

The Mage

by windwings

Take a headstrong know-it-all and a surly Potions master. Mix thoroughly. Add an accidental discovery, a gift, which is either a blessing or a curse, and top with a unique common trait. Watch out for your cauldron, the combination is explosive!

Discovered

Chapter 1 of 13

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A/N Not mine, alas.

This story is A/U as of OotP, but I tried to keep it as close to canon as my plot bunnies allowed. It is about twenty chapters long. I would like to thank my beta, **potionsmistress23**, a million times for her awesome work.

Hermione Jean Granger, Hogwarts sixth-year Prefect, resident know-it-all, and bookworm extraordinaire, couldn't pinpoint the exact moment of her life when she noticed she had a strange, the way she called it, 'affinity' for books. She guessed there had been a long time of taking this ability for granted; probably, it went as far back as her early childhood. Her father, apart from being a rather successful dentist, was quite a brilliant bibliophile. Not like they could really spare some space, but one of the rooms in their neat, semi-detached house, which, together with several hundreds of its total look-alike brethren, constituted one of London's more respectable suburbs, was home to an impressive library of Muggle classics, some of them rare first editions and signed copies.

One of her earlier memories featured her good-natured daddy bouncing her, a curly-locked, snub-nosed, and chubby-handed toddler of three, on his knee with a fascinating tome of illustrated Hans Christian Andersen tales. The bookworm in three-year-old Hermione Granger hadn't yet grown to crave books for what they were for - reading and knowledge - but insisted on trying them out for a taste. Her father would pry away her grabby little paws and say, "Be good to books, poppet, and they will be good to you."

Her father's often repeated phrase went like a red line through her life, and books very soon evolved from mere stacks of paper, some with prettier covers and tastier spines, to friends, to guides, to sources, to whole new fascinating worlds, and, finally, to almost living beings who taught her, made her feel, beckoned to her.

At the happy age of eleven, Hermione's love of books, which everyone thought she had simply inherited from her father, took a whole new turn. She discovered the world-famous Hogwarts library. The first time Madam Pince showed the 'ickie firsties', Hermione among them, the numerous, ceiling-high stacks of books upon books with books and more books, and explained their reference system, the little Gryffindor felt like a child who had a sweet tooth in Honeydukes with an all-you-can-eat-and-carry-out token in their palm. The feeling only intensified with the years.

In Hermione's personal, cosy book world, each dog-eared paperback, worn textbook or dainty folio had its character: its unique traits, a voice, even a gender and relationships. For instance, *Hogwarts, a History* was an old, prudish matron, who creaked out both relevant and not so relevant facts for each and any occasion. Unprejudiced old hag that she was, she frowned upon *Nature's Nobility*, a *Wizarding Genealogy*, a bitter, haughty old fart with dry, wizened parchment, who courted her.

However, she was rather fond of *Finding the Founders*, an ancient tome with a black sense of humour and cackling evil laugh, who thought she courted him, but liked her underneath it all. *Waxing Poetically on Potions* was the Lavender Brown in the world of Potions books while *Blunders of a Blender* reminded her, painfully, of shy and sweet Neville and, sometimes, of Ron, at his best. It was a bumbling, yet courageous, smart, and good-hearted solid tome; simple but funny. Hermione wouldn't mind a date with a bloke like that. If the book were a bloke, that is. Or if she were a book.

Oh, how mercilessly she would be teased if she let any of her few friends in on such thoughts. The teasing situation was bad enough as it was, especially after Pansy Parkinson had noticed the way Hermione was caressing the cracked leather spine of *Hallowed Hieroglyphs*, by Hieronymus Hornhead (So what? The old girl did like to be scratched just so, and Hermione did indulge her from time to time.). If Hermione were just another one of the poor quiet sods who, by some unfathomable whim of fate, happened to be born magical but lacked any other distinguishing traits, she'd be let alone; but she was one of the famous, or infamous, whichever one preferred, Golden Trio. Thus, there had appeared moving pictures drawn by a nameless but immensely talented Slytherin artist, which featured the fifth-year Prefect with books in various situations, mostly bordering on inventive pornography. They had been the source of entertainment for both the student body and, Hermione was pretty sure, the staff, for months following the ill-fated encounter in the library, and they accounted for a hefty loss of house points. Ironically, the Gryffindors were to lose the biggest amount over the whole debacle since the Slytherins were too sly to get caught checking the newest issues underneath their desks in class, the Ravenclaws too studious to be interested for long, and the Hufflepuffs too decent.

No, Hermione would never share the extent of her gift with her friends. She did try to research it, the way her *modus operandi* suggested, but came up empty-handed. Eventually, and very uncharacteristically of her, she decided that it would be bad form to look the gift horse in the mouth and let it be, no matter how much her tenacious nature revolted. Besides, were she to talk about it, people would want some explaining done. And that she was very reluctant to do. Really, it was quite a gift, and she couldn't even say when, or how, it had started. How did it come to her to be able to know exactly what to look for? Where to find it? How to read it? Which books to use for reference and which not? Which of them were reliable, and which were mere humbuggery? (Those constituted quite a fair share of Hogwarts library, Hermione came to realize.) Some of her talent she attributed to the mysteries of human memory. Some - to an acquired sixth sense, which, Hermione firmly believed, had nothing to do with being magical and everything to do with being, simply, the logic of one's subconscious.

But, still, it was a small miracle, in and of itself, that other students could spend days in the library in search of information, but her feet seemed to quite simply carry her to the right rack. Her hands reached just for the right tome, which would immediately open to the right page. Sometimes it was just ridiculously easy, and, at other times, she'd feel almost scared by the way the books seemed so alive and sentient. She could almost swear that, sometimes, the books talked to her; she often experienced a *déjà vu* like sense of having a vague memory about learning something, or reading a book in a dream, yet knowing that it couldn't have happened. And there were things she'd know and couldn't tell how she had learnt them, but, she was sure, if she went to the library, she'd go straight to the source of those pieces of knowledge and have them proven.

Academically, it was an unfathomable help. The good little Gryffindor in her even felt ashamed at times, especially when she was laved and smothered with praise. Hermione was a rather talented witch alright, but she believed she didn't deserve the way she was referred to as the smartest witch of her age, the most brilliant student Hogwarts had seen in a decade, and so forth. A sensible, logical part of her couldn't help but wonder if the entire book situation was in any way abnormal and Draco Malfoy wasn't very far off the mark about her inclination when he said, behind her back, that she preferred a tightly rolled papyrus to an actual male, even though the uptight part of her prised at the notion.

'Oh, bugger it all,' the impatient, bossy part of her would say, stomping its foot firmly on her nagging self-reflection when it promised to get the better of her. After all, she was Hermione Granger, and Hermione Granger was, quite simply, good to books. And, well, the books were good to her in return. Perhaps that was what it all boiled down to.

Being discovered came as a shock to her. But even more shocking was the reaction of her peers.

It was the ambitious, please-notice-me-I'm-clever part of her which rattled her out in quite a literal sense of the word.

The onset of her sixth year saw Hermione being the first student to sign up for a cross-discipline, extracurricular study group for NEWT students, led jointly by professors McGonagall, Flitwick, and Snape. The course covered some more advanced practises of Transfiguration, Potion-making, Defence, and Charms, interspersed with a healthy dose of Arithmantic calculations and Runic Encrypting. Meeting the standards for this prestigious and 'extremely educational adventure', as the leaflet described it, which often was a must for a number of more refined wizarding careers, required a degree of academic excellence both Ron and Harry were only to hope for. Thus, Hermione found herself surrounded by quite a few sixth- and seventh-year Slytherins (still discreetly slipping fresh issues of *Bibliophile, Literally Taken*, as the on-going graphic novel about her love-life in the library came to be named, between her piles of reference material), a large number of older Ravenclaws, and a select few Muggle-born over-achievers like herself from Hufflepuff and Gryffindor. And, naturally, she was quite friendless.

A month, several course sessions, and thirty-two lost house points (docked off her mostly for emitting a tremendous 'ugh' of disappointment when she couldn't stop herself) later, she realised that the reality of the course and her expectations were as different as mist and mast. What she hoped to be an ample ground for thriving experiment, discussion, bold theorising, and brainstorming turned out to be a scholastic and matter-of-fact recitation of what she had already pried from her leather-bound mentors, for the most part. When it came to practice or innovation, most of what the course covered in theory was proclaimed as 'too dangerous to try even for those of you with half a brain', 'too advanced to study outside of a wizarding apprenticeship', or 'too difficult to manage with your young magic being so unstable and, thus, volatile', depending on the professor of choice. And 'No, you cannot; trying it out on your own will result in house point loss, which will go down into Hogwarts Annals, whether you stay alive or not' was a common response.

Hermione felt like a proverbial donkey with the sweetest, orangest carrot dangling in front of her, so close and yet so out of reach.

And thus, on a rather dull, late Saturday morning in October, she found herself surrounded by her peers in one of the larger classrooms on the fifth floor of Ravenclaw Tower, frustrated over the deadly conventionality with which Professor McGonagall lectured about the otherwise fascinating subject of spiritual Transfiguration of inanimate objects.

"It is generally accepted by most magical scholars that almost all inanimate objects have some kind of a spiritual and informational residue similar to what would be called a soul in a living being," Professor McGonagall droned in a distinct Scottish brogue.

"Thus, separating that cognisant aura with the help of specific potions, amplifying it, and Transfiguring it into the kind of informational field inherent in a living being, then transferring it onto said living being, such as an animal, can reward a successful wizard with the array of knowledge that the inanimate object under scrutiny bears. And, as we all know, there are ways to actually read into an animal's mind, despite that the information field of inanimate objects, in raw form, is absolutely indecipherable. Rats are most often used as premises for housing an inanimate ... soul, if we may refer so to this magic substance. Could anyone tell the class why rats would be the ideal recipients?"

A lone hand flew up in the air.

McGonagall sighed, though not without a proud crinkle to the corners of her stern mouth. Hermione was so predictable.

"Well, Miss Granger, let's hear it."

Chin up, with the air of assumed superiority only knowing something that others didn't gave her, Hermione answered.

"Rats would be perfect candidates for such information transfer because of their high adaptability factors and survival instincts. Such transfer destabilises the mental integrity of a rat, or any other recipient; after the transfer itself is complete, the effects are irreversible. An animal with a set of requirements to its habitat and diet and well-established behavioural patterns would have too much difficulty adjusting to an alien soul presence and die, eventually. Endemics die almost instantly. Cockroaches also do well, but most wizards find them much harder and less pleasant to...well, deal with."

McGonagall smiled briefly and almost indulgently at her star pupil. Hermione really promised to become a formidable young witch.

"Five points to Gryffindor for a precise and informative answer." The elder witch glowed with pride.

But Hermione was far from being finished. The wick of her mouth twitched, and her buckwheat honey coloured mop frizzed out even more, in a tell-tale manner. The Head of Gryffindor knew the 'there is more' look on her favourite cub's face when she saw it.

"Miss Granger, anything else of value you would like to add?" McGonagall supplied readily.

Draco Malfoy's pretty steel-grey eyes rolled in exasperation.

"Oh, yes, Professor. Just that the most distinguished case of inanimate soul transfer is the case of the Great Library of Alexandria," Hermione quipped.

Professor McGonagall positively beamed. Really, was there any student more diligent, pleasant, and rewarding to teach?

"After the great fire in the Library, in 48 BC, a vast quantity of precious magical scrolls had been lost," Hermione went on eagerly.

McGonagall's chin went up. Such an erudite, knowledgeable young witch!

"And, well, some of them were the unique and irreplaceable kind, and the wizarding world simply couldn't do without them, so Ptolemy the II hired a wizard named Aton from Antioch to restore the library, at least partly, from the memory of the stones that remained."

McGonagall's eyebrows went a notch upwards. Aton from Antioch? That was quite a bit of obscure knowledge. Wherever had the girl stumbled upon it?

"But Aton didn't use rats or cockroaches. You see, there's one more species that is absolutely perfect for inanimate soul transfer because its adaptability and versatility is much higher; that would be a human being. A human's integrity of mind doesn't change in the process; it's like adding new knowledge, like reading a book, in a way. The library was successfully restored but, well, quite a few slaves were lost in the process due to... cases of abuse in the transfer connection."

McGonagall's eyebrows positively made a run (or a crawl) for her hairline. Inanimate soul transfer onto a human recipient had appalling side effects, since it opened a wide venue for the Dark Arts' most gruesome practices. That was the knowledge so carefully guarded, and so few had even an inkling of it, the fact that it somehow had become available to a student within the school was simply hideous.

Heedless of the drastic change in her teacher's facial expression, Hermione went on, eager to impress all present with her knowledge of the theory, if theory was all she could work with.

"Since then, inanimate soul transfer onto humans was a hidden practice, mostly prohibited in civilized countries and, well, most of the spells and potions that are required to perform the transfer are considered Dark by the currently existing laws, though their formulas and recipes suggest nothing of the kind."

McGonagall coughed gracelessly, as if choking.

Hermione finished and observed the results of sharing her brilliance in the quest for knowledge with the rest of the class. And the rest of the class looked like a pack of twelve-year-old girls who were gawking either at a nude Gilderoy Lockhart or a very grown Sicilian Azure Dragon, to put it mildly. After a pregnant pause, filled with almost palpable tension and silence, Professor McGonagall cleared her throat and asked somewhat peevishly, "Pray tell, Miss Granger, where would you find a reference to... a mention of... such rituals?"

"Why, in the *Malleus Maleficarum*, well, not the Muggle but the wizarding version of it, of course," Hermione rushed, her voice wavering a little under a seeping sense of wrongness. Her mind was finally catching up with the reaction to her latest find.

A collective gasp of shock was followed by increasing chaos and noise. All Hermione could do was sit there with her mouth agape, trying to figure what wrong she had inflicted and what rule had she broken, when all she actually had done was read a book that was not even in the Restricted Section.

Justin Finch-Fletchley and another Muggle-born, a Hufflepuff seventh-year, sat with the same expressions of puzzlement, as if they were not getting an inside joke. Anthony Goldstein was whispering something fervently in Terry Boot's ear, Oletta Elfmayde, a Slytherin seventh year, covered her mouth with her hand after an overly loud intake of breath, and Draco Malfoy was looking at the bushy-haired Gryffindor intently with narrowed eyes which seemed to hold more confusion than hate. The room was filled with scared whispers and sidelong glances. Professor McGonagall's eyebrows went even higher than their moving capacity would suggest, and her mouth opened slightly in an expression of the utmost wonder. She blanched, went beetroot red, seemed to collect herself, and yelled at the top of her lungs.

"Everyone out! Class dismissed! Fifty points from Gryffindor for such a blatant, disrespectful, and obvious lie. Miss Granger, you are to come with me to the Headmaster's office immediately after lunch!"

The students of the cross-discipline, extracurricular course scampered out of the classroom, worried whispers crescendo-ing into high-pitched exchanges as soon as they passed through the door, which meant school grapevine would be abuzz within half an hour. Hermione, hurt beyond measure by such inexplicable reprimand coming from her own Head of House, hastily rushed out, tears blurring her vision.

Lunch was a sordid affair. After crying her eyes out in the Prefects' bathroom, Hermione decided that a witch could do only so much useless weeping, and braved the Gryffindor common room to seek support from Harry and Ron, only to be stared at as a dangerous oddity or an escaped lunatic by some, and scowled at for such a grave point loss by most.

Harry seemed to be as clueless as she was and went out to envelop her in a fierce hug. Ron only managed to look at her like she was suddenly revealed to be an illegitimate daughter of that troll from their first year.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake, Ronald! Don't gawk at me like I'm about to demand your firstborn child for a bloody sacrifice!" Hermione raged, and then stormed out of the common room, followed by Harry, who glared eloquently at a properly chastened and slightly relieved Ron. After all, that was the Hermione he knew, bossy and irritable.

And lunch was dragging. The Hogwarts grapevine had obviously done its deed, and she was unashamedly stared at. Sneaking a few covert glances towards the Head Table, Hermione noticed that Dumbledore was absent, and her Head of House fidgeted slightly as if she was hit with a "splinter-in-the-arse" jinx. The other teachers regarded her with caution, and Filius Flitwick, who always had a soft spot for her, looked her way with vague sadness and disappointment. Only her Potions master's expression remained as emotionless and frigid as the surface of an iceberg. But even Severus Snape deigned to give her a look-over.

And that couldn't bide well.

The student stares went on. Her attempts to focus on food and not give two shites were shattered by an uneasy feeling, as if a couple hundred holes of various depth and circumference were being drilled into her back, so Hermione gave up. She slowly lowered her fork and knife and tried to breathe evenly, imagining that her temper was a boiling tea kettle and she was mentally putting a good lid over it.

"Alright, will someone tell me what in the blazes is going on here?" she posed the question to her nearest housemates and friends, and the last few words were squeezed through gritted teeth. The lid seemed to be of a very unreliable variety.

"You re-really don't have a clue, do you?" Neville hiccupped and looked like the last vestiges of some uncertain hope for her sanity were leaving him.

"Ugh, so help me, Neville, I don't! Isn't it obvious? Will someone have mercy and just tell me what I did or said that has turned me into this... this... freak on display!" As if she hadn't already been one. Well, kind of.

"Sshh, Hermione," Ginny hissed from a seat across from the older witch. "You see, this book you said you read...the..." Ginny lowered her voice, and her face contorted as if she was about to cough up a slug, "The... *Malleus Maleficarum*...book..." Ginny looked around with a flicker of atypical fear. "It doesn't really exist, you know, and even if it did, it wouldn't exist for long because of the things that would be supposedly written there, if it was an actual book and not the stuff from the legends house-elves chastise little kids they babysit with. The things in it are supposedly so illegal and monstrous, it's, well... it would wreak havoc in the world within days if it got into inappropriate hands."

"How come I have never heard of it then?" Hermione frowned.

"Well, 'Mione... I guess we Muggle-raised blokes and gals have different stuff from legends, and no house-elves to intimidate us into obedience," Harry offered with a half-cocked attempt at a cheering smile.

That did compute, but not the rest of it.

"Oh, Hermione, what you bragged about in a serious way is a sure one-way ticket to St. Mungo's Most Warded Ward for Magnificently Mental Magical Beings," Ron supplied in a manner which was intended to mirror Harry's and which Hermione was obviously supposed to find helpful and caring. Except that she didn't.

Pointedly ignoring Lavender's rather innuendo-full remark about them not even differentiating between wizards, witches, centaurs, goblins or other magical folk in that ward for the barmy with yet another impossibly long and ridiculous wizarding name, Hermione turned her face to her best friends.

"But I did read from that book. It was not even in the Restricted Section. Mind you, I only started reading because it called... it seemed to be such a good reference, and I didn't even get far, it was just a snippet, basically, a random one. I don't think I have ever come across the book before, but you know me, I always come across new books! The library is so... it's just so flexible, and expansive, and like a living being, and..." She snapped her mouth shut, realizing she was babbling, babbling hopelessly because, from looking at those sweet and familiar faces with zero comprehension in them, she discerned that she could as well have been waxing poetic on nuclear physics and receive more understanding.

An epiphany struck as a lightning bolt through her brain. But, of course, none of them would just encounter the new books. Perhaps, none of them even knew that one book was there. It was her affinity! They wouldn't know how it was to enter a row of book shelves and feel it, the infinitesimal tug, like a caress between her shoulder blades, like a touch of some ethereal being, like her name being sung by someone, or something, with a voice akin to silver bells. If only silver bells could whisper. And then she would turn towards that call and see it: a book with its spine jutting out a bit from the neat stack of its peers and neighbours. Feel how it begged to be opened, its pages - touched with fluttering fingers, its words inhaled.

It was her blasted affinity that got her in trouble. She'd be looked upon as a despicable abomination, a head case. She'd be mocked, laughed at, ostracized. Or worse, expelled.

And she was having none of it.

"Look, I still don't get what's so criminal about it, unless it's only bad form to refer to this book. Another insipid superstition, probably. Ugh! But there wasn't anything explicitly Dark! At least in things I read. I concede, some of them were dubious and maybe even bordering on Dark, but nothing on the scale of the monstrosity you describe," she barged forth with renewed energy. "I've read far worse in the Restricted Section, for Christ's sake!"

That she was calling upon Muggle God for justice was not good. Not good at all. The lid was flying through the roof and approaching orbit fast. Hermione jolted to her feet, annoyed to the brink with the looks her housemates were giving her that ranged from wounded mooncalf, to 'you are so fucking odd', to outright condemnation.

"Oh, fine if you want proof, come with me, and let's go to the library. I'll find the godsdamned book and read it to you lot out loud!" She hissed and turned on her heels, only to be faced with a solid wall of black, the only touch of colour to it being a pair of elegant hands with slightly jutting knuckles, neatly folded across the chest of their owner.

Oh, sodding hell.

"If you are quite finished making an utter nonsensical imbecile of yourself in front of your classmates, that would be ten points, Miss Granger," the voice that came with the black wall, the chest, and the spidery hands drawled; it's velvety undertones rolled softly and belied the harshness of the reprimand.

"And an additional fifteen for spouting dangerous idiocy."

With an inhuman effort, Hermione checked the impulse to try to explain or ask exactly what was so dangerous about it. It would have definitely been a waste of words, since Professor Severus Snape's temper was notorious for suffering absolutely no lids or any other restraints. She settled for raising her eyes to meet his in sheer Gryffindor defiance.

An eyebrow quirked up in a polished and silent 'you dare?'

"And why don't we make it another five for talking back while we're at it."

His controlled delight at her powerless humiliation, almost tangible beyond the carefully constructed veil of an otherwise impassive glare, got to Hermione.

"But Sir, I didn't say a word back to you! I didn't even..."

She was quite efficiently silenced when Professor Snape took one step closer to her and his chin rose imperiously.

"But, Miss Granger," Snape purred, his voice enveloping her hearing like ripe, astringent honey, "you just did. And if you wish to up the ante and make it a detention with Filch, or five, be... my... guest."

A pause, during which a trembling and finally defeated Hermione could not do better than stand there with her mouth agape, blink, and desperately hope he didn't see the way the world swam with moisture at the edges on her damn retina. A victorious sneer. A flurry of black, so flawless in its billow, one could think he rehearsed it, if one didn't know for sure that Severus Snape didn't care for such things.

And he was gone.

Enlightened

Hermione learns an exciting piece of news about her own nature. Or is it not that exciting?

A/N: Own nothing, make no money. I'd like to thank all of my readers and those of you who let me know your thoughts! This little writer is one happy camper, thanks to you :)

And a special giant thank you goes to **topotionsmistress23**, my beta, who helps my fight with commas become a winning battle.

During her entire teaching career, never had Minerva McGonagall felt so disappointed with herself. Never had she failed a student in such a shameful, neglectful way. A feeling of magnificent guilt that only a perfectionist could develop swirled in her head like a Cornish Pixie in a right snit. She paced in the Headmaster's office, her shoulders slumped, while the Head of Slytherin stood leaning casually towards the sill of a tall lancet window.

"How should I have known, Severus? She is a bright girl and a pleasure to have in class, but she has never demonstrated anything beyond the realm of a regularly gifted student; she's a... she is of Muggle heritage, and Muggles have never been known to produce a..."

"Oh, Sweet Circe, Minerva, spare me your histrionics. Just because she wasn't making herself transparent and then gallivanting around the school premises, shooting carol-singing skylarks out of her arse in her first year, or making a family boggart fall in love with her with the help of a self-invented potion," Professor Snape gave his Gryffindor counterpart a pointed look which made her cringe slightly, "does not mean she couldn't have been discovered."

"I looked through her file, Severus. Miss Granger wasn't even manifesting like a regular witch. No levitated toys, no baby-sitters beaten up by flying kitchen clutter, no curtains burnt in anger. No such things! If not for her Hogwarts letter, her parents wouldn't have had the slightest suspicion that she's... a witch at all."

"And that made you comfortable enough to let her on her own, obviously." Snape's voice oozed disdain. "Too preoccupied with your precious Potter, as usual."

If one could say so about Professor McGonagall, one would suggest that she looked profoundly chastened.

"She was never into much trouble, Severus; always the sensible one. Always trying to keep Ha... the boys... in line," Minerva managed, conceding defeat.

"The sensible one? Surely you jest, Minerva? If anything, that chit of yours has always been opening new venues for trouble-making to Potter and his sidekick. Her intellect was used directly for elevating trouble-making to a whole new level of danger," Snape said, his words as cutting and precise as a fine duellist's wand. "Should I remind you of her second-year atrocious escapade with Polyjuice? Third year, Stupefying *me* and helping that mongrel, Black, elope with the Hippogriff? Last year, her being the only one severely wounded? Rushing into any hazard like it is a test to pass with shiny marks?" Snape sounded positively peaked, which added a distinct hiss to his voice.

"It is of no consequence as of now, Severus," Minerva bristled. "We have to decide on our course of action, considering the discovery."

"This is of *every* consequence as of now."

Snape's words punctuated the already tense air with sharp consonants.

"I don't know whether you have finally overdosed on both the literal and figurative lemon drops the meddlesome old codger keeps stuffing down everyone's throats and into everyone's minds, Minerva, but I am perfectly aware why *my* presence was required at this little soiree; trust me when I say I'm not looking forward to it in the least. In fact, I happen to *a priori* loathe it."

If the venom Professor Snape's words were loaded with could kill, Minerva's battered dead body would have been crumpling to the floor at that moment.

"The meddlesome old codger is still here, Severus, my boy," Dumbledore, who had been sitting at his desk, threading his fingers through the end of his beard, finally spoke up.

"And I know that you are very well aware of what I'm about to ask of you, once again," the old wizard continued in a weary, breathy voice. "But you're the only one who can take up the task at hand. Even you would agree that we simply cannot leave the matter as it is."

"Send her to Beauxbatons, and let them deal with her. I, personally, couldn't be happier if this was the last time I heard about the annoying chit," Snape said airily, as if he was making a suggestion about something so trivial and insubstantial, it was hardly even worth dwelling upon.

"You are also quite aware I can't do that. We will... need her. Who knows how invaluable she may prove to be..." the Headmaster countered and sighed heavily.

"The girl is a walking, talking, breathing catastrophe waiting to happen, Albus. Merlin's balls! Add to that her most dismal choice of friends and a contemptuous inability to use that despicable appendage on her shoulders when it comes to safety, and all of us are sitting on a nest full of hatching dragons here!" Snape exploded and slammed his fist on the Headmaster's heavy, cherry wood table.

A chiselled cup of tea, sitting on top of an almost see-through saucer on the table, jingled, a merry and dainty sound, which stood out clumsily in comparison with Professor Snape's violent outburst. Then, something inside the bowels of the ancient, worn piece of furniture produced a long, trembling clink, and everything went silent.

"I'm aware of the fact that she is dangerous to her peers, and it is not going to be neglected," Dumbledore went on in a tone that was resolute enough to suggest that he'd put a reign on his Potions master's temper, if need be. "Yet, I tend to be positive that she can manage her powers quite admirably, given her nature. You are to train her, Severus; that is what I must ask of you."

Snape leaned over the table and lowered his head to the eye-level of the Headmaster, who was sitting across from him, and his spidery hands pressed flat into the surface of the cherry wood.

"And if I refuse?" His voice was so dangerously low, any lesser man than Albus Dumbledore would cringe in desperation.

Dumbledore answered with nothing, yet his eyes ceased their eternal twinkling. Though his expression changed little, apart from the way the corners of his mouth tensed, and a few more lines wrinkled around his eyes, such heavy tension enveloped both wizards that even Minerva McGonagall, who usually had steel nerves, shivered and fidgeted, waiting anxiously for the silent conversation to end.

And end it did, quite abruptly, when the door to the office creaked and the embarrassed shuffle of two lithe feet broke the silence.

Dumbledore's face immediately assumed the grandfatherly expression his students usually dealt with.

"Ah, here's the subject of the heated discussion herself! Do come in, my dear. Might I treat you to a lemon drop? Or tea, maybe?" Dumbledore immediately rose and fussed about, conjuring a fresh tea service.

