending a painting of a horse rearing up near backwards, its rider clutching at a sword thrust clear through him, to the floor in a cloud of dust.

A black rush of wool swept over her and the hand was suddenly gone. Bella's voice filled the hallway, raging, "She's mine! I caught her, Snape! I did!" Hermione dared open her eyes to see Snape draw his wand swiftly and touch it to Bella's forehead, his glare deadly.

Hermione backed up against the paneling, her hand pressed over her heart.

Severus growled, "Turn away, Bella, or I shall make your endless threats of dramatic suicide a reality."

Bella remained still, turning her wand in her hand, her eyes darting from Hermione to Snape and back. Finally, she sniffed. "Fine. You can explain *your* mistake."

Severus kept his wand level, his arm outstretched in front of Hermione, until Bella backed away and finally turned to stalk away. Bella's enchanted candelabra suddenly slammed itself violently into the floor, plunging them into near pitch darkness.

For a moment, neither said anything, the only sound the hollow calls of birds echoing through the deserted halls.

"I- I-" Hermione stuttered as he lowered his wand.

Severus drew his hand into a shaking fist and closed his eyes. Slowly, he raised his fist, opened his hand, and pressed his palm on the wall.

"You know what I am bound to do," he said in a dangerous voice.

Hermione glanced down the hallway where the warm, soft candlelight disguised the horror contained within. "Yes."

"Miss Granger, this is far more serious a situation than my discovering you roaming the halls after hours. You are, to put it plainly, the walking dead. I need only look the other way mere minutes so Bella can snap your neck like a dry twig," Severus warned, looking toward the open door. "She breaks her toys."

"I had to-" Hermione gasped, then halted in shocked silence as Nagini appeared along the far wall, lifted her head to stare directly at them, then slipped down through a broken floorboard. Candlelight flared into flickering flames down the hall, revealing long waves of wet dirt tracked across the floorboards, riddled with tracks of both human and animal footprints and one long groove indicating Nagini's endless path.

Sickening laughter erupted from the room, faded, and then Bella's pleading voice echoed in the hall.

Silence fell, then the sounds of shattering glass followed an inhuman scream.

"Snape!"

Lucius had appeared at the door; peering over his shoulder, the wire-haired shape of Bella, her expression born of manic possession.

Severus' eyes immediately hardened. Snarling, he twisted his fist in Hermione's coat, pulled her away from the wall, and pushed her toward the door.

"Do as I say and you may live," he hissed at her back.

Hermione walked slowly, acutely aware of Snape's presence behind her. Closer to the room, the portraits were moving furiously and, out of the corner of her eye, she saw a mob rush up to a man, lift him up onto horseback, shove a rope around his neck, and cheer madly as someone sent the horse off.

Hermione dragged her eyes away but heard the low snap and fading hoof beats.

In the doorway, Lucius Malfoy stood, steadfastly ignoring the rising screams of what was Hermione realized was a hapless house-elf as well as Bella's grip on his arm. With each pleading, gasping, round of horror, Bella's eyes grew brighter with a terrifying fire while Lucius' expression remained flat, the firelight laying a coat of flickering orange over his hair.

Bella turned toward the screams as if they were a symphony for a moment, smiling serenely before returning her attention to Severus and Hermione.

"Consulting on your story, Snape?" Lucius drawled.

Severus' response was to grip Hermione by the shoulders and guide her through the doorway. As Hermione passed, Bella reached out and drew her fingers through Hermione's hair, whispering something incoherent before dissolving into childish giggles.

Entering the room proved a shocking departure from the rest of the house. Where wreckage reigned elsewhere, this room was an oasis of order. Ornate furniture polished to a soft glow filled the room; dozens of mismatched chairs lining the walls. On the floor, a massive red oriental rug stretching the length of the room softened their steps. Before a monstrous brick fireplace occupying most of the side wall, a house-elf lay bound to a thin pole, its ears singed badly. Slowly, it rocked, trying in vain to free itself, its eyes flicking up hopefully as Severus and Hermione approached. The roiling heat from the fire was near unbearable, then cold wrapped around them once more.