A trembling, bewildered Hermione Granger entered, a halo of rampant curls around her head making her look truly like a young lion: a very young, reckless, scared, and dishevelled lion cub.

When Hermione finally reached the gargoyle, guarding the entrance to Hogwarts' 'inner sanctum', she was in a right state. The pressure and anxiety mounted in her with each ascending step she took. All sorts of worst case scenarios and explanations as to what was wrong with her ran through her mind.

"Nutmeg Nougat," she grumbled to the gargoyle, as if it were her personal enemy, and passed through when the odd creature moved aside.

The entrance door appeared slightly ajar when Hermione approached it. Despite her very obvious snit, her agile mind quickly worked out that it wouldn't have been done unintentionally, so she halted her steps and listened.

"...pening new venues for trouble-making to Potter and his sidekick!"

Hermione's heart skipped a beat, and her hand went automatically to her mouth to stifle a gasp while she listened. Exactly how much trouble was she in, she wondered, if whatever was happening to her had put Professor Snape into quite a magnificent strop? Why he was even present at this little get-together was the next question that her logic supplied. Couldn't it have been settled between her Head of House and the Headmaster? Unless she was being ex... No, hell, no, she wasn't even going to *think* the word in her head. She wasn't getting kicked out of school over a godsdamned book.

Meanwhile, Snape went on with his diatribe, and, despite herself, Hermione couldn't help but feel hurt. She couldn't even tell what ruffled her more: the offensive epithets he used for her and his indifference on the subject of her fate or the fact that she actually gave a damn. It wasn't like he hadn't belittled and insulted her on every possible occasion for the last five years and then some. She should have been immune by now, right? Hermione sensed a sulk coming on in addition to an array of emotions she was already dealing with.

Hold on.

Wait a second.

Training her? Training her?? For what?!

Her mind didn't even stop to think about why she should need additional training in the first place. Instead, it clutched to the thought that, in some inconceivable way, she, Hermione Granger, would be stuck with the Bat of the Dungeons in some sort of one-on-one training. Harry's most unfortunate Legilimency lessons immediately came to mind, and something inside her wanted to howl and claw like a caged Kneazle. Oh, Harry would have a fit and Ron a full-blown temper tantrum, without a doubt. They never had fully trusted the man.

Another convoluted scheme of Dumbledore's, it must be. After the previous year's fiasco at the Ministry, Hermione had ceased looking up to Dumbledore through the rose-coloured spectacles of blind trust. No matter how thrilling the idea of learning from Snape privately would be under another set of circumstances, no matter how much she actually respected the man, she wanted to run inside and scream '*perish the sodding thought!*' at the Headmaster.

Oh, gods be damned, she did care about where she stood in his books. Well, fuck a duck. That was even more of a reason for her to dread the idea of having Snape train her.

For a few stretching, painful moments Hermione felt awkward and insecure, like a blundering first year all over again. No, she couldn't just go ahead and place herself in a situation where she would be at his complete mercy, a target for most imaginative barbs one was capable of. Given an opportunity, he'd nit-pick her to the point when her self-esteem would turn into an extinct notion. She suddenly had a very vivid vision of herself as a giant, ugly, helpless scarecrow, a crowd of guffawing, cheering Slytherins prancing around her, pointing fingers and laughing, laughing endlessly.

Please, please, whatever it is, refuse, she almost prayed into the heavy silence that hung over the Headmaster's office all of a sudden. When the silence became too unbearable and Hermione was close to ripping at the seams, the door creaked. It was too good of a timing to be a mere coincidence, of course, and when the eyes of all those present inside Dumbledore's quaint office turned to the entrance, the Gryffindor Prefect had nothing left to do but stumble inside. Which she did with a pathetic lack of grace.

Dismissing Dumbledore's untimely offer of tea, Hermione went straight for the kill.

"Whatever I've done, Headmaster, I'm very sorry about it, please, rest assured that it was not my intention to cause anyone any trouble, and I'm prepared to atone for it by any means... I promise, it won't happen again, and I'm ready to accept the punishment, but please, know that I can be fully in charge of my bearings in the future... and I can control my magic, well, most of the time... I'm sure additional training is quite superfluous in this situation, though I'd be honoured, of course, to learn from Professor Snape, but I'd rather not be a nuisance or inconvenience anybody any further and..." Hermione inhaled sharply, lagging behind her own breath after trying to cram all her thoughts and fears into one long sentence, and it gave her just the necessary moment to realize that she was babbling, babbling hopelessly.

"Please, don't expel me," she breathed out and stood still, a heavy weight of sickly anticipation slumping her shoulders.

"Sit down, you idiot child," Snape gritted out and bestowed such a look of contempt upon her that Hermione visibly cringed.

"You have already made yourself an utter nuisance, even if we disregard your blatant eavesdropping, and you are more of an inconvenience than you can even begin to grasp as it is, so sit down and be quiet for once in your life!" Snape went on, fuming.

"Now, now, Severus, no need to be so callous. It's not Hermione's fault, being who she is." Dumbledore patted his Potions master on the shoulder with unceremonious affection since, apparently, affection was the only thing which confused Snape enough to have him back down a bit.

"Miss Granger, won't you, indeed, sit down, my dear girl. I'm afraid we have a long talk before us." Dumbledore's papery-skinned hand gestured towards a vacant chair, and Hermione sat, dumbly at first, but then her mind was reeling, reeling and finally finding it, the nagging little thought lightly clawing at the back of her mind.

What was it the Headmaster had said while she was laboriously dreading being expelled? Something about who she was? She really did have her priorities messed up, didn't she? Oh, gods.

"Being who I am, sir? And wh..." her lips trembled with the sudden emotion welling up, unwilling to obey her and form the sounds.

"Who *am* I?" she croaked at last, scared out of her wits.

The Headmaster approached her, much quicker than his age would suggest, picked up her cold and clammy hand, and pricked her thumb with something tiny and sharp. A droplet of blood beaded up over the miniscule wound, and Dumbledore touched it to something in his other hand that looked like a sphere with blurry edges.

It all happened so fast that Hermione didn't have time to squeak at the unexpected pain. When her blood touched the mysterious object, she was completely taken with wonder because it came to light and its shape suddenly became very sharp and clear. Every indentation and intricate carving was made apparent, as if it was coming out of a fog. For some reason, Hermione thought of Harry and how things probably looked like this to him when he got up in the morning and put on his glasses, the world coming out of the blur.

The thought was so random, it would have made her smile, but the sphere, shining with iridescent colours, mingling and swirling, held all of her attention.

Before she could gather her thoughts and ask the question again, Dumbledore, who looked, for the lack of a better word, triumphant, announced, "Why, Miss Granger, I have it on a very firm authority that you are, most certainly, a Mage."

Well, if that was not anticlimactic, Hermione did not know what was.

Confused

Chapter 3 of 13

So, what exactly are Mages?

I'd like to thank **potionsmistress23**, my beta, for her encouragement, patience with my commas, and being generally wonderful.

I hope you enjoy it! Please, let me know what you think :)

"Why, my dear, I have it on a very firm authority that you are, most certainly, a Mage."

Well, if that was not anticlimactic, Hermione did not know what was. For a few seconds, she simply sat there, stared, and wondered if Dumbledore's announcement was supposed to taper the seventeen years she had lived previously to a palpitating point and vanish them altogether. At least, that was exactly what his solemn tone suggested.

She stared at the two expectant faces and the annoyed one, waiting for something, anything, any tiny bit which would suggest how she must react. Wasn't she already a mage, in a broad sense? A witch, a sorceress, a human being of magical persuasion, or any other such synonym one could think of?

Dumbledore was still beaming at her like Father Christmas about to receive a thank-you kiss from a particularly exultant child. McGonagall's look was shifting from the Headmaster to Professor Snape, who rolled his eyes in exasperation and asked irritably, "Miss Granger, have I been suffering from a long-term deception, and you, in fact, are not the know-it-all your incessant hand-waving and book-quoting led us to believe?"

"I have never striven to usurp that title, sir," Hermione replied defensively.

"Miss Granger," McGonagall started with a good deal more patience and a hint of regret in her voice. "Hermione... do you... happen to know what a Mage is?"

"Well, isn't a mage another way to name a wizard or a witch? A person with magical abilities?" Hermione suggested, musing that it was, probably, what Lavender felt like when asked a particularly tricky question which was way above her head. It was a very, very uncomfortable feeling. Obviously, there was much more to Mages.

"Do us all a favour, girl, and put that thing between your ears to use," Snape snapped after muttering something undeniably offensive about Muggle heritage. "Have you ever heard anyone being referred to as a Mage?"

Hermione pulled her anxiety-addled brain together and suddenly realized that while in Muggle culture wizards and witches would have a variety of names applied to them, it was certainly not so in the Wizarding world. The whole situation was so obvious, so blatantly on the surface that it had never even occurred to her that there was some factual base behind it. There were wizards and witches, and she also had heard of seers and sorcerers; she knew people who were warlocks of various categories, but when she tried to fish in her impressively capacious memory for a name, or names, attached to the concept of a Mage, only one came to mind.

"Merlin?" She breathed out, her eyes widening with a sense of dawning immensity of the whole matter. Merlin was often referred to as *the* Mage, and it was truly mind-boggling to discover she could be... gods, her mind refused to even contemplate that thought.

"Merlin indeed," the Potions master affirmed in a rather malicious tone. "And, before you lose yourself to delusions of grandeur, I'll have you know that you are most definitely not the only Mage since Merlin, but you are, very possibly, one of the most ridiculous."

This dragged a bedazzled Hermione back down to brown Earth and helped her to settle on her feet a bit more firmly and reconnect with her usually sensible self. Which meant that questions were to follow. And, probably, an obscene amount of them.

So, she asked away.

After giving her this short and rather uninformative introduction to Mages, Professor Snape refrained from further conversation, demonstrating with his entire appearance and body language that it was way beneath him; most of Hermione's barrage of questions was addressed by Dumbledore.

The first bit of information, thrown into the depthless well that was Hermione's thirst for new facts, was that there really was no clear understanding as to exactly what made a Mage. Supposedly, a Mage was a witch or a wizard with immense power and some rather unique talents. But there were Mages who were below average in terms of their sheer powers of magic, and there were regular wizards and witches whose original talents were quite extraordinary, yet they didn't belong to the cohort.

The only solid and certain way to know whether one was a Mage or not was the test performed by Dumbledore with the help of the mysterious spherical object; it went by the name Veritas Antica and was even more obscure than the Mage lore. The Headmaster only mentioned that the Veritas Antica 'has always been here, at Hogwarts, and is spelled to remain within it at all times' and that 'the principles upon which it functions are very unclear'.

Though, as Dumbledore had informed her straight away, there were some tell-tale signs, by which one could be suspected of being a Mage, especially, by someone familiar with the concept. For instance, Mages often attracted and formed bonds with unusual magical creatures, a fact which Hermione immediately filed away as the reason behind the inexplicable pull she had felt when she first saw her bandy-legged, squishy-faced familiar. Snape used this turn of conversation to try and cavil at the Head of his rival House.

"You could have sorted her out as early as her third year, Minerva, the lover of all things *feline*," he noted in a voice which was disgustingly saccharine.

Before another argument could start, Hermione immediately asked if it took a Mage to bond with a Phoenix and earned a shrewd smile from Dumbledore and a suspicious look of grudging... not exactly acknowledgement, but something akin to it, from Snape.

Her quick mind immediately jumped to another parallel, and she inquired cautiously if it also took a Mage to be a malevolent megalomaniac with aspirations for taking over the world and a giant venomous snake of indefinite species for a friend. She immediately regretted her brash question, seeing as the Potions master was trying to flay her alive with his look alone, and was glad when Dumbledore brushed the question aside. *Another time then*, Hermione immediately thought, never one to let important information slip by. The Headmaster muttered a something or two about 'stunted magic' and 'such a waste', as if it would whet her interest, and quickly moved onto another

point.

Which happened to be the quantity of Mages. Hermione learned that Mages were few and far between. Despite their being extraordinary magical beings, Mages were often taken advantage of, proving, once again, that the road to the top of the world wasn't necessarily shortened counter-proportionally to the amount of magical power at a wizard's disposal. However, a certain mindset and persuasion skills made this journey much straighter.

In the days of old, Mages were fervently sought and fought over. Many dictators and tyrants, contemporary as well as ancient, had a Mage or two at their service, much more often to the great detriment of their own people, and their allies and enemies alike, than not. This forced many Mages into hiding and led to the development of an unspoken code of conduct, where secrecy was the main rule, goal, and means. Eventually, they had become dwindling, elusive folk, scattered here and there across the globe, their secrecy guarding them but also standing in the way of gathering the knowledge of their own kind and even of estimating their actual numbers. Stuff of quaint legends, they were, to most, a fairy-tale, told in half-whisper at a fireplace on a snowy evening.

They did, however, take care of their own, since an untrained Mage was a human or, to be more precise, a wizard equivalent of a volcano waiting to erupt. The ability to wield the power of a Mage never came with the power itself. Ever since its founding, Hogwarts, as well as most other schools for magical children, covertly looked for Mages among its students and assisted in their training. Dumbledore let her know, with no small amount of pride, that they tested all gifted students, whom they suspected had the makings of a Mage, as late as their second year. Some ambitious pureblooded families, who kept the Mage lore as an opaque ancient heirloom...useless and outdated, but cherished for no apparent reason...would test their offspring even before they learned to tell a wand from a regular twig.

No doubt, Draco Malfoy was tested right after he left his mother's womb Hermione thought with dark amusement, but the openly apologetic look at Professor McGonagall's face prompted her to ask another question, forgetting Draco's nature.

"But why wasn't I tested? I thought I was..."

"The smartest witch of your age?" Snape interrupted her with an eye roll worthy of the National Theatre Stage. "Your guileless lack of modesty is as despicable as your classroom manners, Miss Granger. But, to answer yet another one of your insipid questions, you were never considered for such testing by our absolutely *unprejudiced* Headmaster," Snape delicately stressed the word, his voice dripping with sarcasm, "because you are Muggle-born. Mages either have it running in the family or are of very mixed origins, but never has a Muggle-born Mage been known up to this date. And, to answer one more of your questions, Miss Granger, no, young Mr. Malfoy is not a Mage, no matter how much his father wished for it."

Snape looked at her with an air of undisputed superiority, and she made a mental note to herself to think less... obviously.

"It is true, my dear, that our unfortunate neglect has created a dreadful mistake." Dumbledore's voice was unusually regretful, though Hermione had an unpleasant tingling feeling he wasn't completely frank in his sentiment.

"I would thank you, Headmaster, not to include me in that collective 'we' you have used. Such a nonsensical situation would never have occurred in my House. It wouldn't have happened in any other House either, if not for your mental hygiene of noninterference."

At that, Snape gave the Headmaster and his Deputy another disdainful look and crossed his arms over his chest.

"You all say how horrible and unfortunate it all is," Hermione chimed in impatiently, annoyed with all the drama, "but isn't it supposed to be a good thing? Isn't it... good that I'm a... Mage?" She couldn't completely keep the hurt out of her voice and watched McGonagall sigh guiltily, though it was small consolation.

"Oh, no, dear Miss Granger, it is quite a miracle, in and of itself, and you are no doubt a remarkable young woman, but the fact that you have been discovered so late, when your magic is almost established, remains unforgivable. That we do not know the extent of your capabilities, neither what *kind* of Mage you are nor how well you can harness your magic... makes you dangerous. To yourself and to your peers. That is why I asked Professor Snape to train you. On such a short notice and with so much time lost already... he will be doing us all a great favour," Dumbledore said and patted her shoulder in what was supposed to be grandfatherly reassurance, while he looked at the Head of Slytherin expressively.

This prompted Hermione to finally ask a question that was threatening to jump from the tip of her tongue for some time already.

"Is he a Mage as well?" she said in the most off-handed manner she could manage, making a point of not looking at Snape directly and speaking of him as if he were not present. There. Let the sarcastic bastard choke on his own venom and know that she would not be diminished to a quivering mess with a few well-aimed words.

After a pregnant pause, during which, Hermione could swear, she heard the sound of gritted teeth (apparently, it was considered something of a social faux pas to speak of your Mage identity in the Mage world), the Headmaster spoke again.

"Professor Snape is our best chance to try and rectify this... situation. Or, at least, salvage what we can."

"However, one thing that is beyond salvaging and the realm of our interference, the truly horrible thing, Miss Granger, is that you just up and presented yourself to all and sundry in a most foolish and arrogant way," Snape added, his irritation so pleasing to her that Hermione couldn't help but feel a bit of defiant fondness towards her incident with the book.

The truly horrible thing is that I'm obviously stuck with you in training, you great condescending git, she thought as clearly as she could and watched with grim satisfaction the way the professor's eyes narrowed to fiery slits.

So many questions were beating at her mind, begging to be asked, and her head was swimming with the new information.

"Right... the book." Hermione dared a reproachful glance at Professor McGonagall. "But if Mages are such a well-kept secret, most of them... the students, I mean, will just think I'm barmy, won't they?"

"While *this* astounding piece is old news," Snape purred, his long fingers curling and uncurling leisurely around his elbows, "I'll have you know that a few of my Slytherins have made it a habit to report to their parents any oddity, however small, that involves the Golden boy or one of his two appendages. And trust me when I say, Miss Granger, that Lucius Malfoy and a few others are more than capable of making an educated guess about all this." His voice gradually turned from a purr to a threatening hiss, and Hermione felt cold, sleek tendrils of fear crawl down her spine.

Her defiance and readiness to withstand the Potions master, which she had felt not a few minutes before, sifted away like fine sand through her fingers.

"What will they want with me? What will *he* want with me?" she asked no one in particular quietly, looking down at her hands where they were now clutched together tightly on her lap.

"No one knows the depth of the convoluted schemes that his mind harbours, but the best you can hope for, if he manages to catch you, is that he simply drains your magic and disposes of you quickly. However, this outcome is as probable as Longbottom scoring an Outstanding in Potions, were the NEWTs held tomorrow," Snape answered plainly, and the lack of sarcasm in his words scared Hermione more than anything else on this strangest of days.

She swallowed a tight lump in her throat and fidgeted, ever aware of Snape's heavy look on her.

"I see, then..." She tried to sound nonchalant, but only managed a voice that suited a rain-drenched kitten. "So, about that book, I guess, it was not a figment of my imagination?"

"As it happens, no, my dear," Dumbledore replied. And then Hermione's mind was taken off to the wondrous land of her favourite subject.

The book did, in fact, exist. Alongside a few more, which were written by Mages, for Mages, and could only be read by Mages, and only at times when the book deemed it appropriate. This led Hermione immediately to wonder how much of what had happened was her affinity with the books and how much was the book's unique quality. This very quality, along with some semblance of sentience the Mage books possessed, was such good means of protection that they were left at Hogwarts library on free display, never to be found by any, librarians included, save but a select few. Of course, it was practically unheard of for a Mage to remain undiscovered by the age of twelve, which, ultimately, had led to such a tremendous misunderstanding on McGonagall's part.

Before Hermione even started to seethe anew at one of the most devastating point losses she had suffered during her stay at Hogwarts and, certainly, the most unfair one, McGonagall interrupted her train of thought.

"My dear, I feel we have to rectify the situation, and therefore, it is with pride that I award fifty points to Gryffindor for... the courage you showed in accepting such... highly unusual news, which will change the entire course of your life."

Well, if it wasn't the most gratuitous points acquisition ever, Hermione thought, irritated still with her Head of House, even though the way Minerva's chin turned up high with the pride she took in giving points to her favourite cub, mellowed the said cub somewhat.

Hermione dared a quick darting glance at Professor Snape and caught him rolling his eyes for what must have been the umpteenth time during the entire conversation. Perhaps, he also thought that the courage bit was more extravagant than her rather intimidated state suggested.

"Now, concerning your training, my dear, I'm afraid we will have to impose quite a pressing schedule upon you," Dumbledore said brightly and rubbed his hands with an eagerness Hermione certainly didn't share. "Both of you," he added quickly, looking at Snape.

And so it was arranged that Hermione was to come to Snape's office the first thing after breakfast the following day, which happened to be a Sunday and, as her luck would have it, a Hogsmeade weekend. Not like she had a lot to lose missing it out. Ron would blab about Quidditch and his latest conquest, who, as far as Hermione heard, happened to be a rather ripe for her years Hufflepuff fourth-year and the reason for an embarrassing Howler from Mrs. Weasley. Harry would, no doubt, either sulk somewhere in a dark corner of Rosmerta's tiny establishment, a steaming mug of tea the only thing warming his expression, or forego the entire trip in favour of discreetly spending the afternoon with Hagrid. Sirius's death hurt him more than he was letting to be seen, and Hagrid's jovial and clumsy simplicity seemed to be the only company he could bear for a long time.

No, she wouldn't miss anything at all, except being whipped into walking faster by a light sting of autumn wind, perhaps. And losing herself amidst the divinely smelling shelves at Ex Libris, the new, tiny bookstore on the outskirts of the village. Her expression immediately soured at that particular thought. Dumbledore seemed to be going on and on, bickering about details with Snape in a way which Hermione deemed to be absolutely supercilious and unnecessary. She tuned him out and tried to focus. So many, many questions. She still could not wrap her mind around the concept of a Mage: exactly what distinguished one from your regular witch or wizard? And how was her being one going to affect her life? Their fight? Harry? The questions swam in her head, taunting her, speaking in little high-pitched voices, making her head spin.

"...Miss Granger? Miss Granger!" Dumbledore's slightly impatient voice ripped through the haze of her own whirling, disjointed thoughts.

"Oh, sir? I'm sorry, I got... carried away," Hermione answered, her tongue lax and feeling like it was a lump of foreign tissue.

"It is understandable that you might feel smitten by all this, dear girl," the Headmaster soothed, "but do try to pay attention. What I'm trying to relate is vital, to you, to all of us, and to our cause. You must not speak of your... nature to anyone except Professor Snape and me."

"Why? What about Ron and Harry? I can trust them with everything!" she replied vehemently, her brows knitting together.

Hermione hated to keep secrets from her friends. She couldn't boast a large number of them, and she was only too well aware of how fragile their friendship was in the face of trust issues. The very idea of keeping something that huge from them was revolting. The thought of them finding it out later on their own (which, she was sure, would eventually and inevitably happen) was terrifying.

"It will do you wells of good, Miss Granger, to remember, once in a blue moon, that not everything in this life is about being Potter's extension," Snape inserted, obviously aiming to hurt.

Only the presence of her own Head of House and the Headmaster stopped Hermione from giving a very snide reply. She decided to give it a lick and a promise; after all, there would be plenty of time to polish the immediacy of smart comebacks later, if the words 'pressing schedule' meant anything. Looking pointedly at Dumbledore, Hermione waited for his explanation.

"I'm asking you to take my word here, Hermione." The Headmaster's voice was suddenly grave, and his dotty old man exterior slipped away, revealing the formidable wizard he was known to be. "The Mage Code of Conduct requires it, and there are reasons behind such measures."

"I need to understand these reasons to decide whether they are worth ruining a friendship over." Hermione answered firmly, even while inside she felt shaky and fluttery all over, like a yellow leaf about to be swept away from its home tree by a sudden huff of wind. She might be viewed as Harry's extension, but she was no Harry. She refused to let Albus Dumbledore, master manipulator, play with her for motives only known to him. She was not going to be made a pawn. That lesson was learned well and hard the previous year at the Department of Mysteries.

"Very well, my girl," Dumbledore conceded, a little too readily for Hermione to believe that it wasn't his plan all along. "You are probably wondering what it is that makes Mages different."

Hermione immediately tensed, a welcome strain which appeared when she knew she was about to learn something new and exciting.

"Albus," Snape interrupted the older wizard, a warning so rich and clear in his voice that Hermione shivered.

"No, Severus, I think Miss Granger... *needs* to know this," Dumbledore went on eagerly, and the Potions master looked away in rebellious resignation.

"You see, Miss Granger, the peculiar thing about Mages is not so much their nature; although it is quite unique and distinguished, it is not distinguished enough to draw a clear set of criteria which can mark one as a Mage. It is all about Destiny."

The word was laid with such a careful and reverend stress that Hermione, who firmly believed one's destiny was always in one's own hands, felt this belief to rock slightly where it was pillared by logic, common sense, and healthy self-esteem. Could it be... No, it was out of question. The idea that your life and your choices were not your own made her nauseous.

"What does it mean, Headmaster?" she asked, confused. "And how is it connected with the fact that I cannot share all this with Ron and Harry?"

"Oh, it is not something I can give you a detailed account of, my dear," Dumbledore replied with an apologetic smile. "But not because I'm unwilling, rather, it's due to the lack of such information. All we have are merely guesses, conclusions based on facts, half of which are hardly proven. But, to answer your question, it seems that each Mage has a purpose to fulfill. If the Universe were a sheet of cloth, and people and wizards were threads, Mages would be needles which embroider this cloth. Histories, lives, memories."

"Do you mean to say that it is a handful of people *like me* who run the course of life for the entire..." Hermione trailed, horrified by the magnitude of this possibility.

"Oh, no, no, my dear. Why, that would be a terrible thing to live with." Dumbledore chuckled, smoothed his beard and went on, "Don't forget that the cloth itself is also made of threads."

"That leaves one important detail out, Professor Dumbledore," Hermione said, ever the one to think logically. "The needles need to be held by someone."

"Exactly, my dear, exactly." Dumbledore's eyes lit up. "And that is what needs to be prevented. You have to sew your own pattern, hold your own needle. Throughout the years, dozens of Mages were used to achieve numerous things by wizards and Muggles alike: things like riches, power, glory, and even the greater good. And it always brought about disastrous consequences."

"If we drop the silly metaphors and allegories, Miss Granger," Snape interrupted the Headmaster, "the stark truth is that once you let it be known who you are, you will be taken advantage of. And while I do not believe in such things as *destiny*, the fact remains that Mages are used, abused, and stripped of their power. And it is never pretty."

"But Harry and Ron would never do me harm!" Hermione leapt to defend her friends.

"Ah, my girl... it is never those who would outright want to use you or mean you ill that end up using you in the most destructive ways," Dumbledore stated and gave his Potions master a pained look-over, which made the latter purse his lips in disgust. Such infinite sadness was lacing the Headmaster's voice that Hermione was immediately subdued.

The summer before this year, spent at the Order Headquarters, gave her a unique insight into Snape's routine as a spy for the Order. Though she was not let in on much, once or twice she had seen him stumbling in through the doors late at night, when she, driven out of bed by her own anxiety or a random nightmare, sat perched at the top of the staircase with a book on her lap, finding the library, where Sirius's lingering presence was felt disturbingly strong, for some reason, too sombre for the night time. On those nights, heavily overcast or close to new moon, when impenetrable darkness seemed alive and crawling with wild and malevolent beings, the Dark Lord would issue summons, and Snape would return broken, panting, sometimes - bloody, reeking of humiliation, fear, and things she refused to even contemplate. It was a sight even more terrifying when she had years filled with his opaque, dignified, unruffled superiority being a constant in any situation. He might have been doing it willingly, but the degree of Dumbledore's involvement in Snape's actions was not lost on Hermione.

"So... how do I find out my purpose?" she asked, unwilling to dwell on such depressing thoughts a minute longer.

"You don't. Your purpose finds you. You only have to make sure that you are not forced to fulfill a purpose someone else wants you to fulfill," Dumbledore answered.

"And how do I know you are not imposing *your* purpose on me as we speak?" The question left her lips before she was able to give it a second thought, and her hand immediately flew up to clamp over her mouth.

"Five points to Gryffindor for the sole instance when your impertinence comes in handy, Miss Granger," Snape drawled with a wicked quirk to his mouth and arched a chiseled eyebrow at the Headmaster.

"You don't. But, perhaps, my honesty in telling you that would mean something," Dumbledore replied and rummaged in his pockets for some sweets. The lack of the usually subsequent offer of a lemon drop made Hermione think that she might just have hit the mark with her question.

"I believe this discussion has gone long enough to give me a headache for the rest of the evening now, and, since we have covered everything that seems to be of immediate import," Snape said, looking as satisfied as a cat who got the cream, "Miss Granger, loath though I am to deal with it, I'm expecting you immediately after breakfast tomorrow morning. Headmaster, Minerva."

Acknowledging his colleagues with a slight and elegant bow of his greasy head, the Head of Slytherin strolled out of the room.

The whisper of his measured steps didn't yet finish reverberating over the spiral stair case, and Hermione already hated her predicament, him, Dumbledore, and herself, for her approval-mongery.

"I suggest you take the remainder of the day off, rest, and give it all a good pondering, my dear." The Headmaster lay a warm, gnarled hand on her shoulder, back to his benevolent self. "Professor Snape may be a very tasking instructor, but you are in good hands."

"Has he trained a Mage before?" Hermione asked, with a petulant desire to *doubt* the condescending Potions master.

"Why, yes, he has experience," Dumbledore answered, and Hermione had a momentary thought that it all sounded like some convoluted Muggle job interview and almost snickered out loud.

"Can I know who his last trainee was? I may want a reference," she added with a slightly haughty air.

The Headmaster hesitated and looked at his Transfiguration professor. Yes, definitely speaking of other Mages was bad, bad form.

"His first and last trainees were the Weasley twins, Miss Granger," Professor McGonagall added with a smile that was mysteriously sad.

"Fred and George are Mages?" Hermione's heart leapt with joy at the feeling only newly-found kinship, a sudden sense of belonging, of acknowledging a shared secret can give.

"Yes. They are Loki. Their kind, that is," Dumbledore replied and gave her a hand to help her up from her chair with an obvious intent to shoo her out. "Let me detain you no further, dear. You will have your time for more questions, and I'm sure Professor Snape will be most efficient and accommodating in answering them."

"Do I have a kind? What kind am I, that is?" Hermione blurted, unable to control the onslaught of questions which were queuing on her tongue.

"Of course, like every Mage." Dumbledore was getting impatient, or uncomfortable, or both, she could tell, and though Hermione felt she was entitled to as many answers as she found necessary, she decided to let off.

If the Headmaster was giving her a free rein to question Snape to her heart's content, maybe she should withhold her curiosity for the time being, she thought. Possibly, annoying Snape with questions could invoke the consequences she wouldn't dare to give thought to just yet, but it was a sure means to retaliate if his control, or barbed-wired tongue, or domineering presence grew to be too much to handle.

"Right, I'll go then. Um... thank you... I guess," she offered uncertainly, too miffed by thoughts of the Headmaster's obvious neglect and manipulative streaks to offer a heart-felt gratitude, but too polite to just leave.

"I'll see you to your common room," her Transfiguration professor suggested, and together they left the Headmaster's office, leaving the old wizard to sigh and adjust to yet another addition to the weight on his shoulders.

Disappointed

Hermione's first lesson does not go smoothly.

A/N: I'd like to thank all of you readers. And especially those of you who care to share your thoughts about my story. They are very appreciated, and my muse rejoices! I would also like to send thanks, bags of chocolates and lemon drops to **potionsmistress23**, my beta.

Fairy tales, regular children's fairy-tales, especially those with enchantments and evil, ugly, princess-snatching creatures, became one of Hermione's biggest fears after she had discovered the living fairy-tale that was the Wizarding world more than six years ago.

For the year after she had received her Hogwarts letter, her impression of the Magical Britain consisted of the prim and proper Professor McGonagall, who came to deliver the news and talk to her shocked Muggle parents. She had then quickly shifted into her cat form, coughed up a hairball, and leapt out of the window, lithely climbing down the vines. It filled young Hermione's eager, inquisitive mind with all sorts of chimaeras no child should encounter. Ever the skeptic, even in her early years, Hermione found it extremely hard to reconcile the anthropogenic hubbub of the twentieth century, as she had known it, with the Victorian, wand-wielding surrealism of this new, hidden, *magical* world.

What if the stuff from fairy-tales was true, the eleven-year-old-but-already-practical-beyond-her-years Hermione wondered? What was the extent of things that could be achieved with magic? Could one person control the minds of others? Tell them what to do, and they would mindlessly obey? Reach some point of indestructibility and dispense with the disagreeable at one swish of a wand? Raised on the horrors of modern wars and conflicts, violence on TV and in the streets, Hermione shuddered to think of what could happen if some mad fanatic on a mission to 'make the world a better place' had a powerful wizard at their disposal. She spent sleepless nights wondering why the world had not yet met an untimely and horrible end.

Seven years after, having learned a thing or two about the magical society and about Voldemort, she thanked the gods that the Dark Lord detested Muggles and seemed content to wreak local havoc. She secretly found his cause dumb, his scale appeared ridiculously petty, and his course of actions seemed absolutely aimless. He might have been able, in her opinion, to create a skirmish in a passive, easily scandalized Wizarding Britain. He was definitely capable of whipping a handful of Death Eaters into blind following. But he was nothing as compared to Muggle tyrants in ways of thinking.

Secretly, Hermione was not afraid of Voldemort on a grand scale. She was only terrified that he might hurt those close to her, and that was her own personal and most important reason to actively support Dumbledore's cause. Because, all in all, Hermione Granger just could not bring herself to believe that the snake would ever win, considering his tactics. His claims to world domination seemed to her as credible as those of the fat and funny lab rat from a Muggle cartoon she had once watched.

Nevertheless, each time a new layer of all things magical unveiled before her, she became tetchy, and all those childhood fears sprang back to life. Combined with Dumbledore's oblique hints about destiny, right now they made her feel unpleasantly precious about herself.

She skipped dinner, unwilling to face Harry and Ron and their impending interrogation just yet. Instead, she drew shut the curtains of her maidenly, narrow bed in the room she shared with Lavender and Parvati, let Crooks cuddle at her feet, and tried to lose herself in her Charms essay. If she was lucky enough, her two obnoxiously protective friends would forget all about today and just focus on begging her to help them with their homework.

Her hopes were crashed by a loud bang at the door.

"Hermione, come out, we know you're there, what happened?" Ron's demanding voice, slightly muffled by the mass of heavy oak which separated them, yelled.

A more tentative knock was followed by Harry's careful invitation to come sit with them in the common room.

She tried her best to put on a no-nonsense face, reluctantly un-piled herself from an array of pillows and blankets, and went to open the door.

The sight that met her eyes mellowed her and made something tug at her heart painfully. Ron was standing there with a mug of steaming hot chocolate, and Harry was balancing a plate with cherry crêpes on top of a pile of books. Obnoxious and single-minded these two might be, but they were her friends, she mattered to them, and she didn't care to lose them.

Oh, damn, she thought.

"Oh, look, mate, she isn't moping around here!" Ron elbowed Harry, causing the plate with crêpes to wobble dangerously.

"And why exactly would I *bemoping* here, Ronald?" Hermione asked, her hands finding their way to her hips as she assumed her classical 'I'm Hermione, I'm bossy, and I'm scolding you' position, as Harry liked to call it lovingly.

"Oi, 'Mione, Lavender told us you were crying your heart out here because you got kicked out of that study group and McGonagall gave you a dozen detentions with Filch for shaming Gryffindor," Harry said and winked at her lamely.

The shame of Gryffindor slumped her shoulders; she took the mug from Ron's hands, murmuring her thanks, and moved to the common room.

Flopping down on the settee in a most unladylike manner, Hermione looked at Harry and Ron expectantly.

"Well, what happened there, 'Mione?" Ron didn't hesitate, as he plopped in right next to her.

"Nothing much. I tackled it. And got your *darling* points back."

The last bit was said loud enough for the other students present, who were covertly stealing glances in her direction, to hear.

"They just let you off? Just like that?" Harry asked, incredulous.

"Just like that," she grumbled, hiding behind her hot chocolate.

"And the points? Whatever did you do to get them back?" Ron managed to say through half a crêpe in his mouth.

"Look, this was just a huge misunderstanding. I've sorted it, and it's all good now," Hermione replied, getting disgruntled. "Now, do you boys remember that we have a Charms essay to hand in on Tuesday?"

"Hermione, you fail magnificently at subterfuge. Perhaps you should work on your diversion tactics and poker face. Take some lessons from the greasy bat, maybe," Harry suggested and shook his head in disbelief.

Something inside of his subterfuge disaster of a friend shook at the notion of how close to the mark he was.

"What's poker face? A face that pokes? Then lessons from ole' Snape sound like a good idea, 'Mione, what with that beak of his," Ron guffawed, sputtering pieces of dough and cherry stuffing all over.

Before Hermione could seize the opportunity to steer the conversation away from this dangerous theme and dive into a lengthy explanation of the concept of poker, Harry looked at her suspiciously and shooed his snickering friend into silence.

"Are you hiding something from us, Hermione?" Harry asked seriously after shaking the remains of food from his robes.

"Are you doubting my words, Harry Potter?" Hermione started to get defensive.

Hurt flashed across Harry's face.

"No, it's just... never mind. Sorry I pushed." He narrowed his eyes and got up from the settee, gathering his books and taking a place at one of the tables to supposedly immerse himself in his homework. But Hermione knew better than that. Harry was offended.

"He's been a bit touchy lately... He cares about us, Mione, and it's even harder for him to show now. He still mourns Sirius more than he shows." Now that there were no crêpes left to occupy him, Ron's voice sounded sadder, and the clear perception in his words was more uncomfortable than Hermione cared to accept.

Suddenly, she had a most disquieting feeling that a rift was laid out between her and her friends, and each passing second made it wider and deeper. She wanted to run and hug Harry fiercely, to tell him that it was going to be okay, to tell him the truth.

"Oh, Ron, I..." For the first time in a long while, Hermione was lost for words. She was sure that her friends did not deserve some inadequate platitudes, but it was all her brain seemed to be able to conjure, and the truth was out of bounds.

"s okay, 'Mione. Just... whatever it is, I hope it's worth it." Ron patted her awkwardly on the shoulder and left, giving her a lop-sided smile that made her feel like she had just cast an Unforgivable. Not that she knew what *that* felt like.

Oh, when had these two grown up? And why hadn't she noticed?

Hermione pressed her lips together and tried to breathe deeply through her nose to stop herself from breaking down and dissolving into a deluge of tears and sniffles.

Her sleep was fitful, the regular nightmares about that day at the Ministry interspersed with absurd dreams of Ron, pale and still, spewing giant, malevolent cherry crêpes that enveloped her in slimy, buttery sheets, restricting her movements and stuffing sickly, saccharine cherries down her throat. *The truthss*, something whispered all around her, and the crêpes kept coming over, wrapping her up tighter, and finally she thought she was hearing the ugly, horrific, gurgling sound of oil, sizzling on a frying pan.

She woke up with a muffled scream, sheets drenched and wrapped around her like a cocoon. With a shudder of revulsion, Hermione thought she'd never eat anything with cherries in it again.

It was not even dawn yet; grey, feeble light flooded the room, its other two inhabitants sleeping peacefully, thanks to her well-placed Silencing Charms.

Her muscles stiff, as if she had run a marathon without previous training the day before, Hermione dragged herself to the window. The view before her was far from magnificent: just a strip of a gently sloping field, cropped by the frame of the protruding Hogwarts towers, and a bright spot of Hagrid's pumpkin patch further off. Still, she loved it. She loved Hogwarts grounds in deceitful, early morning light. With most of the students and the staff still drifting around Morpheus's obscure realm, the ancient castle looked its age during those brief, quiet hours.

Hermione gave the view before her one last, loving look and made a beeline for the showers.

The sting of hot water on her cleansed skin had always helped her to clear her mind. It was her habit to plan her day and make decisions in the shower, nothing distracting her from concentration. Standing under the scalding torrent, she closed her eyes and tried to outline her... her actions? Decisions? Things to do?

The recent changes in her life seemed so profound that she was reluctant, bordering on scared, to contemplate the implications. The scale of things demanded thoroughness. But one thing seemed quite certain to the girl. At this point, 'a Mage' was yet nothing to her, merely a label on a set of unknown attributes. Scrubbing herself clean with fervor, as if she were trying to peel her previous life and social roles off, she made a vow to herself. If she was stuck with Snape being her mentor, she would take the most out of it. Learning would come first, and emotions would be held in an iron fist. Snape's knowledge appeared truly ecumenical, and she had yet to see him fail at anything academic. He was brilliant, Mage or not, and here and now, she decided that if she was placed in this situation, by some destiny, or by certain manipulative wizards, she'd milk it dry.

There was only one little thing left. To learn to abstract from whatever vile wrapping this education came in. She was willing to put effort into it.

She towed herself dry and forced a tortoise-shell comb through her hair. It was going to be a long day.

The Dungeons felt even creepier in the early morning. Hermione left the Great Hall, where she had a hasty breakfast, when the first students, some studious Ravenclaws, started trickling in.

A small part of her wanted to rebel against being set up with Snape, and her purposeful stride in the direction of his office just a few minutes after seven was a part of this rebellion. She had already realized that being a Mage had one certain advantage: she would be a force to be reckoned with. In an uncharacteristic bout of Slytherinesque thinking, she quickly understood that it was her only way to stand up to her mentor if needs be. Immediately, this realization brought about a feeling of certain freedom of movement, and she pondered just how much she could get away with.

Hermione approached the heavy, intricately carved door. Deep inside, she actually hoped to disrupt something. Preferably, a nice Sunday lie-in. The man had told her to come after breakfast, and since breakfast started at seven and she had already had it... Wouldn't it be fun, she thought to herself, if she were to impose her person on a sleep-tousled Potions master? Would he wear a Victorian nightgown, complete with a long cap with a tassel? Something equally embarrassing? She'd seen plenty of those in Wizarding clothes catalogues, men's sleepwear pages, and they had never failed to amuse her beyond all decency.

Practically giggling, Hermione knocked.

Before she had an opportunity to make the knock impudently loud, the door opened slightly, displaying an inviting stripe of light in the otherwise grim darkness of the Dungeons. Slightly surprised, she pushed it open and stepped inside the office.

She'd never been there before. Of course, just like any other teacher, Snape's position as the Potions master, as well as the Head of Slytherin, obliged him to keep office hours, but she'd never heard of anyone actually taking advantage of this particular time. Maybe his Slytherins did, but what took place in Slytherin usually stayed in Slytherin.

To her surprise, the office appeared rather at variance with Snape's forbidding persona. It was a very impersonal room. She'd even go to the extent of calling it comfortable. On a small podium, there was a large, cherry-wood table, which appeared to be standard for staff offices in Hogwarts, a high wingchair behind it, and a small upholstered one in front of it. Knowing who was residing in this office, Hermione would have expected an ascetic stool, created with a purpose of humbling and shaming.

The room was lined with shelves of books, but Hermione didn't feel the pull or anything remotely stirring about them. That, combined with a visible film of dust on them, told her that they were probably not his. Not anyone's, in fact. To her, they felt faceless, neutered. Not even Muggle books felt this way. Probably, no one had touched them for

decades.

Heavy, mute-coloured, ancient gobelins, depicting the foundation of Hogwarts, hung on the upper parts of the walls, unusually high for the Dungeons, and Hermione stopped for a moment to look at them. This was when she realized she was, actually, alone in the room.

She quickly looked around in search of her mentor and felt her boisterous mood dampening. He was nowhere in sight, but just to the left of a small desk, topped with a large stack of periodicals and a huge Wizarding terrestrial globe, there appeared to be a very discreet door. As soon as Snape's new trainee set her eyes on the door, it creaked ajar in a clear invitation.

Without contemplation, she scurried to it and entered into whatever room from which it separated the Potions master's office.

It appeared that this was not a room, but a long, narrow corridor. It was so narrow, two people would not be able to pass abreast, and the low, arched ceiling beetled just a few inches above her not so prominent height. The floor was, probably, flagstone, but she couldn't really see since the few torches that were lighting the corridor were too sparse and too dim.

Hermione ran along, and just when she started to get claustrophobic, the corridor ended in a small door. She pushed it open and stumbled inside with an embarrassing urgency.

"Did it not occur to you to knock, Miss Granger?" Snape's melodic voice flowed from across the room, which appeared to be an odd mix of a potions lab, a sitting room, a study, and a library.

Eclectic, bustling with energy and magic, this room was everything the office was not. Her new mentor was standing with his back to her in front of a narrow workbench where a small cauldron was placed over a burner. He had obviously got up hours ago, and Hermione's spirits were fogged further by disappointment. The potion emitted small puffs of lovely golden smoke now and then, and the professor sprinkled something powdery in it.

"Are these your quarters?" she asked, not caring to apologize for her abrupt entrance or note that if he hadn't wanted her to enter, she wouldn't have, Mage or not.

"Yes," was his answer, and he still had yet to look at her.

"Why am I here instead of your office?"

"I thought the reasons were obvious." He sounded reproachful but mild, as if he were talking to a particularly dunderheaded Slytherin first-year, oddly, the only student species Snape appeared to have some patience for.

"Oh... So, we'll be meeting here, I gather? For the training, that is."

"Sometimes."

"Where else?"

"Various locations."

This brevity, as well as the fact that she was still talking to his back, started to grate on her.

"I have questions," she said, not even trying to hide the irritation in her voice. This might as well be a good time to test the limits of his patience.

"Ask."

"Are you a Mage?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you say so in the Headmaster's office the other night?"

"Minerva."

"She's not a Mage?"

"That she is not."

"But she knows? Is it because she's Head of House?"

There was a silence, during which Hermione desperately scrambled to gather some of her previous brash mood and register the fact that the usually uptight professor had referred to her Head of House as 'Minerva'.

"Is this some part of the code you have, not talking about each other when non-Mages are around?" she asked, thinking petulantly that asking questions with obvious answers and getting away with it by having Dumbledore's express permission was a good way to show she was not to be trifled with.

"We," Snape's answer came. The man was still as serene as a sunny Mediterranean midday.

"We what?" Hermione asked dumbly.

"We, not *you*. You are a Mage too, and it would do you well to keep that in mind."

His highly suspicious lack of insults, disparaging comments, and general nastiness was very disconcerting.

Before she tried to discern how much of it could be attributed to the fact that he was within his own space and how much to the obviously volatile potion, which he was now decanting in a plain vial, he turned to her and gave her a head-to-toe look.

Hermione felt like he was surveying what he was saddled with but bore his scrutiny with dignity.

"Take off your robes," he said as if he were asking her something as mundane as taking out a quill.

"What? Why ever for?" Her eyes went wide. She did have a uniform under the robes, which was only wise, considering the autumn chill, but what kind of a request was that, coming from a teacher?

There finally was a flicker of impatience in his otherwise impressively dispassionate face, but he said nothing. Instead, he dipped something minute in the remainder of the potion he had just brewed and, with a few brisk strides, was by her side and grabbing her by the collar of her robes.

He caught her completely unawares, and while she was busy shifting her focus from his inexplicable request to the fact that he was now pulling at the collar to shove a hand down her back, and that the front of her high collar was now digging uncomfortably into her neck, she felt a pang of something simultaneously hot and cool somewhere around her twelfth vertebra.

The feeling itself was not altogether uncomfortable, but its strange novelty certainly was, and as soon as she was free from his hold, she stumbled forward and tried to reach behind her back, her hands commanded by a subconscious defense mechanism.

The burning and cooling spread around her body and clouded her vision for a moment. She stumbled forward blindly, grabbing for purchase, when an unexpectedly considerate hand supported her elbow.

"It would all have been much easier if you were able to follow a simple command without making it into ridiculous Gryffindor mulishness galore," Snape noted, letting go of her elbow when she was able to see clearly.

He looked at her meaningfully, and she would have been a fool not to understand that, in his books, this had been the first lesson. The rebellious Gryffindor inside her huffed at such unceremonious treatment, but she felt showing too much objection would just be foolish, knowing full well that she had walked straight into that one.

It appeared that trust was another issue on the plate to be tackled. She decided to give it a thorough pondering later.

"What was it?" she asked instead, with a slight sulk in her voice.

"A tracking nugget," Snape answered in the same off-handed manner he used when he asked her to lose the robes.

"A what?" The bastard, how dare he...

"A tracking nugget. The potion has keyed it to me so that I can monitor the state of your magic. You are a walking disaster, and I'd rather you were contained, but since the Headmaster insisted that your academic life remain as unchanged as possible, it's a necessary precaution. In cases of emergency, it will act as a Portkey," Snape answered without even batting an eyelash, while her entire being was quaking with indignation.

"How could you?! Without so much as asking! This is an atrocious breach of my personal space and privacy! I can't believe that you would..."

He was at her within seconds, the emotionless mask finally melting off his face like spring morning ice sheen.

"Now, I will only say this once, Miss Granger," he hissed, towering over her, his eyes burning coals of menace. "There will be rules. Rule number one, you do as I say at all times. Rule number two, if it seems to you that some particular time is an exception, see rule number one. Do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal," she spat back at him, her fury a much needed leverage for keeping remarkably unfazed by his intimidating glare.

"Oh, and Miss Granger," Snape continued with a malevolent glee in his voice. "There will be many more breaches of privacy and personal space on my behalf, which is always a requirement of such training. Do your sensibilities a favour and remember it during this sham of an express course on how to be a Mage for dummies."

He withdrew, and Hermione immediately felt weak. If she was going to stand up to this man, she'd need much more than petty daydreams of catching him in embarrassing attire or interrupting his beauty sleep.

Snape seemed to have composed himself fast and now looked at her with a patronizing curiosity.

"Don't get your hackles up. I'm not subjecting you to any special treatment because you are a Gryffindor, or an annoying, know-it-all irritant, or Potter's brain storage, or because I abhor the situation I'm placed in, or for whatever reason you think it is," he said, in a tone which clearly suggested that while these might not be the reasons for his off-handed treatment, to him, they all were stand-alone, glaringly obvious facts.

Hermione returned his gaze with her own, noting grudgingly how much, indeed, she had to learn. How easily he had read her. She sighed and looked away, making a mental note to read on Occluding and mind-shielding. Not like it would keep her mind safe from Snape, but it gave her the necessary illusion of hoping to have a safe place, one day, even within her mind, where she wouldn't feel so naked.

Snape turned from her and walked to one of the bookshelves.

"That will be it for this meeting. You will see me here each Monday and Thursday after dinner and each Sunday after breakfast, unless I notify you otherwise," he said to his books.

Hermione felt so relieved that it was over that she didn't even feel like asking all the questions that had become stocked at the front of her brain overnight.

Once again, Snape strode to her, a book in his hand.

As soon as Hermione laid her eyes on the book, she felt a ringing elation wedge itself amidst her emotional tumult. Now *that* was certainly a book she hadn't seen before. In fact, she hadn't come across anything remotely resembling it. She looked at it and felt her hands tremble slightly, as if she were an addict looking at her fix.

"Here, take this," Snape said with an indifferent note in his voice which suggested he did not share her reaction to the book.

She didn't know what to think of that fact. But, then again, she still didn't know so many things about Mages. Maybe this was how she was unique? Maybe this was her specialty, her *kind*? She almost laughed out loud at the irony. Snape's words from the meeting with the Headmaster sprang to her mind *very possibly, one of the most ridiculous ones*.

"Read it, and then we will have an educated discussion. I'm unwilling to put up with the amount of sheer ignorance on the matter you have so far displayed."

"What is this book, sir?" She reverted to polite treatment, hoping to glean as much information about the exciting tome from him as possible before it told her its tale.

"It's a book of Mages. The closest word would be 'a registry'. From the earliest known to some of the more recent. It contains myths and facts alike, all in all, the entirety of the Mage lore is here," the professor answered, and once again, she was uncomfortably poked by the lack of reverence in his voice, which the book so tangibly inspired in her.

"Now, see yourself out, Miss Granger. And meet me at eight sharp outside of Hogwarts Gates."

"Where will we be going, sir?" Hermione asked.

"We are going to see the Midwife," Snape answered with such an ease, as if she were seeing midwives on the regular basis.

"Who is the Midwife?" Hermione frowned. She really did not like his assumptive tone. Ignorance was a sin in her books, too, but only when it was voluntary. Hers was anything but.

"A kind of a Mage. Rather unique, really. But you'll see for yourself," Snape divulged and gestured towards the tiny door.

"Tonight at eight," he said, and she ran back to his office through the claustrophobia-igniting corridor.

It was not even nine yet. Her mind itched and etched her to find a secluded corner, throw a couple of Cushioning Spells and drown in the fascinating folio clutched to her chest. However, it was a Hogsmeade weekend, and the students would be leaving in an hour. She used all of her willpower, and the desire to immerse herself in the book slightly buckled under her resolve.

It literally hurt to make this decision, but, seeing as Snape was not the most willing conversationalist, it looked like a visit to Fred and George was in order. After enduring a quick internal struggle between her newly found adventurous side and her old sensible self, she decided against sneaking out to London on her own. Instead, she made a quick run for the Owlery.

Educated

Chapter 5 of 13

Hermione meets with the twins and learns a thing or two.

A/N: The response to this story blows me away. Thank you so much to all my readers and those who add this to favourites and especially to those of you who take time to leave me a note. Your thoughts are greatly appreciated! And you make me a happy little scribbler :)

This story was beta'd by **Potionsmistress23**, who is all sorts of fantastic. By the way, check out her **Love Vigilantes**, it's a great story where Severus is deliciously conflicted. And now, to the chapter.

The Hogwarts Owlery was one of Hermione's most favourite places in the castle. On the inside, its high roof was lined with roosts and perches, usually occupied by hundreds of birds of every possible owl variety. The apex of the onion-shaped dome was open, letting out the hooting dwellers and letting in a pillar of daylight, which contrasted starkly with the dim interior. This bright column was constantly pierced by slowly descending feathers, which danced chaotically on their way down amidst the dust motes. It all created a vision of an almost ethereal beauty no other castle inhabitants seemed to appreciate.

The Gryffindor Prefect loved coming here by day when it was empty and calm. Apart from an occasional house-elf, few ever visited the Owlery. Most students and teachers had their own owls, which could be called upon. Those who did not preferred their messages to be sent out by complaisant house-elves, while they themselves shunned the Owlery for its feather- and bird-dropping-littered floor. But not Hermione. She loved spending a quiet afternoon snuggled up in one of the niches. The soft hooting and the constant, languid fall of the feathers through the column of light provided a jovial incentive for work, reading, and contemplation. She had discovered the place back when she had been just a gangly child, and the owls had grown used to her presence. They had even established a pattern. She'd come, she'd be hooted at in greeting, she'd leave her treats on the floor, in the unlit area, and she'd retire to her niche.

Today, however, she actually had a letter to be delivered. Hermione placed a few slices of toast for all to nip at near one of the lower perches and dangled a strip of bacon she nicked from the kitchens. Half a dozen birds, hooting maniacally, descended from the upper roosts. Hermione picked a small, agile owlet with spotted wings and tied her note to Fred and George to its outstretched leg. Feeding it a bit of bacon, she shared the rest with the other five who deigned to interrupt their morning slumber for her and walked to the niche.

The pull of the book in her satchel was as strong as a river current in high water. She supposed she could just take a peek while the bird delivered the message. It was too irresistible for her sanity.

The book was waiting. She could almost feel it thrumming with the anticipation of being opened and...because there was really no better word to describe the process...devoured. The same tugging sensation somewhere under her heart answered the call of the book, and she hurriedly seated herself, cushioned by a few hasty charms and her warm cloak.

Now that she had herself settled for some quality time with the folio, Hermione tried to savour every single moment. Reverently, she pulled the tome out of her satchel and caressed its soft, leather binding. The book felt almost... *Dumbledoreish*, minus the insufferable meddling. It basically smacked of omniscience to Hermione. She closed her eyes in blissful contentment that could only be felt before launching into the *terra incognita* that was a new book. Opening the first page, Hermione let her fingers play over an intricate monogram of the title. *Scientia Abscondita*, the title read, which she vaguely translated as 'hidden knowledge'.

Her fingers tickled with the need to turn the page. Hermione obeyed the sweet command, and the world around her ceased to exist for an indefinite stretch of time.