Soft murmurs faded, and even Bella fell silent. The soft rustle of Severus' robes as he walked behind Hermione was the only remaining sound.

At the far end of the room, a pale figure sat, his hands draped casually over plush armrests.

Hermione felt Snape's hand settle on her shoulder, and she braced for yet another shove, but instead she felt warmth spreading - and the slightest hint of a steadying grip.

Voldemort leaned back in his chair, and the wood cracked loudly. From the hearth, the house-elf let out a mournful cry, then dissolved into sobs as Wormtail nudged it closer to the fire with his foot.

"What is this, Snape?"

Severus' hand flexed a fraction on her shoulder as he left Hermione's side and approached Voldemort.

"A mistake, my Lord," Bella taunted softly, the sound of her heels muted as she strode onto the rug. "The chit followed him."

Voldemort narrowed his eyes. "Severus? What brilliant plan is behind this?" When Bella was about to speak, Voldemort raised a hand.

"She is of no importance, my Lord," Severus explained. "Nothing but a student who followed me off school grounds."

"He lies! It's the Granger girl! The one Potter is always with!" Bella shouted, pointing at Hermione as she rushed over to her.

Severus drew his hand into a fist, the bones grinding together.

"My Lord, Potter has many friends. My position within the Order will be jeopardized if I don't return her," Severus said, trying to ignore the fact that Bella was twisting Hermione's arm and pushing her closer to where Voldemort was rising from his chair.

Hermione's head was violently jerked back as Bella raked her nails into her hair, twisted, and began to whisper into her ear.

Voldemort stood, briefly looking to where Bella had Hermione in her grip, then said quietly, "What will you have me do, Snape? Return a prisoner out of good will? A further question begs though. What, exactly, does your request reveal about your true loyalty?"

Bella cackled softly.

"My loyalty has never faltered, my Lord," Severus insisted. "It is the Order whose trust will be destroyed should I not protect the students."

Voldemort seemed to contemplate Snape's words, slowly walking across the room and ignoring the riveted gaze of all within the room. As he neared the hearth, the crowd of Death Eaters there drew away. Swiftly, Voldemort gripped the pole and lifted it high in the air, a slow smile spreading on his face as the elf cried out.

"Bella?" Voldemort asked casually, ignoring the elf's struggle.

Bella's hand paused in mid-stroke in Hermione's hair. "My Lord?"

Turning the pole thoughtfully, Voldemort asked, "Elf or witch?"

Loveless Fascination

Chapter 2 of 2

An attempt to spy on the spy goes seriously wrong.

Thanks to Ari for beta-reading and following Bella into the dark. And yes, it is the end.

Bella raked a jagged fingernail down Hermione's face, her eyes flicking to the whimpering elf Voldemort held aloft. On the nearby mantle, a seemingly peaceful painting of a sprawling country landscape rested against peeling wallpaper. Two men sat leisurely on a stone wall while the forest behind them burned furiously, the flames rising in time with the fireplace below.

A log let out a shrill whine and crack, spitting sparks tumbling out onto the hearth.

Bella's finger trailed to a distracted halt under Hermione's chin, then her grip around Hermione's throat seized with terrifying force. "Witch! I keep her! I caught her!" she shouted to the room, her eyes wildly searching for anyone seeking to dare offer a challenge, only to be met by Lucius' bored expression.

"Pity," Voldemort tutted, twisted his wrist, and lowered the screaming elf closer to the fire. His eyes turned sharply toward the mantle painting where the two men instantly stood and fled into the burning woods.

Severus caught Hermione's panicked eyes and saw something there. *Survival.*

Hermione watched Voldemort as he stared into the flames, thoughtfully turning the elf, which conjured an image of roasting marshmallows at camp, an image that nearly sent her into deranged giggles.

Without looking from the flames, Voldemort asked Bella above the elf's rasping pleas. "Quite sure?"

Bella giggled nervously and clutched Hermione close. "Quite, my Lord."

All eyes watched the red rug slowly form a bulge, then a writhing tunnel. Voldemort observed the rug with a bored expression and then dropped the pole to clatter on the hearth.

Voldemort said placidly, "Now, Snape, back to the subject at hand. You will have me believe this witch is of no significance?"

"None, my Lord." Severus stated, ignoring how the elf hyperventilated, its terror torn between burning alive and the seemingly innocent tented carpet edge where two shining eyes appeared.

"None whatsoever," Voldemort echoed thoughtfully, his voice darkening as he clasped his hands behind his back.

Severus remained silent, the bones in his hand grinding once more, this time along with sickening dry crack as Nagini burst from beneath the rug, snatched the elf head-first and violently twisted.

"If I may, my Lord," Lucius interjected, carefully circling around the writhing snake-shaped rug in the middle of the room.

Bella watched the exchange with distracted suspicion, her grip around Hermione tightening with each feverish breath. She distanced herself from the others, and Hermione felt a wave of renewed dread as she caught sight of the darkened hallway.

Voldemort made an impatient gesture.

Indicating Hermione, Lucius stated, "They will hunt for her, my Lord. Come right to our doorstep."

"Perhaps," Severus countered. "But, would you have the Order and their allies descend on..." Severus paused, raising his arms to indicate the dilapidated mansion. "This?"

Voldemort narrowed his eyes.

As Bella froze, her grip loosening a fraction, Hermione tore a hand free and snatched hold of the door's frame, her fingernails catching in dry wood. Bella snarled and clamped her hand over Hermione's, prying her fingers back one by one, her eyes still riveted on Voldemort, who stood contemplating Snape's words.

Severus' eyes slid to Hermione. A fraction, nothing more.

"As Snape has claimed the witch is of no significance, my decision stands. Bella may have her," Voldemort stated, waving his hand dismissively.

Twisting Hermione's wrist free of the door, Bella let out a triumphant cry and nearly snapped Hermione's neck as she dragged her through the pitch black hallway, laughing

wildly whenever Hermione stumbled over twisted floorboards, then swung her to crash into a wall, sending a shredded painting sliding to the edge of its nail to catch and sway, the canvas billowing out like a ship's sails in the cold air.

"Ready to die?" Bella asked with mock sympathy, her eyes flicked sharply to the darkened hall, searching.

A sweeping sound and a rustle.

The leaves, nothing more.

Bella contemplated an echo for what seemed an eternity, losing focus, then frowned and viciously tore the painting from the wall, following as Hermione backed away.

"Who is, really?" Bella contemplated this, then snatched hold of Hermione's shoulders, shaking her. "We're all just two words from death, don't you see?" Bella trailed off, her eyes lost as she stared into space, then said with near wonder, "You've got to mean it. Not everyone can, you know."

Bella released Hermione so suddenly she stumbled awkwardly backward and slipped in an indoor snowdrift. A startled scream cut short as Hermione reached a staircase in the dark, her hands flailed for a railing, anything, and found a tree branch instead. Bark broke apart in shards, slicing skin as she frantically tried to slow her fall, coming to rest in the crook of a bough.

Bella peered down at her with detached amusement, her grin widening as Hermione tried to right herself and instead fell sideways to crash into the wall.

A crow called from impossibly close, and, looking up, Hermione saw that the monstrous tree had grown though the walls into the stairwell, sending dozens of limbs soaring overhead in every direction, scratching patterns on the ceiling. Hundreds of shining eyes watched from above in loveless fascination.

Bella drew her wand in a dreamlike afterthought. "Any last words?"

"I pity you," Hermione stated coldly as she backed down through spiderweb-thin branches, the blood from her fingers mingling with bark dry as dust.