She was violently dragged out of the fascinating world that the magical tome offered by an incessant, screeching sound. She focused reluctantly to discover a smallish, light-brown owlet clawing the robes on her shoulder, its feathers standing out indignantly. A strip of parchment was tied to its leg.

"Oh, I'm sorry, you poor little thing," Hermione cooed to the bird and scratched the dotted head affectionately.

The owlet offered its leg haughtily and took off, still screeching, as soon as the weird, bushy-feathered human, who tended to fall asleep with her eyes open and glued to a stack of paper worthy only of a good nibbling, took her post.

Dearest Hermione,

We hope your urgency has nothing to do with the purchase Mr. Sedgewick, a member of our honorable House, made a few days ago to celebrate the victory of Gryffindor over Ravenclaw, which is a sure thing written in the tables of Fates for next Saturday? You aren't going to be a wet blanket and bring it back to us like a perfect Prefect?

We will meet you at Rosmerta's at half past two.

Yours truly,

Forge

P.S. The bird you sent is a menace. Three Pygmy Pufflings fell victim to its claws, and it definitely prefers them orange. Now you owe us three Galleons. Oh, George, don't be an ass. Mione, he was just joking, you owe us nothing, however, the bird's palate needs to be educated.

Hermione laughed at the twins' antics and was suddenly aware that the sun had traversed quite a distance over the sky because the pillar of light in the middle of the chamber was of different intensity. As if time itself decided to remind her of its run, her stomach rumbled, and the rush of blood to her legs, which had fallen asleep from the long immobility, brought about an unpleasant prickling. She looked at her Muggle watch and was surprised to find that it was quarter to two. But, oh, how glorious those few hours spent bewitched by the book of Mages were.

Quickly gathering her belongings, Hermione decided that she'd have to miss out on the opportunity to stop by the kitchens to grab a bite to eat if she wanted to walk to Hogsmeade. Most of the eligible students had already left for the village, and since it was not her turn to chaperone, no one came yelling and searching for her. She quickly ran down several flights of moving stairs through the empty castle and set out to see the twins.

As Hermione trudged along the winding path to Hogsmeade, the weather was changing rapidly for the worse. Where there was a bright, if austere, sunny October afternoon, a messy, ashen-grey cloud started to crawl over the sky from the North, slowly claiming the light and laying deeper shadows around the Forbidden Forest to her left.

Shrugging her cloak tighter around her, she knocked the new knowledge of Mages about in her head.

After a quick look through the book, Hermione had an impression that it had been written by at least a dozen scribes. The earliest accounts of Mages dated back to the Golden Age of the Roman Empire. The earlier stories had taken the contours of mythology, and Hermione vaguely recognized some of the lesser Roman deities among the Mages mentioned.

The medieval descriptions were sometimes portentous, sometimes completely inane, dimmed by the echoes of witch hunt and religious fanaticism. However, they stayed much closer to the way beholden to factuality.

It was the more recent entries that she had found the most interesting and informative. It looked like they all had been recorded by one and the same Mage (that she did not doubt); the narrative was full of calm and measured tones of a journalist steeped in the facts.

She had come across many familiar names, but almost always they hadn't been the ones she'd historically appoint to being Mages.

Of the four founders, only Helga Hufflepuff had been a Mage, a Crafter. She had been extremely well-versed in the Magic of building, growing, and creation. Hermione was astonished to discover how many deeds that were generally attributed to Gryffindor or Slytherin had, in fact, been brought forth by her. She was solely responsible for building and enchanting Hogwarts; the school grounds and the Forbidden Forest were practically imbued with her magic. Over the years, however, many things of Hufflepuff's creation had fallen into the wrong hands or become corrupt and misused.

Another story, which puzzled Hermione to no end, was the story of the Flamels. Miraculously, it appeared Perenelle had been the Mage of the pair. She had belonged to the rare Shifter kind, her ability to handle matter and energy and the powers therein beyond imaginable. Their story was a sad one: Perenelle had been discovered at a young age by no other man than her own future husband and had been literally enslaved for the rest of her life, which was reported to be quite miserable. Perenelle's artifacts were highly sought after, and each had a bloody history of murder, betrayal, greed, and possession behind it.

The book did not divulge what Hermione had come to call the 'classification' of the Mages, but it usually stated to what kind this or that Mage belonged. There were numerous Crafters, like Helga Hufflepuff, of various degree and fame. Then, there were Talkers, those able to communicate with various beings, alive and inanimate alike. There were quite many Loki, ranging from innocuous pranksters to huge-scale schemers, liars, and provokers; many of the Loki would be found as second-in-commands to most outrageous tyrants and dictators history had seen. Then there were Menders, those with the powers for healing and renewal. There was an early and ambiguous mention of a Walker, the one who could step outside the realm of this world and come back. Some of the descriptions were extremely detailed, to the point of getting bogged down in exegesis on the very nature of Magic. Others were mere mentions, oblique and almost reluctantly given.

The book ended on Dumbledore, and whoever had written that particular entry down had had obviously no great liking for the elderly Wizard. Dumbledore was identified as the Player, the one who manipulates fates and gambles lives. Hermione felt that she was growing very much fond of that particular narrator.

After quite some time, she had noticed another peculiarity. It appeared that she had actually gained more factual knowledge than she'd read about. She could not explain the fact, and it was rather mind-boggling, but there it was she knew that, for instance, Merlin, who had been a Finder, and Nimue had had a relationship similar to the Flamels, that Nimue had benefitted hugely from her husband and brought about a strain of bloody, devastating events for her people. However, the version of this legend in the book was very much the same as everywhere else: there was no mention of Merlin and Nimue giving the vows of wedlock, yet Hermione knew it like a fact written in stone that they had been married. After she had discovered quite a few of such rather important tidbits, she decided that there was a pattern. She tried to put a finger on exactly how this little discovery made her feel and stopped on 'apprehensive'.

The friendly vista of Hogsmeade was drawing near. Dainty chimneys emitted merry little smoke puffs, and the town bustled with energy and the onslaught of the larger part of the Hogwarts student body. Generally, Hermione hated crowds, but the sight of Hogsmeade so literally stuffed with life was attractive in a way of a Muggle amusement park, even though it was overtaken by greys and browns of the muddy October.

Her Prefect persona kicking in, she broke a brawl about to start between several third-year boys, one of whom lost the other's newly bought wand polish, and headed for The Three Broomsticks.

The small, cozy pub was not yet swarmed by schoolchildren, hungry and thirsty after the morning filled with shopping, and Hermione immediately spotted the two identical crowns of red hair in one of the booths. She nodded her greetings to Rosmerta and practically ran for the table where the twins were making their forks perform the dance of the little swans.

For a brief moment, Hermione contemplated whether disclosing herself to the twins would rather go against the order not to discuss her *Mageness* with anyone or if it would more follow the Mage code of conduct, which okayed revealing their identities to their peers.

Her strong, inborn inclination to belong to a group, to be part of something, quickly weighted in for the latter option, and she called for the twins.

Mere seconds after she had been spotted, they wrapped her in a four-armed hug, her hair was ruffled by one hand, and her cheek pinched by another, the third hand was squeezing her shoulder affectionately, and one more patting her back.

"Well, if it's not our dear Frizzball!" a young, melodious voice exclaimed.

Hermione had earned the nickname a few years ago at the Burrow, where she had been spending holidays, after an unfortunate incident with one of the twins' inventions. Her hair resembled an enormous brown dandelion parachute ball for days. Yet, she had become somehow very partial to the nickname and the kind teasing that came along ever since. Every time Hermione saw the two red-headed devils they would ask, "So, how's the mop, Hermione?" or "Have any berries finally grown in your bramble?"

"Mione, now that your owl claimed some of our Pygmy Puffs, you'll have to donate some of your hair for future innovative development!" a voice similar to the first one added, and both twins, joined by their frizzy friend, exploded in contagious laughter.

"Fred, George, you can't even start to imagine how glad I am to see you!" Hermione finally managed after extricating herself from their embrace.

"Whoo, so much love, to what do we owe the pleasure?" Fred (for it was definitely Fred) asked cheerfully.

"I'm a Mage," she blurted out without any preliminaries and watched their smiles go slack for a few seconds.

Then they simultaneously turned to each other, two identical unfathomable expressions overtaking their faces at absolutely equal speeds.

"Fred, are you thinking what I'm thinking?" George asked, not taking his eyes off his brother.

"If you're thinking it, I'm definitely thinking the same, George," his living reflection replied.

Their pounce was almost instantaneous, and she felt the nauseating tug of an Apparition.

Hermione stopped whirling and found herself in what must have been the Weasley Wizarding Wheezes storage room or accounts and records cabinet, or both, with an occasional supporting role of being an experimental laboratory, judging by the quantity of odd marks and splotches on the walls.

"You two carrot tops! You whisked me away! I'm not even allowed to be here! I'm going to be skinned alive, you berks!" Hermione fumed, waved her hands emphatically, and was generally furious.

"Rosmerta's place is crawling with Extendable Ears, silly," Fred answered quickly, and his line was smoothly picked up by his brother, "She orders them under an assumed name in indecent quantities, 'Mione."

For a moment, Hermione just shot daggers with her eyes at the two, her hands balled into fists at her sides.

"Easy, Frizzy," George said with a characteristic twitch to the corner of his mouth, thanks to which Hermione had learned to differentiate between the two a long while ago.

The twins eyed her curiously, as if she had suddenly grown a unicorn horn.

"So... Say that again?" Fred said, still watching her.

"I. Am. A godsdamned Mage."

And then she was immediately hugged and squished again, laughed all over, dragged into some improvised dance of joy, which included yowls and howls and unimaginable *pas*. All of a sudden, the room was full of carol-singing skylarks and random shooting stars, and Hermione dimly remembered that she'd heard of this somewhere before... Her anger dissipated in direct proportion to the escalation of the skylark's frenzied chirruping.

"Blimey, Hermione, but this is brilliant!" Fred practically squealed never stopping with his bad jig.

"And who would have thought, our Hermione!" George yelled over the shrill sound of skylarks, who caroled so diligently that their feathers were standing on end.

The impromptu celebration quieted after a few minutes, and all the stars and birds popped out of existence one by one.

"So, why had you kept it a secret all those years?" Fred finally asked, and Hermione detected a barely there tinge of hurt in his voice.

"I didn't. I only discovered last night," she answered and sighed.

"Merlin's pink pyjamas!" George whistled.

"It's a miracle you're still in one piece," his brother added with awe.

"And she's come to us, Fred."

"That she did, George!"

And then she was enveloped in yet another hug and oohed and ached at.

"Come, tell us everything now," both of the twins said almost at the same time and led her up the stairs to their quarters above the shop.

"I'm not really allowed to be here," Hermione tried to chime in, but her little inner imp of rebellion struck again, and she thought that she hadn't actually done anything to get here, so, technically, it couldn't count as an offense. Getting rid of the last twee remnants of self-deprecation, she followed her two redheaded friends.

"So, do you know your kind yet?" Fred asked after her story, a pot of tea, and a tray of biscuits (courtesy of a house-elf who sported a patch of red hair on its head, which obviously wasn't a part of its natural heritage) were done away with.

"No, I don't even know how one finds it out," Hermione replied.

"The Midwife. You are seeing her tonight, aren't you?" George said, finishing the last biscuit.

"Oh," was all Hermione could say and waited for some elaboration.

"Goodie, this should be fun, George!" Fred giggled. "A galleon says Hermione's a Frizzer!"

"Don't be a twit, Fred, what kind of Mage is a *Frizzer*? I'm most certain she is a Mopper! Just look at that thing. It gets wilder with each passing year. 'Mione, George and I are sure that whatever Mage variety you are, it's all about that living thing on your head. Has it been demonstrating any special powers? I do so hope it doesn't try to strangle you in your sleep."

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Please! Can I just..."

"Sorry, Mi. It's all..."

"...George's fault," Fred finished his brother's sentence, and both looked at a rather annoyed Hermione with their perfectly calibrated shop runners appeal.

"It's all so new to me. It's been too much. And now I wear this... tracking thing. I feel like a prisoner with a collar programmed to explode if I step out."

There was identical confusion in the twins' features.

"Sorry, it's a Muggle thing; your dad would know, I brought him tapes with all those prison shows," Hermione mumbled.

"Snape put a tracking nugget on you?" Fred asked, almost casually.

"Yes!" she answered bitterly. "Did you have one?"

"No, but he threatened us with it," George said and added after a small pause, "He won't know you're here, dandelion. The nugget only tracks your magic, not your location."

"But if you want us to tweak it a bit," Fred suggested with a mischievous wiggle of his eyebrows, "we can."

"I'm not sure..." Hermione answered with a great deal of hesitation, though a little voice inside her went hoarse screaming *Do it! Do! It!* "I don't want to get in trouble with Professor Snape this early in my training. He hates me as it is. Oh, he's the worst of all the possible teachers with whom to be stuck in training.

Her flame-haired counterparts looked at her with a mirroring gleam of amusement in their eyes.

"Hermione," Fred started.

"You'll probably think we've gone barmy," George picked up.

"But before you do, please consider the possibility that we haven't," Gred added.

"Even though what we are about to say to you can come across as absolutely insane," Forge finished.

But the time their co-spoken tirade was done, Hermione sat with eyes wide open, anticipating the main course, which certainly was to follow such a flowery prelude.

The twins looked at each other, as if some kind of a decision were being made.

Finally, Fred took a deep, fortifying breath and let it out, "Snape is actually a decent mentor." The tips of his ears burned crimson.

"I'd even go as far as saying he's a decent human being. When he wants to be, that is. Which is, of course, once in a month of Sundays," George added and exchanged a horrified look with his brother.

"I suppose I should take it as one of those 'I'd tell you but then I'd have to Oblivate you' confessions let out unexpectedly," Hermione suggested sourly after a pause.

"Fred, have I told you recently how much I love brains on a woman?" George's face lit up in a positively victorious smile.

"No, recently it has been arses and tits mostly, but I hear you, brother of mine!" Now it was Fred's turn to sport a disarming grin.

"In fact, I'm thinking The Frizz is not a Glumbumble nest, but rather her genius brain trying to take root in the outer world!" George made an emphatic gesture about his head with his hands, trying to convey exactly how fascinating he found the idea.

His copy let out a guffaw, and Hermione felt mollified enough to laugh with them.

"I'd really like to know how it was, being taught by Professor Snape," she said quietly and looked at her folded hands, feeling somehow insecure and out of place in this house of perpetual mirth, jokes, silliness, and brotherly love.

Something in her pose must have stricken a chord in the two Loki Mages, and their faces assumed very unfamiliar expressions which were both serious and a little wistful, as if they were to recollect something treasurable which was lost beyond recovery to the inexorable run of time.

"I don't think we could find the right words, Hermione," Fred ventured forth, the usage of her full name, instead of a shortened version or a nickname adding even more weight to the seriousness in his voice.

Yes, Hermione thought, it was definitely easier to joke about the professor.

"He really does know a lot, 'Mione. He taught us a lot, too," George said and looked to his brother for confirmation, and then both nodded enthusiastically.

"Yes, your swotty little heart shall sing and rejoice, I suppose," Fred added.

"So, are you saying he is... He was not mean to you? I'm just preparing for the worst here, you know? He so obviously despises the fact that he has been... *saddled* with me..." Hermione trailed, trying to wrap her mind about the new information.

"Don't worry, 'Mione, if you want your fill of nasty Snape, you are sure to get it aplenty." George chuckled and smiled wickedly at her.

"Oh, yes, the good ole' bat can be a right git, especially when he's not busy being a minging shampoo dodger or a generally colossal steaming twat," Fred completed his brother with a laugh.

"Fred!" Hermione barely managed to look horrified at Fred's rather colourful foray into cussing because inside she was shaking with laughter.

"Oh, Mione, to cut the long story short, we think you're in for finding out Snape is not what his delightful social graces and gentle approach suggest," George said sarcastically, putting a resume to the discussion by summoning the house-elf with the ridiculous auburn bangs so that the odd creature could clean up the tea trays.

Hermione looked at her Muggle wrist watch and sighed. She really should be going. However, there was one question she could not leave hanging.

"Do you know what his kind is? Professor Snape's, I mean," she asked, her eyes glued to the red-headed elf, scurrying about with tea things.

"Oh, his kind?" Fred gave his brother a puzzled look, and both faces broke out into that same slightly reminiscent and a tad wistful smile she'd already seen on them not a quarter of an hour before.

"We had never found out, Frizzball," George confessed, hanging his head, as if it were his personal defeat.

"But don't you think we didn't try!" Fred wiggled his eyebrows at her, and she immediately smiled, her head full of ways the two prankster Mages could employ to worm their way into their surly mentor's secrets.

"I see," she answered quietly. "Um, I think I should be going now. And thank you. It's been...enlightening."

She smiled gently and had a fleeting thought about how fitting it was for Fred and George to be what they were. How definitely in their element they seemed.

She briefly considered asking what kind of Destiny they thought their lives were ruled by, but something told her that trying to indulge in philosophical discussions with the twins would be like talking Advanced Transfiguration with Ron.

Still, the meeting lifted her spirits considerably. Perhaps, she did not find the sources of information she hoped for, but there, with her, were her two allies, fussing about her with tea and giving her sweet little pieces of advice like 'don't bug Snape with questions when he's grading' and 'oh, his Saturday mornings are sacred and his own, he goes into the Forest for ingredients' and then 'if he's being in a mighty strop it's best to smile or pull a joke, it confuses him'. It was touching, it was welcome, and she was feeling accepted, the feeling as rare as it was precious.

She thanked the twins heartily and received another four-handed hug in front of the Floo which would take her back to Rosmerta's.

"I... I'd like to call in on you from time to time if it's okay," she finally said, a handful of Floo Powder in her palm, her eyes shining a bit.

"Of course, Frizzlocks!" the twins said in chorus and petted her head affectionately with two right hands.

"It's a good thing to... to know you are one of us. Our folks don't know. Mum and Dad do, but prefer to act like they don't and... We're so few and... it's just great to know, um... yes," George babbled. Hermione had always suspected he was the more serious one of the two, if the term 'serious' could ever be applied to the twins.

Hermione kissed two smooth left cheeks and threw the powder into the big, rather dilapidated hearth. In a second, she was popping out in Three Broomsticks.

The discreet pub owner raised an eyebrow at her, and seeing as the Floo traffic wasn't as packed in Hogsmeade as it was in Diagon Alley, to say nothing of the fact that

she was a student with travel limitations placed on her, Hermione mumbled something about an urgent meeting with friends and flashed her Prefect badge at Rosmerta in what she hoped looked like her cloak falling open accidentally.

Rosmerta scoffed rather good-naturedly and turned to a patron in need of more flaming cherry grog.

Hermione thought that she wouldn't mind a quarter of the heavenly warming nectar (and Rosmerta's was specifically brilliant) herself but decided to pass.

Most of the students were either walking up the path to Hogwarts or in the castle already, and she'd hate to be caught out dawdling by Filch.

Five minutes to eight saw Hermione shifting from foot to foot and trying to hide from the piercing wind next to a wall just inside the Hogwarts Gates. She had only been outside for a few minutes and was already chilled to the bone. She had spent a quiet afternoon hiding away from her classmates, hopped up on sugar and excitement after the Hogsmeade journey, and finished off the Book of Mages. It was indeed an enticing read, but mostly of the same sort – an account of all the has-beens. But one important piece that she had filed away for future research was the fact that she now knew with a definite certainty that she was somehow learning more than was textually written.

The icy wind whirled about some brown, withered yew leaves from the Forbidden Forest and howled somberly. Hermione was getting impatient, and the minutes stretched in annoying eternities in such dreadful weather.

When the clock on one of the towers chimed eight, there was a small pop behind her and she turned around, expecting to see Professor Snape, but was faced with a tiny, huddled, and immensely old-looking house-elf. Its eyes were watery-yellow, and it was dressed in something remotely resembling an ancient House Scarf, though Hermione certainly could not discern the colours, which had long before given up in the face of filth and old age. But the most distinguishing feature of the elf was that it had enormous, wrinkled ears that folded forward, like those of a pig, and bore tears here and there.

What is it with today and odd-looking house-elves anyway? Hermione thought and watched the wizened creature drag its feet towards her.

"Master Professor Snape is saying to wait, Miss. Master Professor is sent Lop, and Lop tells Miss. Master is to be coming here shortly," Lop croaked and shivered when a violent gust of wind caught its flapping ears and lifted them up like ugly, veined sails.

"Thank you, er... Lop," Hermione answered, feeling a wave of pity mixed with an odd aversion for the elf. What a fitting name the creature had. She made a few hasty steps towards the entrance doors when her progress was interrupted by a bony hand on her knee.

"Master is saying Miss is not to go anywhere and to wait here," Lop screeched. The importance of its words was underlined with a jaundiced, long-fingered hand pointing to a flagstone underneath her feet and the elf's eyes bugging out in a way that suggested that Lop meant business. With that, the little elf popped back to where it came from.

"Oh, fine!" Hermione snapped back and wondered what kind of Multi-maladies Fly bit her in the head on the day she had decided to launch SPEW.

Ten minutes later, Hermione started to get nervous. What was taking the usually punctual professor so long? Was he summoned? Had something happened? She was feeling like every single cell of her body was shivering with cold, and every single muscle was straining to keep the warmth in. The Warming Charm she kept recasting did nothing to shield her from the wind.

After another fifteen minutes, her lips started to get chapped and her eyes watered. She started thinking of whether she could possibly get away with disobeying Snape and waiting inside, especially since her little trip to London went seemingly unnoticed, when she spotted a dark silhouette gliding swiftly up and across the field from the direction of the Forbidden Forest.

Hermione barely had the time to register how odd it was that the professor was coming from somewhere outside the castle because the Potions master was by her side within seconds.

"Come," he ordered and looked around warily.

"What's happened, Professor?" Hermione retorted, her meager attempt to follow the Number Two rule easily quaffed by irritation and cold.

An eyebrow rose up almost lazily, but Hermione could tell that the usually precise and economical in his movements professor was in a great hurry. It only ignited her annoyance with him, and her wish to make him reckon with her being a person and not a ragdoll to drag around without as much as an explanation took over.

"I've been waiting here in this mother of all bad weathers for over half an hour! And your... Lop said I couldn't even go inside!" She was getting pathetically shrill.

"We have wasted enough time. And as for that – you're a witch aren't you?" Snape hissed, bringing his face closer to her.

A snide response about his obviously shameful mark in Charms, which prevented him from remembering that the Warming Charms were useless on wind, was about to leave her mouth when an entrance door to the castle creaked open and immediately there were voices.

"...how annoyed and disappointed I am, Draco. Do not make me suspect you are no good for handling a simple task, ever again."

As soon as she attributed the voice to one Lucius Malfoy, she was roughly yanked away and immediately felt like a bucket of ice-water was poured over her. Her yelp was effectively prevented by a firm, wiry hand over her mouth.

"Don't even breathe," her professor's voice rustled in her ear, and for a moment there was nothing but the vicious howl of wind, a mad thumping of her heart, which seemed to have jumped up to her throat, and a measured clicking of metal-shod boots on the flagstones.

She was pressed flush against her mentor's chest, one of his arms restricting her movements and the other still clamped over her mouth, and both of them were standing Disillusioned in a little niche behind a sculpture separating the segments of baluster railing.

Trying to calm her breathing, Hermione watched the regal figure of Lucius Malfoy, a shimmering of silver fox fur around his shoulders, stride across the courtyard towards the Gates, his wand out.

"Father!" came a slightly desperate cry from Draco, and Hermione noted that there was still a lingering crack left in his voice, which somehow made her feel pity for the ferret. She pushed the uncomfortable feeling away.

Lucius did not as much as halt his steps. He did slow, however, when he was passing by the very sculpture behind which Hermione stood securely clasped in Snape's steely embrace; Malfoy's chiseled nostrils flared as he took in the air. She felt her heart race with some innate, primal horror which she could neither explain away nor quail. Her sensible side frantically tried to whip her entire being into calming down, screaming at her that she had never feared Malfoy so, and it would be the worst timing to start now, but it was of no use. The horror curled and writhed inside as if it were a parasite worm eating away at her guts, an alien being she had no restraint for, and she felt that if something, some outlet, some form of release did not come fast, she would erupt, either with magic or with her dinner, and that terrified her even more.

The hand over her mouth relaxed and moved slowly to cover her eyes and forehead. It felt... oddly comforting and almost gentle. She thought she felt a whisper of magic across the back of her head which raised the hairs on her nape, but ascribed it to her own state. Though Hermione still could see Lucius through the slits between her professor's bony fingers, she felt the horror ebb away and realized she was as tense as a rod.

Meanwhile, the clicking of Lucius's fussy dragonhide boots stopped.

"The air here reeks of muddy blood," he spat with contempt, turning to Draco. "They must have left already."

"Father, I'm sorry, I did arrange for him to be held back for at least half an hour, I don't know where she..."

"Cease! And be glad this order did not come from our Lord. He does not suffer incompetence lightly."

With that, Malfoy senior swept in a flurry of furs and velvets and expensively styled silvery hair to the Gates and was gone. A full minute later, the entrance doors to the castle closed behind Draco.

As soon as there were no more sounds in the air but the occasional yowls of the wind, Snape released his trainee.

"What was that?" Hermione managed, feeling the tension leave her body and give way to shaking. Her mind reeled trying to connect the dots and understand how many of the circumstances were connected. Had Lop just prevented her meeting with the elder Malfoy?

"That was your godsdamned magic almost doing both of us in!" The Potions master was positively livid.

"I meant, did you send Lop to warn me not to come inside and that whole thing with Lucius and Draco and..."

Oh.

The realization dawned on her, and she felt a desperate need to sit down. So that was what the tracking nugget was for.

"So tell me, Miss Granger," Snape spat, his voice rippling with cold fury, "What will it take you to remember to take me at my word? I'm afraid you do not fully understand the extent of free rein I have with you per Dumbledore's arrangement, and trust me when I say that if I inscribe the words 'I must do as I am told' in burning letters on your forehead, it will not be considered an inappropriate teacherly digression."

Hermione recoiled in fear and hurt. But even more hurtful was the feeling of her own inadequacy. It felt like that her messes were piling in quantity like an avalanche. And the pile seemed to have the same destructive capacity. She had just placed herself and her mentor in danger, all because of her dawdling and an irritating tendency to question everyone's actions. She should have just gone with him and asked questions later. But she was so cold and so annoyed, and yes, so worried about him and she...

And being close to him felt safe, somehow.

"I'm sorry, Professor, and thank you for... handling this situation and... me... so well," she whispered, a feeling of defeat washing over her.

"Not every inspiring platitude has real substance, Miss Granger," Snape answered, the malice almost gone from his voice. "We still have an appointment to go to, and you have some explaining to do."

He looked at her with disappointment in his eyes and gestured for her to follow him.

Hermione followed with her head hung low and a distinct feeling that her mentor's disappointment stung worse than his vicious anger.

6. Tried

Chapter 6 of 13

Hermione and her mentor visit the Midwife. Not everything goes as expected.

A/N: My dear readers! I want to apologize profusely for missing a few updates. This month has been rather horrible for me. On V-day weekend I had a very unfortunate incident, involving a wasp and a very severe case of allergies. Stayed in hospital for a week, my lungs shut off, sort of. Next thing, it got complicated with a pneumonia. Another ten days in hospital sans Internet, but for my cell.

I'll try to make it up to you. I'll also try not to deviate from my self-imposed schedule of one post a week in the future. Thank you to everyone who sent notes, letters and PMs. And a giant thank you to **potionsmistress23**, a beta to die for. Enjoy the chapter and drop me a note if you like. Reviews are love! Send some! :)

Shrugging her coat about herself with grim resolve, Hermione started after Professor Snape. She was determined not to screw up anymore. Well, at least for a stretch of time, she thought. She wasn't yet ready to give herself as much credit as being sure something wouldn't pop up and mess up her laudable intentions.

She trotted after her taciturn companion, his cloak's billow a mad dance in the wind, and thought about ways to reset their working relationship to a blank page. Her Gryffindor brain, buzzing like a disrupted ant-hill, provided only one measure to be taken. Truth.

She should tell the professor about the twins. A little sliver of her mind, the devious one, the one that was rapidly growing of late, wasn't planning on that being now. It had to go to hell.

"Professor Snape!" Hermione called to the man marching purposefully ahead of her.

He didn't stop.

He didn't even demonstrate as much as a sign he'd heard her. Hermione found that especially troubling.

She hurried her step, and after a short run she was beside her mentor, cloak and hair whipping in the wind.

"Professor, I need to tell you something!" Words were bursting from her like confetti from a Christmas cracker. "I went to see Fred and George earlier today." She waited a bit and added, "In London."

That made Professor Snape stop abruptly.

"And you are telling me this because, Miss Granger?" he asked, his voice standing out in the violent wind, not with the volume but with the sheer maliciousness.

"I want a fresh start," she breathed out. "Please," she added when his cold glare was all she got for an answer.

"Do you even realize how close to death we were a few minutes ago?" he demanded, his voice rivaling permafrost for coldness.

The dim light of the stormy night cast sharp shadows on his face, making him even more ominous, making his words and the could-have-beens he was pointing at even more terrifying.

"No! I don't! And that's exactly the thing!" she said passionately, trying to channel all of the frustration *thenot knowing* brought her. "I'm trying to trust you here! But all those elliptical remarks and assumptions that I somehow must know things don't help!"

He looked at her, seemingly taken aback.

"We are not having this conversation right now, in this weather and in these circumstances," he answered haughtily, lifting his chin a bit, which caused the shadows on his face to rearrange from harsh angles to softer shapes. She noticed then, that he was not as furious as she thought he would have been.

"When *are* we having this conversation?" she asked, sounding way too petulant even to herself. She immediately thought that her intention to start afresh by being mature was quickly going down the drain.

But she couldn't back down. Hermione felt she was on the verge of negotiating something important.

He looked at her with a curiosity she couldn't see etched on his face but could feel as a tangible substance emanating from him.

Without deigning to answer, he started to turn on his heel slowly, his eyes never leaving her ruffled form, and then he was walking towards the Apparition point again, slower this time, as if there were a stretching cord between them which would break if he moved too fast or too abruptly.

A test, she realized. It was a test. Trying not to dwell too much on the whys and hows of it, she firmly put a foot on her own desire to stomp, yell, and demand an answer and willed her feet to follow him. Silently.

Merlin, this was not going to be a thing she could get used to in a hurry.

They reached the Apparition point in a few minutes, and he turned to her, a small, battered stuffed animal of unidentifiable species in his outstretched hand. A Portkey. The location of the Midwife must be pretty far away if even such a capable wizard as Professor Snape was not risking to Apparate there, Hermione thought and resisted the urge to ask about the Portkey.

It immediately occurred to her how silly her asking would be, since his intent was obvious enough. The thought that came after put a crimson of shame on her cheeks. She suddenly realized that she must have been doing a lot of this questioning the obvious, not just with the professor. Maybe she was indeed the pain in the neck everyone thought her to be.

An arch of an eyebrow prompted her to action with the practiced, silent eloquence of a simple gesture she had come to associate with her mentor. She sighed, bracing herself, and put her hand on the toy's soiled tummy. And then there was spinning and lurching and tugging of assorted parts of her body in all directions, and then, just about when she was panicking over her having to breathe soon and there not being any air to inhale, the excruciating sensations stopped. She landed on her unsteady feet and almost bumped into a broad expanse of black, which was her professor's chest. His eyebrow rose again, this time in what she thought was a back-handed version of an 'are you okay' question. He'd never outright ask her, she knew. She nodded in the affirmative and felt a strangeness at the thought how easy and straightforward it was to communicate with her mouth shut.

Hermione straightened herself out and looked around. She appeared to be in the middle of a snow drift, knee deep. And that snow drift appeared to be in the middle of a vast, starlit valley, full of its unnumbered peers. She had never seen so much snow, not even when she went skiing in the Alps with her parents. It was magnificently untouched, it glimmered softly in the starlight, it covered slumbering pine trees with a thick coat, and it appeared somehow ancient, like it had always been there.

"Where are we?" she asked, awed and feeling totally justified asking, especially after a brief glance at Professor Snape had confirmed that he was somewhat confused by their whereabouts as well.

"We are here to see the Midwife, and apparently, she has relocated since I last saw her," Professor answered and, seeing as she was still staring up at him with eyes like saucers, continued reluctantly, "The Portkey is issued by the Midwife herself; there's no telling where it takes you."

If Hermione was somewhat miffed at the idea of her mentor using a Portkey, the destination of which 'there was no telling' for, she let it rest.

"I take it you have seen the Midwife before, sir," she said with tentative politeness, framing her question into a statement carefully.

"Obviously," he answered, but maybe her previous compliance had mellowed him somewhat because he added, "Once for my own self, and then when I went with the twins."

"Oh," she puffed out lamely and looked around for any sign of habitation.

There wasn't so much as a path in the snow or a trail pattern left by some misfortunate animal to indicate there was even life around.

However, Professor Snape seemed to have figured out their location soon enough. Performing a series of complex wand movements, he obviously acquired a sense of direction in the snow-covered waste and gestured for her to follow him. Their walk was slow and unsteady. Even though the professor was removing excess snow off his way from time to time, Hermione's feet still managed to get caught in the uneven ground's nooks, covered by thick, downy snow.

As she stumbled and wobbled after Professor Snape, who seemed as lithe and steady as if he were walking on a paved road, her tongue itched again. She was not deluding herself that the issue of her little London trip had been dropped for good, but oh, how greatly his silence and withholding of all things Mage-related got to her.

Immersed in thoughts and questions, which were whirling inside her head like the snowflakes outside it, she lost her balance when one of her feet went into some hole in the ground, and a second later she was being severely disillusioned about how fluffy and soft the snow looked. Her face particularly was not fond of the experience, hitting the crust hard.

For a minute, she lost her bearings and only started to scramble up when the needles of icy cold began to prickle at her skin in a way that was rather more than she could tolerate. The snow was deep, the place immediately seemed hostile, and her mentor's ever cold attitude only fit into this sordid land of winter, glaciers, and austere pines, wherever the hell it was.

Hermione felt an entirely different, hot prickling at her eyes and battled with her soggy cloak to get up. Just about when her struggle with her attire seemed to be dropping on the losing (and very humiliating) side, a firm hand grabbed her elbow and hauled her up, none too gently but very efficiently.

She was solid on her feet and realizing that snow was everywhere inside her clothes. Her impossible hair was chock-full of it, it sneaked in her sensible boots, and some of it was currently melting behind her collar and slithering down her back in cold little trickles. Her professor sighed beside her, and she couldn't discern whether it was a sigh of frustration or aggravation or disappointment. An insane part of her desperately wished it was a sigh of compassion at the sight of her misery, and (very untimely so, she thought) she instantly remembered how safe it had felt when his cloak had given up its dominant billow to be wrapped around her like a cocoon of security.

Fighting hard against tears that were dangerously close to spilling, she asked the first inane thing that popped to the surface of her mind.

"Was it so horrible with Fred and George? Put you off... training... entirely?" She finished with an embarrassing snuffle.

Her question must have caught the Potions master completely unaware because, for a fleeting moment, his face showed unguarded wonder and something altogether... *tolerant*. Well, almost.

"At times," he answered, quickly collecting himself, "they were so... absolutely... atrociously... insufferable that a quick Avada seemed like a merciful end to both of them." His voice could have put the snow kingdom around them to shame. But there was something to it, some barely there undertone which she couldn't discern. A fondness of sorts, maybe, if she considered it viable to put 'Professor Snape' and 'fond' in the same sentence.

And Hermione felt normal again, strangely. She could very much imagine the extent of the word 'insufferable' when applied to the twins.

She brushed the snow off her face, hiding a small smile with the gesture. Her cheek appeared to have been scratched on the hard crust, and the melting snow was smarting on the cut. Professor Snape's eyes fixed on the small abrasion. The tip of his wand touched her cheek lightly, and she felt the skin there tingle, healing.

Hermione mumbled her thanks and followed the man in front of her when he started walking again.

Soon enough, the pines started to get taller and form small orchards, and then, beneath a cozy clutch of trees, Hermione noticed a light. It was faint as if it were coming out of a small window with a tainted, uneven glass in it, which was probably the case. After another three minutes of barraging through the snow, they saw a timberwork hut. It looked old and rickety, half-sunk into the ground and almost entirely covered with snow.

"It appears we have reached our destination," Professor Snape said, halting his step.

"This is where the Midwife... receives visitors?" Hermione asked, shivering with cold. Judging by the darkness of the hour and the surroundings, she assumed they were somewhere up in the Northern Europe.

"This is where she lives. But the last time I went, the place was different," her surly companion answered, and Hermione had a sharp feeling that he was slightly confused. She didn't like it. It retracted from the solid ground under the whole situation.

Suddenly, the door, which was half snowed in, flew open, letting out a draft of cozy warmth and a beam of juicy, ochre-coloured light, the kind that can only be exuded by a flaming hearth, and a tall, lissome creature flew out, wrapped in a halo of pale blond hair.

At first, Hermione thought she was a Veela, at least in part, so ethereally, otherworldly pretty she was.

"*Terve!*" the glowing... girl... or woman, Hermione could not decide, exclaimed and dashed towards them with an expression of ultimate rapture on her smooth, perfect face.

"What is she saying?" Hermione asked no one in particular as the girl (yes, definitely a girl; no, not Veela, either) ran up to her, took her clammy hands into her warm and soft ones and gave her a peck on the cheek which could not be described other than loving.

"Oh, you English!" the fairy-like creature squealed with delight as if this discovery had brought her utmost joy.

"I beg your pardon, Madam," Professor Snape ventured stiffly, folding his hands across his chest in the numerous folds of his cloak when the girl was about to give him the same welcome. "But where is Signora Consuelo?"

Apparently, he had expected something different altogether, Hermione thought with some unease.

"Come inside! I wait for you. Tell you all," the angelic girl said with a little less elation, which made her at least a bit more humanlike.

They followed their exalted host inside her little dwelling, and Hermione was very relieved to find a blazing fire in the hearth and a vacant chair right next to it.

"Oh, I so happy!" the pale-haired girl chirped, bustling about the tiny kitchen (sitting room and dining room) with tea. "You my first clientele!"

Her speech was heavily accented, but Hermione could not place it. She looked tall and willowy, pale-skinned; she had blue, azure eyes with light-brown lashes and a delicately curved mouth. Stunningly beautiful and a bit on the crazy side. The girl was clad (for she was exactly clad, not dressed or attired) in a hand-knit dress, a strange, fur-made footwear Hermione could not put a name to, and a shawl with something looking eerily like rabbit paws instead of tassels. She had golden hoop earrings on, so large a small parrot could perch on them. Everything about her screamed North.

"Are you... the Midwife?" the blunt Gryffindor in Hermione asked before she could shut it up.

"You can say so," the strange creature replied, smiling and showing a perfect set of snow-white teeth. "Oh, I sorry. Venla. My name."

"I'm Hermione Granger and this is Professor Snape, my mentor. We're both from Hogwarts in Scotland." Hermione gestured to her professor, who was standing in the corner next to the low-set door and giving out the air of a highly superior creature, a posture Hermione was coming to associate with his confusion.

"Yes, nice meet you, Hermione, Professor," Venla said, managing to shake both of their hands in quick succession.

"Well, Miss... Venla," Professor Snape pronounced her name as if it were something distasteful, "are you going to let Madam Consuelo take your place seeing us any time soon?"

"Madam Consuelo died. Old. Last winter. I instead. I move from Spain. I her... her..." she suddenly looked very sad and was desperately searching her obviously meager English vocabulary.

"...her apprentice?" Hermione provided, her heart going out to the girl.

"Yes, yes! You new?" Venla asked.

"I... guess so."

She turned to look at her professor, who strangely wasn't doing the talking. Snape seemed to be taken aback by the news of the older Midwife's death.

"Good grief, I'm surrounded by amateurs. Do you even know what to do?" he asked the sunny Venla in his patented condescending tone.

"Yes, I know. I learned. Consuelo showed," the young Midwife answered, taking the challenge up and a step closer to the Potions master.

She was young, Hermione thought. Probably only a few years older than herself. In a Luna-like way, Hermione somehow really liked the girl. Or maybe it was the fact that her mentor obviously thought her, too, not worthy of his while.

"So, you new! How exciting!" Venla chattered away, turning back to Hermione. "But you so old..."

Apparently, either tact was not her strong suit or she did have a serious language barrier.

"I... uh... I'm Muggle-born, you see," Hermione answered and tried to hold her head up high.

"Muggle-born? Parents Muggles? So strange!"

"Yes, you'd think. Well, anyway... can you... tell me what you do? I didn't have a... chance to read up on Midwives." At that Hermione gave her saturnine companion a look full of reproach. She hated not being in the know, and the book of Mages provided zero information about Midwives.

"Not Midwives, stupid." (Hermione was pretty sure Venla meant silly, so she went right along with it.) "Midwife. Only one. In whole world."

"There's only one Midwife at a time. No one knows how it is regulated, just like not a single Mage would be able to tell where or how they find their successor. Midwives *deliver* new Mages. That's their sole purpose. They help the young ones break the shell and find out their kind." Professor Snape finally joined the conversation, albeit very, very reluctantly.

"Yes, yes, I tell your kind and wake your magic!" Venla added enthusiastically and turned to the professor. "Consuelo said me about you. You are..."

"Your mentor had no business telling you what I am," the professor barked through gritted teeth, effectively shutting up the young Midwife.

She didn't cow. She laughed, a young, exuberant sound that made Hermione proud of her (and doubtful of her sanity, too, because few people dared to laugh in his face when Severus Snape spoke in such a tone).

"Consuelo told you quick-tempered. You interest me. I want to know more you." (*Merlin's starry, pointy hat, Venla, fifty points for the amount of bluntness that would make any Gryffindor a scheming master of intrigue in comparison*, Hermione thought.) "Come, Hermione, we need start," Venla suggested kindly, dismissing a seething Snape with a graceful wave of a hand.

"Not before I have a few words with you, Madam," Snape interrupted smoothly and stepped into the only other room in the small hut with the spring-like Venla, shutting the door firmly behind them.

Hermione took a minute to appreciate her surroundings. The hut was small, the timbers large and roughly hewn, and the low ceiling was strewn with dry herb tufts and various witching objects hanging from it. The tiny space was crammed but rather neat; the furniture seemed old and handmade. Hermione wondered how Venla, so young, was living in this snow desert all by herself and shivered slightly at the thought.

The Midwife and Professor Snape chose this moment to reappear from the adjacent room. Indignation rolled off the professor like scent off a Yeti, woken up in the middle of hibernation.

Hermione looked up at the pair quizzically.

"Everything fine. Your teacher thinks I worthless, but it okay," Venla informed her brightly and bestowed a dazzling smile on both of them.

She really had taken a few raps in the head somewhere along the journey, that Venla, Hermione thought quite fondly.

"Go in, Miss Granger. And try not to do anything that would make me carry you back to the Hogwarts Hospital Wing in my pocket," Professor Snape said and sneered unpleasantly, suggesting with an elegant hand that they should start whatever it was Venla was supposed to do.

Now it was Hermione's turn to enter the adjoining room and shut the heavy door, draped with furs of unidentifiable animals. The room was also tiny and stuffed with various paraphernalia, both magical and domestically mundane. Hermione was particularly surprised seeing a warm knitted sock sitting on top of a stack of ancient looking books, together with a piece of stale bread. The ceiling was even lower, if it was possible, and created a feeling of being watched from under hooded lids.

"I don't know much about the Mages and what I'm supposed to do," Hermione confessed apologetically, sitting in a chair which was made of something remotely resembling antlers and laid out with animal hides.

"I can see that. Your mentor not talks. No bad. You still learn," her sunny-haired counterpart replied, plucking herbs and other ingredients from around the room and throwing them in a small cast-iron pot which was hanging over another hearth.

"You my first new Mage. I saw many Mages Consuelo woke. She helped find their nature. Not always lucky. I try hard."

"What will you do?"

"I touch you."

"What?"

"Your soul, magic. I touch. It wake."

Not that she didn't trust Venla to do her thing, not exactly. But Hermione caught herself thinking how embarrassingly much she wished her mentor was here with her right now. Even seeing him roll his eyes and sneer in disdain at her would take an edge off her generalized discomfort.

The pot bubbled merrily, and its lid wobbled as if something were trying to crawl out of it. Venla put on something that looked like an oven glove that had been hand-made by an ogre child and poured a generous cup of steaming liquid...something, which smelled like herbs and mead and sunlit, ripe fields...and handed it to Hermione.

"Drink," she said, grinning like she had just brewed the Elixir of Life.

Hermione did. It tasted earthen and not altogether bad. Tangy liquid that enveloped the cavern of her mouth with a buttery film. She wanted to have another draught, irrelevantly wishing to get a better taste and, maybe, to nitpick the ingredients.

But everything chose to go black at exactly that moment.

7. Named

Chapter 7 of 13

Hermione learns her Mage kind.

A/N: As always, a huge pile of thanks goes to [potionsmistress23](#); she is the one who makes it readable. I would also like to thank all my reviewers, especially those who care to leave their thoughts repeatedly. You guys, all of you, are amazing! My muse feels loved. And I'm sorry for lagging behind with posting on TPP. Hopefully, you forgive me.

The world was muzzy and sad; she was blind and completely desensitized to it. There were voices out there, muffled, like someone was speaking through wads of candy floss.

"...in blazes did you do?!"

"Nothing! Only that what I had..."

The voices faded back out. Timeless, deaf blackness and nothingness again. Next time she came to, she thought she could twitch her fingers and perform a pathetic half a blink. There was now a difference between light and dark when she blinked. Good, at least she wasn't blind.

"Oh, she wakes! She okay!" a cheerful voice exclaimed, though there was a little shrill note in it. Venla.

"She better be. Or else." Clipped tones, oozing malicious warning. Her mentor. Everything was right in the world.

When Hermione's head felt a little more like itself and a little less like a bucket full of moldy moss, she gave opening her eyes another try. Warm light flooded her vision. Venla was pacing the room with a small thatch of dried flowers in her hand. Professor Snape was sitting in a small rocking chair. Said chair was much more fitting for hosting plump grandmothers with their knitting than surly men, what with its flowery, hand-made quilt and all. He was peering at her intently with what she thought was a Severus Snape expression of concern (on anyone else, she would take it for a royal sulk).

"Do you feel anything?" he asked.

"What am I supposed to feel?" she replied, confused.

"Do you feel anything different? Any shift in your magic?"

"I... don't think I would know the difference, since I don't think I know how it feels to feel one's magic, pardon the tautology," Hermione answered tartly.

The professor pinched the bridge of his substantial nose and sighed in utter frustration. Hermione felt an evil little lump of warped satisfaction coiling and recoiling somewhere in the pit of her stomach. *So much for your elliptic assumptions, Professor*, she thought.

"Miss... Venla!" her mentor called out to the Midwife with irritation. "How did the procedure go?"

"Oh... I..." Venla clamped her mouth shut, and suddenly, her cherubic face was crumpling a bit.

"You what?" Hermione croaked forlornly. She thought she was seriously ready to argue the case of who was the most ridiculous Mage, there in front of her professor.

"You old! I tell you it! Adult magic differ. It work. A little." Venla shrugged and looked wounded.

"She's not *that* old. Still technically a child!" Snape's indignation was capable of withering flowers with its force if there were any around.

Hermione felt her anger flare up at being referred to as a child, but when she took a deep breath to yell back something she would regret later (of that she ~~wade~~ *facto* sure), the anger shot straight to her head as an impulse of pain. Then it settled to tingling, which was still very unpleasant, like a wet, slimy tentacle gliding across the back of her skull, *on the inside*.

"I think I feel something..." she muttered to no one in particular and tried to concentrate on extricating the tentacle out of her head. It felt so alien; she wanted to shake it off like a bad dream.

Venla's and Professor Snape's eyes immediately shot to her.

"What do you feel?" Snape asked cautiously. He got up from his chair and moved to crouch beside the piece of furniture Hermione occupied. It had seen much better days and could only be identified as 'horizontal'.

"A tentacle," she answered in a daze, almost talking to herself, the realization that she must have sounded ridiculous lagging behind her efforts to place the unusual feeling.

"Where?" the professor asked with such seriousness as if he had completely understood the tentacle thing.

"In the back of my head." She sounded panicky to herself, but the damn thing, or whatever it was, was making her very existence very, very uncomfortable at the moment.

The foreign feeling of tingling and writhing was increasing by the second, and she screwed her eyes shut and pressed her palms over her ears with force.

Through the red fuzz of pain, she heard Venla clap her hands in glee that even her pain-addled brain thought was completely out of place.

"Her magic come through!" Venla chirped.

"It looks like her magic is eating her from the inside! This is not supposed to be painful." Professor Snape sure sounded agitated. That meant something was really off.

"But she old. It is why!" Venla sat next to Hermione and put her arms about her trembling shoulders.

Somehow, it made the pain even worse. That or Hermione just needed to lay blame on someone for what she was experiencing, and poor Venla happened to be that unfortunate someone. Just when Venla started rubbing soothing circles on her back, offering her the thatch of dried, unknown flowers to sniff at, and speaking something sweet and nothing-y in Finnish or, maybe, Estonian...Hermione's linguistic capacity wasn't large enough to discern...she jumped out of her embrace like a spooked animal and landed on the floor in a heap of rippling pain.

The tentacle in the back of her head grew spikes and thorns and was wreaking havoc in her entire upper body. She balled her hands into fists tight enough to draw blood where her nails broke into the skin of her palms. Considering how short and trim her nails were, that was very tight.

An idea the origin of which she couldn't place...like so many other ideas and facts...popped into her brain: she should control the breathing. It should ease the pain somewhat or at least make it less incapacitating. She started blowing out loud puffs of breath, but the pain only mounted. For a moment, there was a feel of a cool hand on the back of her neck, and it was so heavenly soothing she wanted to scream when it was gone, just as suddenly as it appeared.

"No, let her do herself!" Venla said in a raised voice. Apparently, the professor tried to help her out, Hermione realized through the haze of blinding ache. Ah, but that was so sweet! She made a note to tell him so and immediately giggled at her own silliness.

The malignant tentacle of pain or magic or whatever it was that was currently ripping her apart definitely fed on giggling. It felt like a dozen metastases were spreading downwards to her back and shoulders, and there was a strong compulsion to give in, to let the pain overtake the rest of her being.

One part of her, the one she quickly came to label as 'old', fought tooth and claw for the vestiges of what seemed to her to be the entire existence as she knew it. The other, quite the opposite half, was cooing and coercing and threatening and seducing her to just let it go and embrace the change. It was like being split in two, like watching two halves of her own self come against each other in a deadly sparring match, and it was up to her to flip the thumb up or down for one of her selves. She couldn't decide which one. Both seemed crucial to her integrity, and letting go of one of them seemed like chopping of a leg and an arm. And half her head, maybe. She ridiculously tried to recall a silly test she'd done over the summer, something from a psychology magazine her mother had lying around at home, which told you what hemisphere of your brain was the leading one. Hermione could not remember whether she had scored left or right, and which half she could let be chopped.

I can't decide between you she said to the two identical girls with excess hair problems, who were staring back at her expectantly from a ring. Complete with blurry spectators, which her imagination didn't care to give more shape to, and boxing gear. She couldn't even pinpoint the moment in time when she started hallucinating from the pain.

The two hers in front of her were beating each other into pulp and, apart from feeling a very real pain from the god-awful tentacle, she felt another kind of ache, watching her identical copies literally go for each other's throats.

I can't decide! she screamed in her mind. *I'm keeping you both!* With all her being, she willed the fight to stop and watched the two girls pull each other into a bloody embrace. The pain inside her reached its peak and exploded in a flash of blinding light.

When she came to for the second time in the last half hour, it was to the mingled feeling of relief and utter misery. Her very marrow seemed to be aching, and every single problem, every single desire or aim she had in life gave way to an overwhelming wish to curl up into a ball and not move for a week.

Professor Snape was pacing the room. Three steps forward, turn, billow, three steps back, turn, billow. After a few repeats, the monotony of it seemed like Chinese water drop torture to her.

"Please stop," she croaked, not caring that it was not exactly Ron to whom she was talking.

He whipped around to face her. And he was in a marvelous strop. Not that she really cared, at that exact moment.

"What happened to me? And please just tell. No games." Words were like barbed wire coming through her sore throat.

"Our scatterbrained friend with a dislike for auxiliary verbs here would tell you that you have just *beerborn* as a Mage," Snape drawled sarcastically, and his fingers curled and uncurled elegantly to add quotation marks to 'born'.

"And what would you say?" Hermione asked weakly.

"I would say something has gone wrong, and we will not know the extent of this... travesty," he gestured to the pot with the strange potion and the cup and, well, the entire room and even included Venla, "until something or other goes awry, which, may I assure you, it will. Sooner than later."

Okay, it was a royal strop, alright. Hermione sighed exasperatedly and let her head fall back into the pillow, covered by a knit-work pillow case.

"What was supposed to happen?" she asked, resigned.

"It was supposed to be painless, and it was supposed to be quick. And you were supposed to feel your magic right away and differently."

"How do you know I didn't feel it?"

"You wouldn't have doubted if you did."

Snape was quite spot on, as usual.

"Can we go now?"

"Can you refrain from asking questions? Not even your addled state keeps your mouth shut?" Snape's usually non-existent patience was already stretched too thin.

Hermione, surprisingly even to herself, let out a short laugh, which made her wince with sudden pain.

"Quite on the contrary, sir," she said quietly. "I'd rather blame my addled state for the loss of inhibition and nick a few questions in, now that I don't feel compelled by decorum to remain silent."

He gave her a suspicious look from under furrowed brows, but it was not glaringly unkind.

"Your *addled state* appears to be a lot more of a mental handicap than I would have originally thought, Miss Granger," Snape said with an ugly, saccharine smile, which adorned the corners of his mouth with little crow feet.

She cringed a little, hurt, and turned her face away.

Venla chose this moment to bustle into the room with a battered-looking book, a quill, and a piece of parchment. Judging by the way the book was completely silent to Hermione, it had to be Muggle. Upon closer observation, it appeared to be some kind of a dictionary.

"What is going on?" she asked.

"I look for good word for you, Hermione," Venla said with the air of businesslike satisfaction of someone who had performed an important task successfully.

"Oh, you mean you found out my kind?" Hermione immediately went from weak and resigned to excited and frantic. It was not exactly pleasant, pain-wise.

"I did, but I need find good English word." She started rummaging through the dictionary and scribbling.

Hermione *felt* that her mentor's eyes were rolling up to the ceiling without even having to look at him.

"But don't you have something like... a register?" Hermione was more than intrigued.

"It not like this."

That Venla. Her elliptical answers were even more infuriating than Snape's. And they were grammatically horrible, on top of that.

"What our multi-talented Midwife means is that she has found out your kind, but it does not correspond with the ones known to her, so she has to give it a name and finds her English skills lacking. So, where others," Snape paused dramatically, "would have recourse to decorous circumlocution, she resorts to blunt dismissal."

The Potions master's unnecessary sarcasm was rubbing Hermione against the hair.

"You'd resort to not deigning to answer at all," she muttered.

"And you'd do well not to forget yourself with me." Snape looked at her, and there was something eerily dangerous in his eyes.

Hermione started to say 'as if I could' but swallowed it up quickly, taking in the scary glint of his look.

At that moment, Venla looked up from her task with a smile which would turn every boy in Hogwarts into a puddle of want in a snapshot.

"I find it!"

The young Midwife paused, sizing the faces of her visitors for readiness, and announced solemnly, "Hermione, you are Middler!"

Well, at least I'm not a Cher or a Barbra Streisand, Hermione thought and dissolved in peals of laughter, despite the pain and the strain of the night.