Bella's eyes widened as the triumphant grin fled from her lips.

"Pity me?!" Bella shrieked, startling panicked crows to crash through the upper floors. Forgetting magic, Bella violently beat her fist against the tree, shaking snow loose and shattering twigs against the walls as she descended upon Hermione like a starved animal fixated on a difficult kill.

"How dare you?!" Bella screamed, tearing fistfuls of branches free, crawling down the tree, growing more enraged as Hermione slipped down out of sight. Remembering her wand, Bella's screams spiraled upwards into gales of laughter, punctuated by gasps for air as she carefully aimed.

Shards rained down into Hermione's hair as she blindly descended, her hands rasped raw, catching then slipping, another slice. A groan and crack and the shadows twisted as she fell again, rammed into the wall, felt an open edge, and shoved herself through just as Bella's wand stabbed through thick brush and she screeched, "*Avada Kadavra!*" Green light filled Hermione's world as wooden knives tore at her arms, hands, fingers, and then she fell into the black.

Hermione's breath tore out of her as she slammed onto a table-top, her coat torn to shreds and her arms soaked *Bloody*, her mind calmly informed her.

A wail of utter fury erupted from above as Bella searched for her suddenly missing prey.

Heaving for air, Hermione rolled off the table, half falling in the process when a hand clamped firmly over her mouth and dragged her backwards into the cold, wet dark.

Screaming was impossible, and an arm pressed against her throat. Her mind reeled for alternatives as her burning fingertips slipped over cool wool.

"Biting, I assure you, would be counter-productive," a deep voice breathed in her ear.

Hermione nodded as Severus' grip eased. He leaned forward and instructed silence with a look. She watched as he edged himself closer to the hole in the high corner of the wall and drew his wand. Dim light filtered through as Bella's plaintive calls for Hermione to come out, come out from her hiding hole echoed in the cold air. Wooden fragments trickled through as Bella negotiated the tangle outside, her hissing curses competing with mockingly soothing calls.

While watching Severus' dark shape move into the shadows, Hermione's eyes tracked upwards, and she barely stifled a gasp. Bella had lowered herself and was a head's turn from discovering the hole.

In one sudden movement, Severus climbed a chair, stood on the table, raised his wand, and cast barely above a whisper, "*Petrificus Totalus!*" then cursed loudly as Bella instantly swung her wand wildly.

"She's mine!" Bella raged, clutched the hole's edge, and blindly cast spell after spell, sending frantic streaks of light spiraling in shutter speed. Flashes of red and green exploded simultaneously, some rebounding off of the walls at impossible angles and others blasting flaming holes through towering stacks of books. Starlight shone in from two floors above and ashes fluttered like snow in near daylight, and Hermione could see an armchair engulfed in greenish flames, its shape disintegrating to a skeleton before her eyes.

Hermione's hair was rapidly becoming wet, and she looked up just as a loud groaning sound erupted, rose to thin pitch, then cracked, and her world cut short to damp black.

Severus Snape stood tall on the massive table, icy smoke flowing around his legs and burning mahogany filling his lungs. He reached out to Bella in a soothing gesture of peace.

Bella paused, half-wrenched through the hole, teeth bared, her wand poised to strike.

"Now, Bella," Severus said in a soothing tone, slowly raising his hand toward her.

Bella then began to laugh, softly at first, then in fits and starts as another massive icicle impaled the floorboards near where Hermione lay, her wand arm still drawing back even as she reached with the other hand toward his.

"She was mine." Bella whispered as if telling him a deep secret.

"I know," Severus said softly, his hand closing over hers. "I know."

Bella's twisted her hand, another spell on her lips, then halted as Severus looked into her eyes and spoke to her in a quiet rush.

She froze as he spoke, eyes slipping closed, wand forgotten.

"The chair's on fire," Bella mumbled absently when she climbed down to stand next to him.

Severus nodded, raised Bella's hand, and lowered his head to lay a kiss.

"So it is."