The other two people in the room stood dumbfounded, though, when she finally was able to take two breaths without them ending with absolutely unladylike snorts, Hermione thought she saw the corner of Snape's mouth quirk a bit. Wow, hidden depth there, Professor. She wondered if Snape had a disturbing fancy for Bette Midler, or that strange fondness of Muggle cinema some wizards seemed to have, or simply was more in the know of all things Muggle than merely the name of the current Prime Minister.

"Any... elaboration of that... term?" Snape asked the golden-headed witch, who looked, for all she was worth, sad as a child whose favourite toy had been taken away.

"Oh, yes. Some. It the case when I know meaning first and then give name," Venla said and handed Hermione her parchment.

At the top of it, there was a word in an unfamiliar tongue with many vowels and unlauted letters, probably Venla's native. Below were a few... translations? Suggestions?

Translate

Interpret

Intermediary

Between

Middle

Golden Means

"What is it?" Hermione asked, baffled.

"It what you can be. Your kind. Middler best word for you. You someone in middle. You connect things."

Hermione practically saw Professor Snape's ears prick to attention.

"But I don't understand... how does it even start to describe whatever special powers I might have?" she asked, desperate to have come to yet more ambiguity.

"You should be grateful she's given any explanation at all. You could have been treated with long stretches of rubbish which would have put Trelawney to shame. Or you could have been given nothing but that single word," her mentor noted with a smarmy leer, looking at Venla down his magnificent nose.

Great. This was just great. Hermione huffed her frustration.

"Hermione, no worry. You find them, your talents. It always like this. When you know who you be, you look for them. Like Loki, Finders, Walkers, Healers, they common. They know what to search in them. Some Mages not common. Some mysterious," Venla said and winked at Hermione after darting her eyes quickly to Professor Snape. "You not common. I only help birth. You grow up by your own."

She came up and held Hermione's hands in both of her own, looking up at her with clear, blue eyes.

Overcome by an unexpected wave of warmth towards the beaming Midwife, Hermione hugged the girl tightly, if only to catch a glimpse of the same kinship and unconditional acceptance she had felt with the Weasley twins. The fact that Venla was clumsy and a bit on the barmy side, and not everything went smoothly for her was endearing to her in the comfortable way imperfections of dear people could be sometimes.

"Thank you, Venla," Hermione said with feeling.

"Oh, not thank me. Not everything go okay." Venla looked disappointed with herself. "If only you came young. Nine or eight years ago. Now I not know where your magic. You born, but it strange. I worry. Come see me soon. Maybe, after Yule?"

"Oh, I'd love to!" Hermione gushed and immediately realized that she really, really would love to visit with Venla again. "You must be lonely out here."

"Oh, no, not at all. I love here! And I can Apparate to see family all times." Venla's smile was like a tiny sun.

"Isn't this solitary life frightening a bit? Don't you miss friends... family? Is it something Midwives do, living alone?"

Venla responded with a peal of silvery laughter, like a little crystal bell.

"Not. I like alone. I a hermit. And I have friends. Like Cinderella!" Venla made a cute face.

"Cinderella?" Hermione thought that maybe, just maybe, the Saint Mungo's Most Warded Ward for the Barmy was missing a patient.

"Yes! My grandmother a Muggle. I watched Cinderella. So lovely!" For a moment, Venla's heart-shaped face was lit up with the dreamy expression angels on vintage Christmas cards wore, but she broke the illusion by emitting a sudden, loud whistle, a thumb and an index finger stuck at the corners of her mouth.

At that moment, a beautiful, snow-white ermine weaseled out from under the sofa somewhere and whirled around Venla's feet. Cinderella, indeed. Hermione snickered and dared a sideways glance in Snape's direction. Yep, definitely some knowledge of Muggle pop culture there. Judging by the flare of his nostrils and his posture, which was becoming more rigid by the minute, it would really have been nice that all comparisons with Cinderella ended right there.

"Miss Granger, we're leaving this madhouse now," her mentor snapped and threw her cloak at her very unceremoniously. Still wobbly from her foray into second birth, Hermione's reflexes refused to surface, and the cloak landed on her face clumsily. She fumed under it for a second and dragged it off, almost a second too late to notice a hint of regret flicker through Snape's face like a twenty-fifth frame. But it was there. Had been there. And it was the sole reason for her not to blow her top then and there.

"Venla, it has been a pleasure." Hermione turned to the young Midwife and kissed her cheek with cultured politeness. "I hope to see you again around New Year."

"Oh, I be delighted to receive you!" Venla clapped her hands. "Just ask the Council for Portkey!"

"The council?" Hermione's mind received another painful nip as something she should have known but didn't popped up again.

"You really need educate her better." Venla was speaking with all the goodwill of an advice columnist.

"You really need to mind your own business. Not that you seem to have enough *mind* to mind it well, so to say," the Potions master retaliated, quite bursting at the seams.

"Oh, I not one who keep a Mage up to seventeen years and expect she not act like newborn," the sunny creature answered with such sublime sarcasm there was really no telling whether she was being sarcastic or completely contrite. Merlin bless Venla and her utter lack of reserve (and obvious utter lack of knowledge where Professor Snape's reputation was concerned).

Snape was positively seething because he took hold of Hermione's arm and, without saying a word, started for the door of the little hut.

"Bye, Hermione! Bye, Professor!" Venla shone upon them with an indefinitely warm smile. "Hermione, wait see you again! Professor, think what I tell you before. I can try!"

Hermione's natural curiosity reared its head and had to suck it up immediately. Well, maybe later there would be a time and a place to find out what Venla was happily chattering on about.

As soon as they closed the door behind them (or rather slammed, more like it), Professor Snape stuck something in Hermione's hand, and after a few very painful, very unpleasant moments, she found herself on her knees at the gates of Hogwarts, slow sheets of late autumn rain falling down on her and an old Guardian in her hands. And her dinner was insistently curious if it was okay to come out now.

She clamped her hand over her mouth to keep it down and smelled the metallic, icky scent of drying blood. Just great. She remembered, vaguely, balling her fists with inhuman effort to fight the pain, and suddenly, it all became too much. An ugly, murky wave of self-pity washed over her. It wasn't her fault, after all. She hadn't asked to be in this situation, and she hadn't, most of all, asked to be in it with Snape. She could parry with the best of them if needs be. Pulling her pride like a cloak about her, she stood up and started moving. Right now, she wanted to be in her bed and draw her bed curtains around her like a 'fuck you' to the world outside.

"I don't remember dismissing you," a cold voice behind her said.

Hermione turned around slowly, as if any jolty movement would crumple her resolve.

"I dismissed myself, obviously," she replied with equal coldness, which contradicted her state immensely.

"Do not use that tone with me if you are not up to facing the consequences," he hissed, moving his face closer to hers.

She quickly discovered she was past caring. Really, what consequences would those be? He would what, put her in detention scrubbing cauldrons for a month? Sneer and glare at her with coals burning in his eyes? Oh, let him. As if that would change anything.

"I'm not up to facing your methods of teaching, that's what I'm not! Some mentor you are!" she spat, not bothering to cover the liquid hurt in her eyes anymore.

"I'm not here to *educate* you. I've only been called to clean up yet one more of Dumbledore's messes and to prevent you from being a danger to yourself and to the students and the staff in this school." There was so much unguarded bitterness in his words that Hermione felt like she'd swallowed a mouthful of wormwood. "And that is the only end of the bargain I intend to keep," he added, cold and collected again.

He grabbed her hands then and, with a few swishes of his wand, healed the half-moon indentations her nails had left. The considerate gesture almost belied the passion with which he so apparently hated their situation and her, by extension. Almost.

A thought suddenly flashed through her mind and made her eyes open wide with realization.

"You are not angry at me, are you... You're angry because... something happened which didn't look safe, and you couldn't do a thing," she stated slowly, feeling her own anger dissipating.

He didn't answer, didn't deny anything, which was a miracle in and of itself. After an eternity of an uncomfortable and yet connecting moment, he said, still bitterly, but with a resigned exhaustion that made its way into his voice, "Go to your dormitory, Miss Granger. Sleep. I will have you excused from your first morning class. Come to my office after dinner tomorrow."

She was so startled by his words that her 'you will most certainly not (have me excused, that is)' died a quick and easy death in her throat and went to heaven with her exhaled breath.

She nodded curtly in acknowledgement and made a beeline for her dorm. It was already past curfew.

As she took the turn towards Gryffindor Tower, she became aware of a presence nearby. For some reason, her gut feeling insisted that the presence was hostile or even alien. In any case, not something one would run into in Gryffindor domain. Turning around the corner, she saw Draco Malfoy leaning against the flagstone wall with a casual elegance that was known to charm lesser witches right out of their knickers. Fortunately, Hermione was no lesser witch. She paused for a second, on the lookout for a sudden strike or any other snaky move she knew the Malfoy heir was perfectly capable of, but Draco didn't as much as lift a finger or speak a word. It looked like he was merely making some sort of a statement with his presence. She passed him by, and he still remained as he was. And in a way of something you would never expect from an enemy, this was even creepier than his regular outright aggression.

Hermione rarely felt so relieved and happy to see the Fat Lady as she was a few seconds later.

Dealt

Chapter 8 of 13

Hermione drives a hard bargain.

A/N. Just a quick thank you to all my readers. Your reviews make my heart swell.

Hermione woke up in the wee hours of the morning, like she always did on Mondays, and dragged herself to take a shower. Seeing her reflection in the mirror, she groaned. She looked like something Crooks would drag in, and even he had better taste, probably. Her hair was a clutch of Devil's Snare saplings, and her skin looked whitewashed, with two strategic blotches of purple around her eyes. Apart from that, it appeared she had a light fever: just enough to make her skin tender and her joints let

her know they existed.

Shedding her nightclothes, she was about to step under the torrent of steaming water when she heard a dainty pop behind her. *What the...?* "Lop? What are you doing here?" she yelled.

Her hands were torn between placing themselves on her hips in righteous indignation and making a meager attempt to cover her nakedness.

Lop, Snape's very own house-elf with sails for ears, stood there with a scroll in its scrawny hand.

"Lop is better asking forgiveness than permission, miss, Master is saying all the time," the creature screeched in a faux sweet tone that suggested that no kind of asking for forgiveness was, in fact, on the platter.

She had trouble picturing her mentor asking for either, but another burning problem was to be solved. That being her, still standing naked in front of a cocky, of all things, *cocky* house-elf, who really deserved a sock being stuffed into his condescendingly smiling little mouth. Or was *it*er? Hermione really couldn't tell.

Fuming, she made a few steps towards a towel rack, grabbed a large fluffy towel, and wrapped it around herself.

"Your Master rubs off on you the wrong way, Lop, if you think it is fine to intrude upon people taking showers," Hermione chided and tried to look very offended. She hoped she sounded like one of those snobs who loved to have their house-elves perfectly trained.

"Lop is promising to iron ears for Miss today," the elf answered with as much sincerity as his master would put in apologizing for making a first-year Hufflepuff cry. Hermione thought it might be the only case when ear ironing would do any good. Those wrinkly ears were hideous to look at.

"What are you here for?" she asked curtly. Obviously, no amount of superior displeasure could humble the elf, so she might as well make it quick by cutting on the pleasantries.

"Master is saying you are to have this, miss. He says, give it to the irritant personally," Lop answered eagerly and smiled, revealing a few sparsely placed, crooked teeth. His Master's elf, indeed.

Hermione snatched the offending scroll from a knobby hand none too gently and waved at the offending creature in clear dismissal. Lop remained unfazed and in one place. The sheer audacity of the elf! She glared at him with a look she hoped was enough to induce a bout of penitential head banging in any elf. Lop sneered.

"Master says if miss needs anything, miss is to call Lop." Could elves leer? Lop certainly could.

"Thank you, Lop. That is most kind of your Master, now...*scram*." Her patience was being detrimentally reduced.

With another dainty pop, Lop blurred out of the picture and left Hermione to her shower and her crowding thoughts.

First things first, she unwrapped the scroll. It was the official letter of excuse from her first morning class, which happened to be Charms. There was a note attached to the scroll, written in a familiar scrawl with haughty capital letters and never a single ink drop.

Miss Granger,

Remember rules one and two. Get more sleep.

SS

Well, he could stuff number one and number two where the sun did not shine. As if infused with spiteful purpose, Hermione set to scrubbing herself clean and arranging her thoughts.

She wished she could be Loki or Player. Or even Walker. Those seemed like something one would find on the pages of Marvel Comic books. Vibrant, mysterious. *Attractive*. She thought of Fred and George and of their vivacious nature and how just being around them made one carefree and laughing. And then she thought of Venla and her spark that lighted whatever space she occupied.

What kind of name was Middler? It sounded mundane and... unpretty. She felt so Lavender for thinking it, but that was exactly how it felt when she said it to herself. Middler. The ever unlovely, clumsy creature with ratty hair, bony knees, pale skin no tan would to ever stick to, and a future which seemed to include only books, loneliness, and bitterness. And, perhaps, a few cats if she were lucky. Immediately, her taciturn professor sprang to mind, and Hermione was shocked to realize how well *he* fit that same description. Not that she'd ever seen his knees, but judging from his slight, lean form, she supposed they would be bony as well.

And whatever 'between' was Venla talking about? What was she supposed to connect? What was she capable of interpreting and rendering? Hermione hated to feel confused, and the lack of information felt like the lack of ground under her feet. Like she was treading through a swamp without as much as a pole. Any minute now, she could be sucked in an abyss full of stale water and swamp sludge. She willed the uncomfortable thoughts away and proceeded with lathering up her hair with grim determination.

When she stepped out of the shower, she felt her bubble of purpose burst and syphon away. All the weight of last few days sat in a leaden burden over her shoulders. And it felt like at least one third of it was currently pulling her eyelids down. Refusing to go along with Professor Snape's recommendation to skip Charms, Hermione slapped on some lotion and got dressed. Maybe, a good ole' cuppa would get her motor running.

Good ole' cuppa surely did, but only enough to get her feet to the Charms class without plaiting themselves into a little feet braid. When she staggered into her seat, she felt completely knackered. Damn him to all circles of possible hells for knowing better. She almost imagined the smug git giving her an 'I told you so' eyebrow.

Professor Flitwick fluttered into the classroom, bringing a whiff of simple mirth and crispy, businesslike resourcefulness with him. He was reading out the assignment for the day's lesson when she felt it. An uncomfortable little inkling. Nothing alerting, just a feeling. She made an act of dropping her quill and used the pretense to turn around to see what was causing it. Sure enough, Draco Malfoy was regarding her with... suspicion? Interest? *That* kind of interest (or, Merlin, please, no)? Hate? Awe?

She watched him just long enough not to be conspicuous about her little spy act and caught a glimpse of Blaise elbowing him in the ribs slightly to regain his attention. This new aspect of Draco's treatment of her scared her witless. She'd prefer he sneered, blathered on about her blood status in no gentle terms, and was generally a prick she was used to. A colossal prick, but a familiar prick.

On top of her exhaustion, she really, really did not need to have this entire Draco situation to mull over. And she didn't even start to handle the situation with Harry and Ron, who were giving her cold shoulder and acting like she was a see-through waif who didn't deserve consideration.

Professor Flitwick noticed her only when the separating charm she was studying (which was supposed to segregate dried peas from sunflower seeds, all mixed in a bucket) produced a gooey, stinky porridge. It was quickly bubbling over and threatening to take over her workspace. Hermione was beyond mortified.

"Oh, Miss Granger! Has your spell gone wrong? How peculiar! But hasn't Professor Snape had you excused from my class today?" Flitwick asked, the three feet of his good-natured self almost jumping with excitement of taking the little arrogant should-have-been-a-Ravenclaw down a peg. The tall stack of books he usually occupied to make himself a bit more imposing shook precariously under his feet.

The cold shoulder Hermione got from Harry and Ron was quickly switched to smoldering glares. From the corner of her eye, she noticed the younger Malfoy give her a

knowing smirk. A *knowing* smirk. Ye gods, what had she got herself into?

"Hey, what's up with Snape writing you off from classes all of a sudden?" Ron hissed from behind her where he was sharing a desk with Harry.

She glared back at them and showed them the business end of her wand, hoping it was enough of a threat.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Professor Flitwick, it's just... a little experimentation on my part. And I was doing something for Professor Snape, which he thought would require more time, but I'm finished with it, so this wasn't necessary," she said demurely, fixing her work station with a few wand swishes. She immediately felt that she had to readjust her efforts with her wand. She knew enough about Muggle cars to see that the readjustment wasn't like the one a driver of a small fuel economy car would have to make when his butt was firmly planted in a muscle coupe's seat. It was the shift in the magic quality, not quantity and force that needed different handling, and she couldn't yet quite put a finger on it.

The tiny, half-goblin professor smiled at her mischievously and continued on with the lesson, till the end of which Hermione purposefully ignored Ron's questioning hisses and Harry's brooding glares.

As soon as the class filed out into the corridor, she felt her upper arm snatched and dragged away.

"You've got some explaining to do," Ron's voice gruffly informed her, and before long, she was being led rather unceremoniously down to one of the less frequented passages of the Ravenclaw Tower.

As soon as they stopped, Harry asked with the sternness she found disconcertingly saddening, "What are you up to?"

Neither of them had yet addressed her by her name, and it hurt.

She was riled up, and her wand hand itched to dole out a whopper to the two interfering, mistrustful twits she called friends.

"Don't you think, for one second, Harry Potter, that if I had anything to tell you, I would say it without a minute's hesitation?" she asked acidly.

"What has Snape to do with you, Hermione?" There was hurt in Ron's voice that mellowed her.

"I'm just assigned a project. That is all," she answered tiredly.

"A project that makes you take off with him and get back after curfew, and next morning you wake up with black circles under your eyes?" Damn Harry and his quiet, observant perception.

"A project that is important enough," she answered firmly.

"Important enough that we don't get to be included?" Harry pressed.

"Important enough that I'll ask you to just trust me for now? Please, Harry," she asked with a hint of desperation.

And was treated to the view of Harry's backside as he was retreating and leading Ron away by the forearm. She sighed heavily and hoped to all deities that confrontations were over for today. She wished; and the wishing was interrupted by a snort. Leaning on the opposite wall, Draco Malfoy gave her a dirty look. She was almost glad it was dirty. Finally, something familiar.

"Trouble in your little Gryffindor paradise, Granger?" he asked casually, checking out his nails.

"Why, would you like me to cry on your shoulder, Malfoy?" Hermione retorted, spitting out his name like it was a cuss word.

"Merlin, no. I would take forever to get rid of your...*muddy* snot." Draco made a show of looking profoundly disgusted. Hermione was unperturbed, however.

"Then I suggest you run along. Crabbe and Goyle seem to only have half a brain between both of them and probably need you to walk them from one class to another right about now."

That certainly got Draco. His two henchmen were nowhere as fun and smart as hers, and she knew he knew it. Not that... it actually looked like she had any henchmen anymore.

Who would have known that the delicate bone structure of Draco's pretty face could contort in such a gruesome expression of rage.

In a second, he was holding her against the wall, roughly and carelessly, like one would handle a sack of last year's potatoes. Hermione thought it was probably what she was to him, anyway.

"Don't. Provoke me," Draco ground out between his teeth, his face disgustingly near hers.

"Don't. Threaten me," Hermione replied with much more confidence than she actually felt.

Draco's forearm pressed hard against her neck, and she felt a definite poke of a wand against her ribs. She was very well aware that most probably, Draco was just trying out some new grown-up intimidating techniques, that he was more bark than he ever would be bite, but despite that, she felt a trickle of fear. A trickle that quickly turned into a flare of something else, something that felt alien and yet, she knew, belonged to her. It was her magic, she realized, and the thought was panicky. *What to do, what to do? Hogwarts is safe, I'm safe*, she chanted in her mind. She could feel the pull that new, unharnessed power was exerting on her. Closing her eyes and trying to concentrate on *not losing it*, she realized that the magic was quite literally about to leak when a cheerful voice sounded nearby. Relief flooded her as the unknown uprising wave seemed to abate together with Draco unhanding her.

"Miss Granger? Mister Malfoy? Is there a problem?" Professor Flitwick asked, eyeing both of his students with a simpering lack of suspicion.

"Of course not, Professor," Draco answered, back to his charming prefect self. "We were just... catching up here. We will be on our way."

He gave Hermione a meaningful glare and was off in a flourish of his expensive school robe.

"Um, yes, I think I better go as well." Hermione smiled lop-sidedly at Flitwick and hurried away. In the opposite direction from Draco.

The rest of her day was filled with menial school things, like scheduling and dropping an indecent amount of books at the library (and checking out an even more indecent amount), breaking a few confrontations, letting a homesick first-year cry on her shoulder, and such. She went by on sheer indignation, fueled up by her altercation with Harry and Ron and Malfoy's impudent and weird stalking.

When she plopped down at the dinner table next to Lavender and Ginny and relaxed her legs, when Hogwarts' excellent, solid, hearty food made her mellow, she couldn't understand how her feet even managed to support her. Her eyelids, at least, needed matches or a spell to stay up. The thought of having to drag said feet down to the Dungeons and keep said eyelids up and away from shutting her eyes for the night in the middle of the hallway made her very marrow groan in protest.

Her only incentive to leave the warm, cozy Great Hall (where she could at least sit) was Harry, who was giving her looks which clearly meant to make her feel like she was

standing over his soul's wounds with a salt shaker.

Sighing in defeat, she left.

For once, the chill of the Dungeon's came handy as it shook her up some. She made her way through the intricate maze of corridors into Snape's classroom and then further, through the narrow, home-to-claustrophobia tunnel into Snape's study and knocked.

The door creaked open to a shadowy figure, backlit by the fire. He looked her up and down, as if actually deciding whether to let her come in or to shut the door in her face. She felt a presence fluttering about in her head, like an evasive back thought. Which was definitely not hers.

"Don't use Legilimency on me," she said, offended. She knew well enough that he could be much more subtle than that, and for him to make such a careless job of it was a way to show her just how little he cared about her sentiments on the matter.

"Don't use that tone of voice with me," he replied flatly and let her pass over the threshold.

"You didn't have to make it so off-handed. You could have asked whatever you needed to know," she said petulantly and averted her face.

"I don't feel like I'm inclined to coddle you in any way." Good gods, but he had the audacity to shrug as if he hadn't just breached one of the ground rules of polite Wizarding behavior: don't snoop around in others' heads and be seen.

"Now, explain why you disregarded my explicit orders and forwent the few necessary hours of sleep." His tone could turn Sahara into a snow waste. So, that was what no more coddling was about.

"I'm not going to miss out any of my classes unless I absolutely have to."

"And who has told you that you are in a position to judge what you absolutely have to do?"

Hermione felt his low, frigid voice crawl right up her spine to raise wispy hairs at the back of her neck.

"It was not an explicit order, Professor," she said, a little too breathily, "I thought it was just you... being nice." It took her everything not to cringe at the word.

Her mentor's lips thinned into an almost non-existent line.

"I shall keep it in mind that, despite your ridiculous fight for some semblance of fair treatment, you only respond to orders or threats."

Oh, she had walked right into that one. But never had Hermione Granger been known for being a sore loser. She summoned all her dignity.

"I really appreciate the gesture, Professor, in spite the way it was delivered." Lop's patronizing sneer still swam at the back of her head, giving her creeps.

"I don't really care for your appreciation." He waved, dismissing her about-to-be-an-apology callously. It hurt more than it should have, Hermione quickly registered. "I felt a rise in your magic about ten in the morning, relate the cause now."

"Draco Malfoy was...I guess he was threatening me. There's something disconcerting about his behaviour," she answered through some reluctance. She really did not want to nitpick it with him.

"Lucius knows," he said simply, instead of chewing her for details as she had expected. This new knowledge wrapped around her in a cloak of suffocating fear.

"Did he... guess?" she croaked.

"He most certainly did. I'm not sure to what extent he had enlightened Draco of your... situation. You will be wary of him from now on."

Like she hadn't been before. But she let it pass.

"Did your magic escape?" Snape asked in a manner of one asking about two-week-old puppy, escaping from its basket.

"No, but..."

"Then that will be all for today." A graceful movement of one hand indicated the direction of the door, and he turned away, not even waiting for her to see herself out.

He had to be kidding. She dragged herself all over the castle just to be handled? Like this? Fury shot up inside her in a flashing release of adrenaline into her blood stream.

"That will most certainly *not* be all." She put as much derision into it as she could.

He watched her with a condescending benevolence of a pack leader wolf, eying a pup, small enough to have innocence and gall to bark at him.

"I would like to see you try, little girl."

She caught herself thinking that, perhaps, this was the most threat-laden thing he had ever said to her.

"I'm here to learn," she insisted. A bold part of her decided that she had little to lose, after all.

"Well, I'm not here to teach you." The same glacier coldness.

"Dumbledore said you are to train me!" she all but cried in desperation.

"Train you to contain yourself." He was absolutely unmovable.

"But I need this education..."

"What you *need* can perish in balefire, for all I care."

She recoiled, as if slapped. He went on, to make himself glaringly clear.

"I'm here to prevent a disaster from happening. Your own self-preservation instincts are thoroughly lacking. Now, I've done my duty by you for the day, so I suggest you remove yourself from my study before you face my displeasure."

Oh. So it was a study, after all. Hermione looked around the room, which could have been anything at all, so eclectic it was, as if a clue would present itself somewhere in her surroundings.

She knew she had no leverage over him whatsoever. Her heart was doing cartwheels inside her chest, and when she practically sensed that he was about to remove her bodily, she acted on a whim, blurting the words and stifling the urge to think over the repercussions.

"I'll make you a deal!"

That got his interest. If Hermione didn't think Professor Snape had all the sense of humour of a bear, woken up in the middle of winter hibernation, she'd think she had amused him.

"A deal?" That disdainful eyebrow again. "What could you possibly offer me in exchange for teaching you? I see absolutely nothing of interest of any conceivable kind." He looked her up and down, and Hermione felt really, really uncomfortable and self-conscious. She should have really thought that one over.

"I don't have much money, and my parents are not exactly rich, but..."

"But I don't want your money, girl." There was resentment in his voice that wasn't there before. Had never been, even when he was at his vilest with her or her friends.

"Sir, is there anything, anything at all... You are my last chance." Hermione felt the heaviness of untimely moisture at her bottom eyelids.

"No, I'm not. You can ask Dumbledore. *Professor* Dumbledore," He corrected himself swiftly, and suddenly she felt the elation of a drowning man who was grasping at a straw and realized it was strong enough to pull himself out. They had the same reasons to be wary of the old Player.

"No, I cannot ask... Dumbledore." She omitted the formal title, and immediately there was a flash of something in her mentor's eyes. A flash of something she liked.

"A favour, then." He said simply.

"A what?"

"Your end of the bargain. A favour. A debt. Not a life debt, but a debt nonetheless. Sworn at a wand point. I may call it in when the need arises."

"And what would it be?" she asked, a slight feeling of unease seeping into her. She thought eerily of standing on a very verge of a quicksand. It all looked innocent and calm, and then it started to suck you in with the deliberation that was excruciating in its slowness and inevitability.

"Oh, I don't know," he answered lightly and gave her a reptilian grin. "Anything."

Oh, what the stinking hell.

"Fine."

She drew out her wand and touched its tip to his while he chanted a simple binding spell.

9. Offered

Chapter 9 of 13

After a night of good sleep, Hermione can't help but double-guess her deal with Snape.

A/N: I know, I know, my updates can't be called timely. I'm very sorry about that, my dear readers. This summer has been quite a challenge. The heat, the wildfires, the smoke in the city. Pretty nasty, and I can't wait for winter to come.

As usual, thank you a million for your fantastic reviews. They definitely keep me afloat. And a special hail to **tpotionsmistress23**, my lovely beta.

She slept like the dead. Her walk back from Snape's office had been nothing more than a hazy memory by the time she somehow managed to get back to her dorm room. When reasonable thinking returned to her, she would feel surprised she'd made it at all, like a drunk who had discovered himself tucked safely in his bed in the morning when the last thing he remembered was sitting in a pub the night before.

She was roused from her sound sleep by being shaken rudely. Lop was jumping at the foot of her bed.

"What the..." Hermione took a glance at her Muggle watch. Not even six. Was there a madhouse for house-elves? Lop certainly belonged there.

"Master wants Lop to give Miss this," Lop, currently the most bothersome creature in Hermione's world, said solemnly and handed her a note.

This time, however, the elf had enough brains to pop out of her way immediately after her fingers touched the piece of parchment.

Miss Granger,

See me now. Now.

SS.

Wretched man. Did he even sleep at all? And at that moment, the entirety of everything that had happened the night before descended onto her mind like an avalanche.

Graces, she had made a deal with him. Without as much as even supercilious research on exactly what the wand point deals entailed. Hermione may have been very well read in the matters of Wizarding academia, but when it came to everyday life, customs, and traditions of this world, she found herself coming thoroughly short, time and again. Which had only proved one of her main principles: information was everything. But wasn't it information in the first place for which she'd put herself in this predicament?

Her eyes went back to the underlined 'now' in the professor's note. She wondered how long the 'now' could stretch before he came to retrieve her or did something equally humiliating, and darted for the loo.

Not five minutes after, Hermione was jumping three steps at a time down the magical stairs.

Thoughts hopped around in her head like unstable hydrogen atoms before the start of a chain reaction. Could she backpedal now? Whatever did he want from her at this ungodly hour? Maybe she should just go to Dumbledore and let him handle this. When her train of thought took this turn, she stopped, suddenly overcome with a feeling of

unease, as if something were crouching behind the corner, poising for an attack.

Handled. That was exactly why she couldn't go to Dumbledore. He'd handle her. Toss her and place her and lead her in his game of human (or wizard) chess. Last year's Ministry debacle still caused her nightmares, and one scar across her abdomen was enough, thank you very much.

She thought of Professor Snape and tried to remember exactly why she had decided that handing herself in this fashion with him was any better. Sure, when it came to the big things, he had done right by her and her friends. Year after year. Was it enough for her to trust him? Her education was a big deal for her. And not just a big deal, but the most important step in becoming someone: a precious goal she kept pursuing, employing any means available to her. Somehow, she couldn't help but think that if she traded a favour for her education, the said favour had to be something equally huge, equally valuable. And she really, really was having a hard time thinking of something that would even the scales between her and Snape in this matter.

She decided that it was the biggest source of her discomfort and then continued on her way to the dungeons.

"Are you having second thoughts?" Snape questioned her instead of greeting her as he appeared before her at the entrance door to his study.

"Who wouldn't?" she replied, and tried to look casual.

"Do you want out?" he asked unexpectedly, and Hermione couldn't help but gawk in mingled amazement and disbelief.

After a few seconds, the professor turned away from her and crossed his arms over his chest. His face was lifting up and flexing into a complacent mask Hermione knew was a sure sign of his confusion.

Well, if that was not almost endearing.

"You would let me out?" she asked with a little more skepticism in her tone than was absolutely necessary.

"You were brain-dead yesterday. It might be viewed like I was taking advantage." He shrugged.

Hermione felt disoriented. Was she being set up? An odd phrase surfaced to the top of her mind, something about choice.

"The only way to know you've chosen rightly is to make the same choice again," she said vaguely, as if speaking to herself. It really was starting to bother her how those pieces of someone else's mind kept popping into her own at odd times.

"And your choice will be?"

Somehow, the very fact that he had offered to undo the deal if she wished, when her head was clear, spoke of honesty and honour.

Really, what would he ask for? Copious amounts of monkey labour? She could handle that. She'd even buy a new toothbrush for all the scrubbing she'd have to do every week. His knowledge was worth it. Would he... No, most certainly he would not. She remembered her 'morning bramble' as Fred and George loved to call it, her round, button-like nose, and her almost fish-belly pale skin which was begging for some sun. She was plain. He was worldly and probably jaded. He would never. And that was the gist of it. But it had to be something big... would he make her change loyalties to suit him? Ask for her firstborn?

She decided to cross that bridge when she came near it.

"I'm not backing off, Professor Snape," Hermione said resolutely.

He looked at her with a strange expression she hadn't ever seen on his face before. It was almost like she had managed to astonish him, and in a good way, too. It was rather inspiring.

"There will be rules."

Well, obviously. Rules number one and two were practically begging for amendments and clauses.

"I thought we already had rules that covered right about everything," she noted nonetheless, with a good bit of bite.

"The situation has changed." He waved a hand nonchalantly and Summoned a quill and a piece of parchment.

"What's this?" Hermione asked, perplexed.

"Why, a set of rules for you to abide by. You don't seem to be able to keep them in your head on your own."

She clamped up an indignant huff. Whatever.

"Exactly how is the situation different now, Professor?" Hermione asked off-handedly.

"Are you of legal age according to the Wizarding laws?"

"I'm seventeen, if that's what you are asking," Hermione answered, slightly alarmed.

"Then the nature and conduct of our arrangement does not have to be supervised by the wizard in charge of the establishment upon the premises of which our interaction takes place."

Oh. The realization was washing over her like a tide. So, Dumbledore had no say in it anymore. Hermione briefly wondered if it were a good or a bad thing and picked the former.

"Alright," she said, a little dazed. "So, about those rules."

"Yes. First, you will keep me informed of your whereabouts at all times. Second, you will take me at my word. Always. No second guesses. Third, this arrangement is to remain private. You are to report to me immediately if the situation with your magic, like the one involving a certain Malfoy yesterday, arises again. If you fail to go by these simple rules, I will suddenly find myself very pressed for time more often than not, while our agreement will still stand." As he spoke, the rules appeared on the piece of parchment in detached, impersonally styled writing.

"I'll add more rules when a necessity arises. Keep that parchment somewhere safe. It's spelled for your eyes only, but it will be of little use to you if your horrendous classmates subject it to their imbecility."

The most recent issue of *Bibliophile, Literally Taken* immediately sprang to Hermione's mind, and she flushed red.

"You are also to report any advances the members of my House make in the direction of your person," he added. She noticed that this particular order was not duplicated in writing on her rule parchment.

"It's not in..."

"No, it's not. I'm still the Head of Slytherin, and you may consider it a request. A *very* firm request."

An order, then.

"Is that all?" she asked, furrowing her eyebrow.

"Yes. You may go now," he answered with a peculiar softness.

"No." Her hands balled into fists in preparation. After all the fussing about rules, she had decided to storm the main gate. "It is a dual bargain; we have exchanged something which is supposed to be of equal value, as far as I understand, and we are on equal ground in this. So, I want some rules of my own."

She practically trembled with trepidation and excitement over her own boldness. Neville would have popped an aneurism if he only could see her right now.

That eyebrow again. It crawled upwards in a graceful movement that preceded impending trouble. When she failed to back off and cower and beg for forgiveness, like most of her fellow students would in her place, the second eyebrow joined its mate.

"Are you implying that *you* will be laying out ground rules for *me*?" he asked, and she realized that she couldn't really tell whether he was incensed with her impudence or amused to a very rare degree.

"Okay, you don't have to call them rules, *per se*. But I really... want you to consider a few things. You've said that it is only us that stir this particular cauldron after all, so I want some stirring done on my part as well."

"Very well, let's hear this," Snape said in a tone which clearly meant 'I'm indulging you with this rubbish, little girl, but make no mistake, you will pay for this later'.

Before her bout of courage expired prematurely, she sighed and started speaking. "I want a real education. I want to ask questions and have them answered and feel normal about asking more." She made an emphatic gesture during that particular request. "I want no more elliptical conversations. I want to be prepared for whatever is coming my way, being a Mage, and I want to be ready in time for those events."

The eyebrows, which were keeping their arched vigil over the professor's temper, relaxed minutely. On the inside, she felt encouraged, but her outward body language betrayed every single insecurity she had. Her eyes fixed somewhere on the pocket of his frock coat, and her thumbs twiddled.

"I don't want to be a nuisance to you, Professor," Hermione whispered honestly. "You would help me an amazing deal in this if you didn't treat me like one all the time, even when I clearly am not one," she babbled to her now tightly clasped hands and waited for something terribly disparaging, which was sure to be coming out of that disdainfully curved mouth of his any moment now.

"I'll consider your words," the professor answered curtly. To her, it sounded like he had just agreed to counsel homesick Hufflepuffs.

"Thank you, sir," she said genuinely. "So, how do we proceed? I have so many... so many things. There's Malfoy and my magic and..."

"We proceed by going to breakfast. You shall meet me at the Gates at half past seven for our first lesson."

Feeling quite satisfied with what she had achieved so far, she decided not to impose on her luck any further, nodded her agreement, and turned to leave. But as she approached the door to the narrow passage to his public office, a nagging overcame her.

"Sir, why did you ask for a favour from *me*? I can't wrap my mind around what I can possibly do for you, now or in the future..." She trailed off and cringed at how laced with fear and worry her voice sounded.

He looked as if through her for a long moment, only the slightest crinkle to the corners of his eyes betraying the fact that he was actually mulling over what she had asked.

"One never knows when a favour owed by someone so... by someone such as you may come handy, Miss Granger," he answered softly. "Do not fear, I shall not ask for what you cannot give."

Well, at least it was somewhat relieving. With another sigh, Hermione finally closed the door behind her.

She wondered what he had almost let leave his mouth after that 'so'.

Her day passed in a familiar sequence of classes, meals, and meaningless conversations, all overshadowed by almost festive anticipation. She had bargained herself for what she thought was a good deal and even received some reassurance that Snape's side of the agreement would not be something she'd come to hate to do.

A little after seven, she was positively giddy with the prospects and even arrived at the Gates fifteen minutes earlier in vain hopes to calm her nerves with dull waiting.

Her feet shuffled restlessly of their own accord, and when she heard a silly tune sounding slightly off key, she was surprised to realize that it was actually her humming. Before she knew it, her mentor was striding towards her, dressed in his 'heavy duty' garb, something he wore in class or to the extracurricular course when especially volatile potions were involved. Hermione actually had to check an urge to jump up and down and clap her hands like a happy loon.

She wanted to gush and fire up a load of questions about today's lesson, but instead, she decided to be polite and accommodating. She had asked him to treat her like a being with at least half a brain, and the least she could do was act like what stood for the definition of one in his books (which would seriously challenge her patience and nicety levels).

"Good evening, Miss Granger," the professor greeted her briskly. "I hope you have dressed warmly. We are going out to the Forbidden Forest."

The prospect of going to the Forbidden Forest on a not exactly balmy October night was rather underwhelming, but Hermione kept that observation wisely to herself. She mumbled back a greeting and nodded in agreement, and they started for the woods.

The evening was still, and the torrential rain of the past few hours left the ancient castle and the magic-fused air around it fresh and smelling of ozone. Hermione could see the spot of glaring orange in the murky background of the pre-winter landscape not far ahead. Hagrid's pumpkin patch. Their path lay clearly by the gentle giant's hut. Her heart swelled with affection at the thought of Hagrid. He was always by their side and on their side, even if it meant trouble for him. And she was especially grateful that Hagrid had been there for Harry. Always, even when she and Ron couldn't be for various reasons. Harry was hovering dangerously between adolescence and adulthood and could use all the support there was. Which was very little.

Hermione smiled and was already looking forward to saying hello to Hagrid when Professor Snape halted his step and gestured for her to stop with a hand, which darted out of the elaborate folds of his cloak like a lissome, white predator.

He quickly turned around and tapped her head with his wand. A rush of coldness from the Disillusionment Charm, made doubly unpleasant by the bite of October night, rolled down over her. She clenched her teeth in rising frustration, but it was instantly dispelled when the professor took hold of her hand and led her in the direction of Hagrid's hut, discreetly making it look like he was walking all alone.

"Look at 'em, Fang, yeh old boy! Look at 'em pumpkins. Big this year, heh?" Hagrid's joyful voice rumbled a little ahead.

The pumpkins, indeed, were huge and abundant. Hermione thought that Cinderella's fairy godmother would have quite a dilemma at this particular patch. This made her

choke on a snicker, and her hand received a warning squeeze from her mentor when Fang's ears perked (if this could be said about two sagging, floppy things which were made for affectionate tousling and not for perking) and the huge, old dog emitted a lazy woof of greeting.

"Oi, Professor Snape! Hello there, sir! Going about the forest? I mussay the unicorns're a lil' fussy tonight, an' there mussbe a hatchling at that harpy nest."

There was quite a bit of affection in Hagrid's voice, and his face sported a warm smile, which made his round cheeks swell and ripen with colour, like two young plums.

Hermione was even more surprised when Snape didn't respond with his usual, vicious snark or a rude dismissal.

Instead, he actually stopped and shook Hagrid's hand, and Hermione could swear that somewhere between darting out of the voluminous robes for the handshake and hiding back inside, that hand was thoroughly licked by Fang. Trust a dog's sense, her mother, a lover of all things canine, would often say.

For some reason, she wanted to smack Fang. Why was he all soft with the gloomy recluse of a man? It was like watching Ron ogle that seventh-year Hufflepuff whose breast size was in a counter-proportional relationship with her intellectual powers. And just like Hermione couldn't but grudgingly admit the validity of Ron's attraction, she couldn't but understand Fang a little, too. Because she, herself, was growing aware of the warmth and comfort of the professor's hand surrounding hers. The feeling was becoming increasingly natural.

Her mentor exchanged a few remarks with Hagrid, and there was another surprise for her. He was actually capable of casual conversation. Of course, his tones were clipped and his words as economical as ever, but there was a certain, barely-there fondness in his voice, which made the whole exchange a thing so far away from his usual socializing patterns (at least, the ones Hermione knew existed) that she was startled.

And that hand, too. It was warm and firm and strangely reassuring. She felt somehow overly sensitive and could tell where each of his fingertips lay softly on the outer side of her own hand. For some reason, she found the way his inner palm touched hers unusually intimate. At that particular thought, embarrassment rushed to her face in a rich flow of colour. She thanked the deities she was doubly protected from being seen by a charm and the darkness of the hour and tried to pep-talk herself into getting a grip. Her efforts gained much more zeal when, instead of calming down, she felt the already familiar tide of magic rising and tickling up her spine. Snape tensed visibly by her side, and Hermione could *swear* that his hold on her hand became, for the lack of a better description, unsure of itself.

Hastily promising Hagrid to stop by later and drop a couple of bottles of his specialty ointment for Hagrid's joints (as a thank you for a few hairs from a baby unicorn, no less), Snape started to tug her along, and her magic ebbed away. As soon as they reached the outskirts of the Forbidden Forest and the looming, vigilant trees swallowed them into the shadows, he released the charm and let go of her hand. It felt like a loss.

Hermione was left with a feeling that she was supposed to glean something from that display with Hagrid. Maybe, he was trying to show her another side of him, laying the first brick into the building of trust? The idea of putting Snape and trust into one sentence didn't seem quite utopic to her any longer.

"Were you frightened of something a few minutes ago? I felt your magic swell," Snape asked with a tinge of wariness.

Thank you for the idea, Professor Hermione thought, relieved that she wouldn't have to fumble for a plausible explanation (and how would she explain the effect his hand was having on her, anyway?) and lied smoothly, "For a moment there, I thought Fang might give me away. He's a sharp dog... and... well, you know how dogs are."

He seemed to be satisfied with that.

They were treading farther and farther into the forest, and already when she looked back, she couldn't see anything but the same, sombre trees. She only could think of one way to take the edge of her uneasiness.

"Sir, can I ask something?" she ventured carefully, in a tone that implied that she would take no for an answer just fine.

"Are you trying to mollycoddle me, Miss Granger?" Snape replied with evident amusement. "I would have thought I'd have been drowned in questions by now. Merlin only knows how you held out that long."

She supposed it was his way of saying yes.

"I wanted to know about Lucius and Draco," she said, still cautiously.

"Lucius knows of your nature. He made... inquiries with me. I haven't given him anything yet. I'm not sure of how much Draco is aware," Snape answered easily, moving a few branches out of their way.

"How do they..."

"Oh, for the love of Merlin, Miss Granger. Surely, you are not as naïve as to think your little display with the *Malleus Maleficarum* would go unreported. Or unrecognized."

"What of Vo...the Dark Lord?" She didn't speak the name out of respect for Snape, she realized.

"He does not know yet. But it is only a matter of time. When he learns of your nature, he will be... let's just say the consequences will be dire for those who failed to report it. He is somewhat... keen about Mages. And this makes me think Lucius is pursuing a goal of his own. This way." He pushed away a heavy bow of a fir tree, which looked like a paw of some eerie animal in the dim light of his Lumos spell, and they stepped into a small clearing.

"Why is the... Dark Lord keen about Mages? Is he a Mage?" Hermione asked, utterly intrigued by the subject and ecstatic over the fact that her professor was finally *talking*.

"He was. But somewhere along the way to his, shall we say, present condition, he had done a few things to himself that have altered him beyond the imaginable. Few knew him as a Mage before, but what he is now is most certainly *not* one of us," Snape replied as he was checking about the clearing and casting some spells non-verbally.

"You've said the consequences will be dire when he knows. What are you going to do about it?" she asked tentatively, well aware of what kind of consequences he, being her mentor, would face.

"Ah, save your worry for your hare-brained friends, Miss Granger, I neither welcome nor need it. And do not for a moment think that I would take up the task of educating you if I were not absolutely sure that I can handle the load." He spoke so vehemently that she was ashamed immediately about worrying, no, actually, doubting his ability to look after himself.

"So, I suppose, he wants to somehow regain his Magenness, so to say? He's looking for ways to do this?" Hermione put forth a guess, changing the subject carefully. The whole conversation seemed so frail that she was afraid that as much as another breath out of line would pop that magical bubble and revert her mentor to his usual unapproachable self.

"You suppose right." Her heart leaped at that. He had never verbally acknowledged her being correct before. Her most excellent potions usually deserved as much as an infinitesimal incline of his head. "I've known of a few occasions where he used Mages in experiments to achieve this goal. Used literally. But unsuccessfully. As far as I know, it can only be done in one case. There's a kind of Mage, called Taker. Takers can transfer magical quality of one being to another. And that includes Mages. They can even give magic to Muggles. The transformation is always complete and a one-time deal. The *donor* is left absolutely drained of magic. And often of life, as well."

Hermione shivered. This was a dreary power to wield, indeed. The wet pines rustled around her like malignant spirits, and it felt like Snape was telling her a particularly frightening fairy-tale, the fright factor being exaggerated by the darkness and the hissing wind and the brooding forest.

"And does he have a Taker at his disposal?" That would be horrible, if he did.

"Not that I know of," Snape answered, and his words left a trace of uncomfortable fear somewhere deep in her mind. "The last Taker I've heard of was murdered by his own family soon after his... discovery."

This whole Mage world was rapidly becoming more and more dreadful.

"How come you are still... capable then, sir?" She was choosing words slowly, lest he decide that he was already telling her uncharacteristically too much. "Is he not aware that you are a Mage, too? Has he not tried to take your power?"

"He is. But he has not. My Mage powers are so useless to him, that I'm much better fit to do the jobs I do now."

Oh, so much promised, so little given. So Slytherin. Hermione was practically turning inside out with the desire to press further, but little as she knew of Snape, one thing she knew for certain: if her following question was to touch his kind of Mage and his powers or the jobs he did for Voldemort, her luck with him would die a painful death, with no hope of resurrection in the near future.

She swallowed her curiosity down and went for something else instead.

"What kind of Mage was he? Tom, I mean. You know, before..." She trailed off, unwilling to verbalize whatever atrocities had brought Voldemort to his present reptilian state.

"A Crafter. He was supposed to create, invent and bring forth things of beauty."

How infinitely ironic.

"Thank you for telling me all this. It is important to me, sir," Hermione said quietly, feeling sincerely grateful.

"Do not bother with gratitude, Miss Granger. It is a part of our deal, after all," he replied with a clear dismissal, and Hermione smiled to herself. So, he was taking her 'rules' into account. Good, that. She made a mental note to allow herself an extra-large pack of Honeydukes finest bitter chocolates when the next occasion presented itself.

"That would be more than plenty of preamble, girl. Now, to your lesson." Snape cut her musings and produced a black scarf. With no further ado, he stepped behind her and tied it around her eyes.

She was dipped into an impenetrable darkness.

10. Overflown

Chapter 10 of 13

Hermione is given her first practical lesson on how to be a Mage.

A/N. Again, thank you for reading and reviewing this. I'm lagging behind on personal responses, but I will answer to each one of you. Some of them made me so happy I grinned like an idiot at my computer screen. My husband even thought I had got myself involved in an affair and had just received an e-mail from my supposed lover. Haha :) This summer has not been the best for me so far, with all the heat, forest fires so close to home, and real life dramas, so your response cheers me up a lot. Thank you, my readers!

And a special, chocolate-covered thank you goes to **potionsmistress23**.

"Professor," Hermione called out hesitantly after five minutes of standing still in the middle of the Forbidden Forest at night.

Silence. Drooping silence everywhere around, interrupted only by occasional cries of nocturnal creatures.

At least ten minutes must have passed, and she called out again, with more urgency this time. "Professor, if you could tell me what I'm supposed to be anticipating..."

Her little speech was cut off by a loud screech nearby. The sound was so mindlessly horrible, the young witch was sure it could only be produced by a mating pterodactyl or something equally hideous.

The forest seemed to be crawling with hidden, not particularly friendly life. Continuing with that particular train of thought seemed precarious enough for her to try and concentrate on something else. Except, there wasn't much of anything else on which to concentrate.

Okay, relax, think, focus, Hermione told herself and took several deep breaths. Where was her mentor?

Another fifteen minutes or so later, Hermione thought she could differentiate much better between the various squeals, whistles, cackles, shuffles, and twitters which constituted the cacophony of the night around her. She also noticed that her sense of smell was becoming more acute. She could pick up the intoxicating aroma of the blooming, giant night violets, endemics to the Forbidden Forest few knew about because of their seeming uselessness. Putrid stink of rotting leftovers of some predator's dinner was carried over when the wind whiffed from her left. A hint of stone bramble juice. Wait. It was too late in the year for fresh stone bramble. But she knew it for a fact, from a few agitated conversations over lunch, that the fifth-years were making a Talkeasy Tea, stone bramble juice being its base. *A-ha, got you*. She indulged in a victorious smile.

"You know, you're obviously standing in a leeward side, because I can smell you," she stated, shifting her weight to one foot. Her hands found their regular place at her hips, in a stance she used when she was about to give Ron and Harry a piece of her mind.

"So you can. And it took you a good half an hour to make sure I didn't leave you here to become the harpy hatchling's meatball toy," a voice right behind her rolled smoothly.

"Can I take the blindfold off now?" she asked with summoned annoyance, because she was really cringing inside at the thought of harpy hatchlings playing around with her battered body.

"No," the professor answered curtly, and with her sight-deprived, heightened senses, she felt the movement of air behind her where his robes must have billowed as he turned around and started walking away. Walking away?

"What are you doing?" she asked. She wasn't even ashamed that fear was showing in her voice and lost-looking form.

"Walking."

"Away? Now that I can smell things, you're leaving me to the harpies?" She wasn't getting shrill yet, but it was a close thing.

"Are you questioning my methods of teaching, Miss Granger?" he asked ingratiatingly.

Hermione felt that he wasn't angry. But there was a big, fat 'yet' attached to that. It was like he was poised to be angry; she needed to tread carefully.

"I'm just at a loss as to what I'm supposed to do," she demurred, folded her hands, and waited for an answer.

Which, of course, never came. Temporarily robbed of her eyesight, she strained to assess the slightest change in the space around her, nostrils flaring, searching and distinguishing scents. Her fingertips rubbed together, as if she were able to actually feel the texture of the air.

She was sure that if her ears could prick up and move around like that of a cat's, they'd be doing a lot of that right now.

Taut like a chord, she felt that she was able to sense all the minute disturbances about her *I am so lost*, she thought, frustrated when her brain registered no sign of anything *happening*.

That's when the words came.

Hasn't it occurred to you to consider that it may as well be a part of the lesson?

She immediately knew they weren't her own. They sounded in her head so distinctly and in such a foreign way, she was sure it wasn't a conclusion to which her own mind came. Hermione almost jumped in surprise.

Was her mentor using his Legilimency on her? Could he even use it from afar, without looking into her eyes? But then again, she didn't think she even had the vaguest idea about the extent of his skills in this or other areas.

However, Hermione was sure it was not Legilimency. Though she had never had an opportunity to practice the art, she'd read all there was on the subject of it, and Black's family library had a lot to offer. Legilimency did not work in the way of talking. It only worked in the way of hearing and reading. One might be able to offer certain thoughts to the reading party while being under the spell, but Hermione sure as hell did not put her professor under it, Mage or not.

Yet, she was sure it came from him. The voice in her head was genderless and neutral, but the manner was definitely his, like there was some mental print attached to it that she was able to recognize.

She wondered if it was some residue of his thoughts or an unvoiced answer to her last statement. One thing she knew for sure. Somehow, this was the manifestation of her own little ability. Something about connecting things, though what was being connected in this particular instance was still questionable. Middler, indeed. Right now, she was definitely in the middle of something, and though she was able to pick up on a hint from Snape, it certainly did not help.

Another screech, coming from (possibly) a pterodactyl, ripped through the night. This time, it sounded much closer and, Hermione could swear, had a distinct, questioning tone to it, if such a thing were even possible with pterodactyl screams.

"Professor, I think I got it. I caught your stray thought. Maybe they are right, the Muggles, I mean, and thoughts are electrical impulses the brain produces, and I tuned into yours, even though it was probably floating around here for some time before I got it," she babbled, wringing her hands, the palms of which were getting sweaty and clammy.

Silence. She turned her head, searching for the smell of stone bramble juice. Nothing.

"Okay, I'm taking the blindfold off," she said in a shaky voice, and her hands moved to the silky cloth around her head.

She untied the knot and another one. And then another one. And one more. Queer. She fingered the knot. Definitely, tied over only two times. She untied two more knots, and just like that, there were another two.

Fine, plan B would be brute force. She tried to rip the damn thing off. No effect. It was like she couldn't even get the tiniest leverage over the offending piece of satin. Spellwork. *Nice touch, Professor.*

As she was thinking maliciously why Professor Snape would even need a spell that would hold a blindfold in place over someone's eyes, another gut-wrenching wail carved through the air. This time, there was a clear threat in it, and it sounded as if the horrendous creature was crouched in one of the trees surrounding the little clearing.

Hermione whipped around, trying to gauge her surroundings in vain and simultaneously decide on her next course of action. And that action had to be quick, she was sure, because the next thing she felt in the closest vicinity of her head was the swish of a giant wing.

Her breath accelerated to the point where it became too loud for her to rely on her hearing; everything around her was muffled by her heaving intakes of air, and blood beating in her ears under the influence of the most primal fear. That fear transcended any region of normality for Hermione because the spellbound blindfold prevented her from giving the said fear a shape and a substance.

Wings flapped to the right of her, and she felt a gust of air from the movement. She turned to the source, wand at the ready. Then the creature was behind her, gurgling and wailing. Deprived of the advantage of her sight, she couldn't even gather enough calmness and wit about her to cast a simple Protego. It didn't make her feel much better, since it was rather useless in case of a physical attack.

Something sandpapery and sickly wet ghosted her hand, and she screamed at the unexpected sensation.

"Leave off!" she yelled in the general direction of whatever being was about to make a bloodbath of her. Her blindfold was gathering moisture from her eyes, bitter tears of hurt and helpless anger. Was that also part of the lesson? Leaving her all alone, blindfolded and defenseless in the middle of a hostile environment to stave off some vile creature on her own? *Not completely defenseless*, her sensible inner voice chimed in. *You still have your wand and magic, how about that?* She brushed it off in favour of feeling horribly wronged by her horrible mentor. Her inner, petulant child called for simpler solutions, and running seemed like a perfect one.

The horrendous gurgling and cackling and the flapping of coriaceous wings intensified about her. The hellish being was probably salivating at the sight of her agony and loved to play with its food. She whipped around a few more times, firing off a few random Stunners, and took off. As soon as she reached the brim of the forest, she realized that, thanks to all her blindfolded jerking around, she had lost all sense of direction. Now her life was definitely forfeit.

Sobbing openly, she scrambled in her despair to perform a few spells she thought might help remove the blindfold. She was that close to using a Diffindo in a dangerous vicinity of her own face. She cursed herself and Snape for ever accepting the deal, and had a desperate desire to hug Ron one more time before something terrible devoured her alive.

A few seconds passed in excruciating, actionless silence, and she felt her magic start to rise. The anticipation of the unknown seemed much more frightening than the

outright attack.

Hermione stood pressing her back to a large, gnarled tree, chest heaving, tears soaking the blasted piece of cloth. Wand stretched before her, she prepared for the imminent onslaught of the creature.

However, it did not come charging at her as she had expected. She sensed the movement a split second before she felt it: a slow, creepy scratching of what could only be a claw at the side of her neck.

Screaming bloody murder, she bolted, colliding with something hard; her hands beat at what seemed to be a disgusting mix of wet, slimy feathers and talons, and she ran with no sense of direction or purpose, wailing all the time, letting go of every restraint she had on herself, her very essence being diminished to one giant pit hole of primeval fear.

She hadn't even made it to the other side of the clearing when she felt like something huge sucked her in and swallowed her whole, and exploded within her and outside her, spilling in immense power from every single pore in her body, vibrating in every cell, no, in every molecule that constituted her. The feeling was so fundamental she couldn't even start to assess it. If she were a universe, it was as if she were having her own personal Big Bang.

And then, abruptly, as if a movie cut short, it stopped. Blissful nothingness claimed her.

She woke up and stretched like a lazy cat. The feeling of whatever bed she lay in was delightful. It was warm and cushiony in all the right places and smelled divinely of old, bushy pine trees soaked in fresh rain. She never wanted to leave the comfort and luxury of the wonderful bed. Something akin to flashes of light tickled her sensitive eyes behind the closed lids, and she ran a tentative hand over her face. No blindfold.

Opening her eyes just a fraction, she saw that it was still dark out. In fact, it was so dark, she could barely distinguish the darker silhouettes of pine branches above her, so still they seemed engraved into the clear stardom of the sky. Not in a bed, then. She sighed and tried to move. Complicated. Turning her head, she nuzzled what she thought was the most fluffy, downy pillow, but what in reality turned out to be a patch of silky, green moss. Okay, Warming and Cushioning Charms, too. And the flashing light was a Lumos spell at the end of a wand. Snape.

As soon as she saw his hovering figure, indignation washed over her in such a strong wave that she felt her muscles tense with it.

"You! You left me out there to fend off some vile creature I couldn't even see! How could you? What kind of teacher are you?" Hot tears burned her cold cheeks.

"The kind that is willing to acknowledge that you can't afford time to do this. And you were *perfectly* safe, Miss Granger," Snape replied with a calmness that Hermione found revolting.

"To do what, exactly? Stand around blindfolded?" she ground out in response.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake, girl. To have your magic excess overflow. You've been a walking, talking gunpowder keg with a fire on top. How do you feel now?" he snapped in a businesslike tone, checking her pulse and performing a series of some diagnostic spells Hermione did not recognize.

"I didn't know I had magic excess. Feeling okay, I think."

In fact, when she did her own inner roll-call, she felt more than okay. She felt marvelous. It was like a weight was lifted off her, and a veil was ripped away, and a whole lot of other constrictions she didn't even know existed. But now that they were gone and she could feel their absence, she couldn't understand how was it even possible for her to function with all that burden. She was feeling able and fast and sharp and even...Merlin knows why...attractive.

"I feel... strangely light," she said in a gleeful daze, as if she had sniffed too much Sargasso Seaweed smoke.

"Small wonder. As soon as you are able to extricate your brain from your bout of self-adoration, you can see for yourself the amount of magic you had pent up. And its destructive force." He sounded irate, but rather lightly so. Once again, Hermione wondered how she managed not to get him in a strop.

"Why would I even have it?" Hermione asked, trying to regain control over her completely relaxed body.

"Have you ever heard of magical metabolism?" Ah, a lecture. That she could do, even lying in the middle of the forest at night after some kind of a magical blast.

"I've read about it, of course. It's the set of magical reactions in a witch's or a wizard's body, regulated by..."

"Oh, do stop your regurgitating of books before I have a punctured gall bladder case," her mentor cut in, effectively stopping Hermione's perfect recitation about to begin.

"So, is something off with the magical metabolism of a Mage?" Hermione asked, undeterred.

"Not off, as a matter of fact. It is unbalanced in a way that more magic is produced than is spent. *Somescholars*," here Snape paused, indicating with his very voice exactly how high his opinion of said scholars was, "insist that it is the source of our powers."

"And what do you think, Professor?" Hermione asked, immediately feeling a lagging astonishment at the fact that she actually wanted to know his opinion on the subject. Moreover, that it would matter to her more than the opinion of all those other scholars.

"I think that the pertinent knowledge is that an imbalance exists and needs to be handled. Mages are usually discovered at young age, when it is much easier to control and channel excess magic. Do you recall any out-of-regular-scale magical accidents in your childhood?" he asked, inclining his head slightly and folding his arms across his chest, like he usually did when he asked a particularly tricky question. Depending on the answer, a hefty loss or a sufficient acquisition of points usually followed. Somehow, the professor always knew who and what to ask so that the acquiring party would always be Slytherin, with the rare exception of an occasional Ravenclaw.

"No, I don't," she answered blandly. "But how was I able to keep it all down for so... long?"

"Graces, girl. It took you almost two hours to even start questioning my actions. You stood there, waiting, trusting, blindfolded in the middle of the forest, surrounded by Merlin knows what. And what did you do? You just waited to be instructed. No initiative, no defensive instincts kicking in. Like a proverbial lamb brought for the slaughter. Convention personified."

Hermione hated to think of herself as conventional.

"Am I not supposed to trust you, as my mentor?" she asked, her voice pitching up.

"Of course you are. It's fundamental. But there's trust and then there's... trust. Your trust is simplified. It's the kind of trust used to let others do your thinking. A Mage will require creativity, not mere rehashing of instructions and book paragraphs," Snape said, with a superior tone of someone in the know.

She felt torn between astonishment and hurt. On the one hand, she hated the bland image of herself in his head. She hated it even more that she wanted that image of her to change. She wanted to be creative, adventurous, interesting. On the other hand, she was still dealing with the daze his treatment put her in. Yes, he did say he felt freer now that they functioned on their own terms, but that much freer? She didn't even think he was that eager with his Slytherins. At least beyond the confines of their common room.

"So, now that it's gone... it'll be easier?"

"No. But it will be somewhat safer. Are you in a condition to get up?" Snape stretched out a hand to help her up, and she registered an increase in her heart rate when she took it. As soon as she was on her feet, she let go abruptly, suddenly scared and unprepared and confused by her own reactions. She almost wished he would go back to being a twat.

Luckily, what she saw around her covered up any discomfort the hand-in-hand situation might have created. The clearing was now very different. Where there was a carpet of dried, browned leaves, touched with the cold breath of impending winter, now green grass was stemming up. Tiny bells of lilies-of-the-valley swayed gently with barest movements of air. The sides of trees facing the clearing were adorned with fresh foliage.

"Oh, humbug! I made this?" She heard her own voice coming out in breathless wonderment.

"You also cleared the some of the sky above," Snape said with such contempt, as if he were talking of his favoured cauldron being melted beyond repair. Looking up, Hermione was amazed to see that, indeed, a perfectly round portion of the dome above the clearing was bright and starlit, low-travelling, fat clouds were encroaching on it from all sides. "You also made this," her mentor said, gesturing with a careless hand to a heap lying motionless at the side, in a bed of ivy and columbines.

"Is that..." she whispered and paused, unable to finish the question.

"Yes, you ridiculous witch. That is your monstrous attacker. A magical Dodo. Ugly as sin, but one of the most harmless and pathetically affectionate creatures known to wizardkind. You were perfectly safe. It just wanted to make friends. Though, I must admit, it worked perfectly for the fear factor in your overflow."

Oh, gods. Hermione's hands pulled at the wiry strands of her hair in despair and shame.

"Is it dead?" she asked, crestfallen, and looked with overwhelming pity at what looked like a mix of a bird and a Flobberworm, lying eerily still. Its dirty-pink skin peeked through filthy, gray feathers, which grew in all directions, as if the poor thing just came out of a whirlpool (which it probably did). The bird's head was huge and bald. In fact, some of it wasn't even covered by the pimply skin: a large portion of its off-white, lumpy skull was bone-bare around the huge, hideous beak. A long, purple tongue bulged out.

"I don't think so. The thing could survive a horde of giants stampeding all over it," Snape said. He came over to the Dodo and poked it unceremoniously with the pointed end of his boot. Hermione cringed at his callousness.

Leathery rudiments of wings flopped erratically, with a sound that was surprisingly loud for such tiny, ugly things. The bird opened its eyes and screeched madly, as those eyes rolled around.

Hermione, always the one to stand by the underdog, went to her knees and petted the slimy head, heedless of the bird's general atrocity.

"You poor thing! I'm so sorry, I am," she crooned, and petted the abnormally large head. The Dodo calmed immediately and held still, obviously enjoying the caress, if one were to judge by pleased gurgling, coming out of its beak.

Professor Snape looked positively like he was on the verge of losing his dinner.

"If you are quite done consorting with this... thing, it's getting rather chilly out, and I prefer the comfort of my quarters at this time at night," he said, eyeing his protégé and her obvious new project with a look that screamed 'hopeless'.

"Oh. You are right. And Professor?" Hermione paused, gauging his readiness to answer 'one of her inane questions'. He, apparently, didn't look too threatening because she went on. "Why did you say this outburst could be dangerous? All it did was put some flowers up, remove a couple of clouds and... knock the wind out of one bird."

"That is exactly why I took you to this place. The Forbidden Forest is full of magical anomalies, and this is one of them. Your outburst was seriously muffled."

"Alright then. Lead the way," she said, ready to go home and ponder the events of the night.

Professor Snape haughtily turned around in a swell of black cloth and started walking back to the castle.

Trailing behind him on light feet, Hermione noticed that the tail of his robes was splattered with little scarlet anemones. She snickered into her balled hand and decided to forgo notifying him of this new detail in his wardrobe. The Dodo hobbled clumsily behind her, emitting a squeak of delight now and again.

11. Sensed

Chapter 11 of 13

Hermione's abilities surface at an unexpected moment.

A/N: I write for pleasure only! Your reviews made my week, my darling readers. This chapter, like all others, was lovingly beta'd by [optionsmistress23](#). Enjoy!

"It's putting Mrs. Norris in a trance!" Filch screamed, pulling at the filthy, greasy cuffs of his tattered overcoat, the colour of which had been history long before Hermione was even born. "All she does anymore is crawl after it like it's a giant rat stuffed with catnip! The pantry mice have gone on a rampage! And then there are students reporting missing clothes. Mr. Crackledew, one of your own, Minerva, said that he'd seen this thing ramble about with a Slytherin scarf. It must have a nest somewhere! If it does, it will breed! And then we can kiss the school good-bye!"

Filch was livid, his spittle was flying everywhere, and the ugly patches of receding, gray hair poked in all directions from his head, making it look like a dandelion from hell.

The culprit, guilty of so many gruesome crimes, sat, all ruffled up and sulky, in a cage that was too small for it, emitting a loud quack of protest now and again. Hermione was holding the cage, her expression crestfallen. If not for Hagrid's heavy, soothing hand, which was currently resting on her shoulder, she was sure she'd be starting the waterworks right about now. Professor McGonagall's face didn't give any positive signs about the Dodo's fate, meaning it was probably forfeit.

It had been almost two weeks since the Dodo followed her to the castle after her very remarkable first lesson with Professor Snape, and currently, it was one of the many things that disturbed the fragile routine into which she had fallen. The other one was Harry. He seemed to be spending an awful lot of time huddled up in Dumbledore's study, and when he wasn't, he was poring over tomes that came from Merlin knows where. Those folios were obscure even in Hermione's judgment, which was very liberal when it came down to books. This would have been simply suspicious, if the very fact that Harry would be burying himself in books for hours at all didn't set all the alarms

inside her screaming. Considering this, Hermione was mind-boggled.

She tried to confront Harry about all the secretive book-studying, but in vain. He did have things to hold against her, and she felt he was absolutely in his rights when he said that he could keep secrets from her all he wanted, since she was the one doing it for a long time already. This shut her up effectively, but she cared. It nagged and hurt, and after a few days of wracking her brains, she went to Ron. Ron, who always had boasted an acute sense for fishy happenings, was surprisingly clueless. It appeared he had believed Harry's lame excuse of needing to study to get the passing grades in his NEWT classes. He was so shocked by Hermione's pointing out the obvious that he managed to forget his own offenses, at least for some time, and the two were seen conspiring a few times on the subject of how to get around to Harry. As the only common policy both seemed to agree on for the time being was 'wait and see', Hermione had plenty of time between waiting and seeing to attend to her own important issues.

Strangely enough, the almost daily practicing with Professor Snape became almost normal. On a few occasions, Hermione would even call them comfortable. And most definitely, they turned out to be extraordinary educational experiences. In fact, Hermione grew to relish them. Snape's head seemed to be chock full of the most delicious pieces of knowledge. The reluctant, grudging way in which he shared them made her crave them even more.

At first, she was very blunt, pestering him for more facts and theories on Mages, running ahead of his own pace in order to *get there*. Their first attempts to have a what she thought would be a normal, scholarly, teacher-student discussion went awry, leaving him crackling with fury and her frustrated and almost in tears. After a couple of days' break, where during their lessons Snape only drilled her on how to harness the magic flow and feel all its subtleties, she decided that a change of tactic was long overdue. Her father would always say in such situations, 'When you're hungry and the fridge door is broken, don't try to pull the handle all the time, Hermione, if it doesn't work. Use your brain.'

She had a journal delivered to her by post-order, charmed it for privacy, and titled it *How to Make Snape Talk*. Two sleepless nights, full of exhausting monkey labour, and it was full of ideas, recorded brainstorm sessions with her own self, written observations about Lop, which at the end proved quite useless, and even flow-charts. And Hermione had a solid theory.

After analyzing everything she knew about Snape, she came to a conclusion that he must be a very inquisitive person. One didn't get to be so godsdamned clever without a hunger for knowledge. This was, in its turn, something she knew inside and out and, thus, material she could work with. She realized that the best way to make Snape share would be to poke his own curiosity and leave him no choice but to *ask* for the information *she* could give. And give out what she needed in the process.

"I have this thing with books, Professor, which is somewhat... strange," she started casually once, while they were practicing the techniques which helped tune oneself to the magic of the outer world. It was a planned move. After a good deal of thinking, Hermione decided that giving away her affinity with books would be worthy of getting his attention and thoughts on the subject in return.

But he ignored her and continued on with the training without as much as acknowledging her remark.

When the lesson was almost over, Hermione was about to give in to the sharp, deep despair that only seeing that her effort had gone in vain gave her.

She was about to leave his study when he called out to her.

"Miss Granger, what was it about you and books?" he said, sounding bored out of his wits.

Yes!

She turned slowly, trying with all her might to display none of the elation she felt and act just as reluctant and pressed for things as he was when she asked him something.

"Oh, it's really just a trivial thing, Professor. Now that I've thought of it, I gather it wouldn't be something pertinent to bother you with. I'd hate to get on your nerves again," she said solicitously.

"Fine, suit yourself," Snape answered without raising his eyes from his grading, and gestured her out.

At first, Hermione panicked, thinking she overdid it with the reluctance part. Then, her rational side kicked in and reminded her that if his curiosity were anything like she thought it was, the seed had been planted.

She didn't even have to wait long for the proof. Only two days later, Hermione was sitting in Snape's study, at a measly, shabby desk he put in the corner for her, along with a creaking chair and a single candle, and she was making notes. The subject was a journal of a wizard who had developed a tedious, but working, routine for those who wanted to enhance their magic. Hermione flipped a page and suddenly had a sharp feeling of strangeness. She closed her eyes and concentrated, like Snape had taught her, trying to open up and pick up whatever stirred the sensation. Her fingers ghosted over the book with deliberate thoroughness. The presence was certainly there, elusive, but there. Hermione felt like she was seeing something out of the corner of her eye, but when she turned to look at it directly, it was always gone. Putting all her magic into her concentration, she tried harder. There. As her fingertips ran over the well-worn spine of the journal, she felt it again, and this time, she caught it and was able to put words to it. *There's a much faster way.*

Her eyes flew open as she realized that she'd said that out loud.

Her mentor was watching her intently, pinching his chin with a thumb and a forefinger. It looked like he had been doing that for some time already.

"So, what is it with you and books, Miss Granger?" Professor Snape asked levelly.

"Sometimes, I read more than is written, Professor," she answered, allowing him the dubious pleasure of coaxing the information out of her.

"Is that all?" he inquired.

"No, not really." The temptation to give into a barrage of words that was ready to gush out of her was beyond great. But she didn't yield, even though her very tongue itched with the effort.

"Well?" he prompted impatiently after some time, when it became clear that she wasn't going to elaborate.

She allowed herself a small smile at her victory. Just a nervous little shrug at the corners of her mouth.

"I, uh..." She made a show of stuttering a bit, as if she didn't expect his questioning. "Sometimes I have a feeling like something calls, maybe? The books, I mean, but don't get me wrong." Her confusion wasn't even half-faked. After her debacle with *Malleus*, she was pretty touchy on the matter of her human-like treatment of books.

"Explain. In details."

Yes! But no, not just yet.

"Um... Professor? Do you think this can be one of my, uh, special powers, so to say? The way I'm connecting things?"

And so it began.

It appeared that Snape was very curious, in fact, about what being a Middler entailed. He mentioned owling the Midwife and requesting particulars. Hermione forwent pestering him for Venla's answer and wrote to the sunny creature her own letter with questions, instead. Venla was very gracious in her reply, and the fact that her written

English seemed to be much improved with the help of some translation spell did wonders for their communication.

Venla informed both of them that she'd never heard of Middlers, but being an inexperienced Midwife (and not exactly well-versed in English), she said that they should look closer into Talkers and, maybe, Finders. She, unfortunately, could not provide them with the necessary information, as it was a law among Midwives not to keep records of all the Mages that went through their hands, for obvious reasons of secrecy and safety of said Mages.

One of the first things Snape did after he wormed (which Hermione enjoyed immensely) the information about her book quirk out of her was put her to various tests. They were so simple that Hermione was unpleasantly surprised with herself for not trying these things out before. She attributed it to her inherent fear of not being like everyone else. After all, before she'd learned she was a Mage, she'd had a hard time believing her book thing was something out of the ordinary. It had never been anything but a shameful queerness.

He'd offered her books to 'read', a word the semantics of which had noticeably broadened of late, and compare the experience.

It appeared that well-used books had more additional information to pick up. There was definitely a connection between how much time a book had spent in the hands of its owner and how much it was able to give. But the most interesting and giving were the handwritten books and journals or books with lots of notes on margins. Those projected clear and broad. The professor suggested that Hermione was somehow able to pick readers' and writers' thoughts on subject matter of the book.

The other peculiarity was the thoughts themselves. They all shared one and the same quality: all of them looked like something a reader or a writer would be very uneasy speaking out about. Like that mishap of a meditation trainer. Although his methods appeared solid, he, himself, did not believe in their efficacy and practiced a much more intensive and faster working technique. This tidbit was provided very grudgingly by Snape himself, since the writer was an acquaintance of his who owed him not one favour.

This did put Hermione very close to Talkers, if not for two little things. Talkers could derive information from any objects, living or not. Hermione appeared to be very narrowly tuned. The other was the little matter with her experiencing the pull, hearing the call, while Talkers always had to initiate the 'talk' themselves.

Snape also hinted that she should look at her kind in a wider sense. He wasn't talking about Destiny as openly as Dumbledore would, but the allusion was obvious. When Hermione gave this idea a thorough pondering, she realized how eerily numerous were her social roles that could be described using the word 'middle'. First and foremost, she was in between the two worlds Muggle and Wizarding. Hermione didn't know many Muggle-borns, but the ones she did know either tried to assimilate into the Wizarding World completely, to the point of hiding their origins when possible, or hung on to their Muggle heritage with fervor. She, on the other hand, tried to be the equal part of both. Fred and George, with whom she had taken to conversing on a regular basis, would always tell her, 'Hermione, you have your arse crack directly over the borderline between Muggles and Wizards.' She used to laugh it off, but now she couldn't help but think how precise, if brash, the description was.

Then, she often acted as a mediator between her friends, between her friends and their studies, between students of various Houses, being a Prefect. The occasions were too numerous to ignore. When she relayed her observations to her mentor, he didn't say anything, but the corner of his mouth lifted up slightly before he gave her the task for the day's lesson.

This was another thing she had managed to change in their interactions. He now seemed to be more inclined to react and react positively. She noticed that he was pleased when she made progress; even though he had a weird way of showing it, she did know. When she picked up her latest essay with an O- (minus stood for a few commas he inserted), she felt a sense of satisfaction as her fingers ran over the mark. His satisfaction. She knew he wasn't just pleased with the essay. He was pleased with her overall work.

The elation she felt at this realization was almost embarrassing.

"H'mione, dontcha worry none," Hagrid rumbled beside her. "I'll take care of the little guy. Did you know they are very... ugh... what's the word... intelegant?"

"Intelligent?" Hermione suggested absently.

"Yes, that's the one!"

They turned into one of the seldom-tread corridors in the Hufflepuff part of the castle. Here, some of the windows faced the garden and were so old there wasn't any glass in them, and the climbing ivy vines were cautiously spreading a few sprouts inside the castle. Most of the Dodo sightings occurred here. The place was favoured by young lovers for its romantic atmosphere of abandonment and wilderness, and the poor bastard scared amorous couples with its friendly screeches.

The collective decision stated that Hermione was to locate her charge's nest, clean it up and place the unfortunate bird in Hagrid's caring hands. She was bringing some small fish, a few live locusts and a giant mantis, a Dodo's craved treats if one were to go by Hagrid's word.

They were rounding a stony corner of the wall, covered with moldy spots and green moss. A beam of light was piercing the still, slumbering air of the corridor from the nearby window.

"What's that smell?" Hermione said as she caught a whiff of something stale and putrid.

"The nest is close. Dodos could give charity shops a good ole' run fer their moneys," Hagrid said with a great deal of pride.

Just as Hermione was about to ask exactly what they were about to see, she saw it.

It was giant. It was horrible. It was morbidly fascinating.

The pile, which was about five feet tall, consisted of garb that made the Room of Hidden Things pale in comparison. There were old clothes, obviously snatched from unobserving house-elves, judging by their state, intertwined with scarves of all the Houses in what looked like a clumsy pattern. Underwear and socks that sported various degrees of wear and cleanliness constructed some sort of an outer wall, with odd, pairless shoes for turrets. Quaint leaves and withered blooms were stuck in at odd places. Hermione even thought she saw a dead bud of Devil's Snare. Cracked tableware was placed strategically here and there, and the top was ridiculously decorated with bended forks and spoons. There were a few dead rats folded in a circle around a very pretty broken hair clip with gems that changed colours. The Dodo presided proudly on top of that extravaganza. When it saw Hermione, it gave a cackle of utter glee and rolled down, knocking a few things on its way, to have his head rub and snack.

As Hagrid fed the Dodo his locust, and both were cooing together in perfect harmony and happiness, something flashy drew her attention. It was a quill, but not something a regular student would have. It was exquisite, exotic, and obviously expensive. The soft-looking texture of the long hairs rippled at the slightest change in the air, and Hermione had never seen such vibrant blue and green colours on a quill. She thought it may have come from a peacock, but definitely not your regular garden variety.

She reached out to pick it up, thinking that whoever owned it must have been very unhappy to find it missing.

That was when it hit her. The surge of information was so forceful, so immediate that she swayed on her feet.

When Hagrid put a steadying hand on her shoulder and looked inquisitively at her, she knew she most probably had no time to spare. Grabbing the quill and shouting some incoherent excuse to dear old Hagrid, she ran to the only person with whom she could share the information.

A few minutes after, she was pounding on her mentor's private study door, oblivious to the usually stifling narrowness of the passage that led there.

The door flew open, and she was met by a rather infuriated Master of Potions, but she didn't allow herself to be surprised and distracted by his casually rolled up shirtsleeves and the lack of a regular multi-buttoned coat.

"This better be important, girl," Snape said with a cold warning, but after he took a second look at her frazzled state and scared face, he motioned her to a chair and said something Hermione didn't discern, into the dark.

A few seconds later, Lop, curiously solicitous and bashful in the presence of his master, popped in and handed her a glass of water. She gulped it down in several large draws.

"Well?" Snape asked impatiently when she still failed to speak.

"Who is Fazeem Noorta?" she asked breathily.

"How the hell shall I know?" Snape looked puzzled and not in a good way.

"Someone named Fazeem Noorta is a Mage. And he or she is in a world of trouble," Hermione answered with firmness she didn't know she had left.

"How do you know that?" Snape's tone took a whole new cadence now that he understood she was dead serious.

"This. Does this look familiar to you?" she said, showing him the quill.

He didn't need to confirm it. Judging by the stiffness his pose suddenly took, Hermione saw that the professor knew exactly to whom this quill belonged.

12. Offended

Chapter 12 of 13

Hermione gets a glimpse of Malfoy's big plans for her.

A/N: As always, thank you for the wonderful reviews, all of you: those who just drop a note to let me know what you think and those who offer continuous cheer and support. I couldn't wish for better readers! And a special thank you with a bow on top to **potionsmistress23**, my wonderful beta.

~oOo~

"But, sir, we have to do something!" Hermione pleaded with her pacing mentor, her sense of justice blaring at her to get up and act, act, act.

"And what is it you suggest we do, girl?" Snape asked snidely and gave her a glare that screamed, "you're dangerously close to entering the realm of Stupid, capital S."

Hermione squeezed her eyes in immense concentration.

"Give me the quill, please," she said, her hand outstretched.

"Whatever for? You've only tried to do it about a thousand times already," he reminded sarcastically, "and have never seemed to get anything else out."

That was true. All they knew was that someone named Fazeem Noorta was somewhere in mortal danger, that he or she was a Mage and...a piece, provided by Professor Snape...that the quill belonged to Lucius Malfoy; how it had become one of the Dodo's prized possessions was still a mystery to be uncovered.

"Well, we obviously can't confront Malfoy about the quill," Hermione said, putting her preferred technique of verbal brainstorming with self or peers to work.

The professor rolled his eyes at her and emitted a pained 'ugh', showing with his entire appearance that, for the life of him, he couldn't wrap his mind around the reason why something that obvious even needed to be stated out loud.

"*Obviously*, your Gryffindor bluntness is as incurable as metastasizing cancer, Miss Granger. And I advise you to keep your inane musings to yourself, unless you have something of value to add to the conversation."

"Oh, I wasn't aware we were even having a conversation, sir, why, with your verbosity," Hermione retorted tartly, offended by his treatment of the one approach to thought processing that had always worked for her.

"You are forgetting yourself, Miss Granger," Snape said in a deceptively dulcet tone of voice, and Hermione shrugged uncomfortably.

Spurned and irritated by his neglect when her own sense of justice screamed for something to be done, Hermione picked up her bag, fully intent on leaving the surly bastard to his own devices.

"I don't recall giving you permission to leave." His cold voice stopped her in her track.

"I don't have any practice scheduled right now," she answered petulantly and lifted her chin up. "Apparently, you're planning to sit and wait while whatever is happening to this poor person continues to happen, and I still have Transfiguration homework to do."

He was at her, fast as a viper in a flurry of black, his hand on her throat.

"Yes, I will sit and wait, and you will do the same, Miss Granger. And if I sense as much as a stray thought in your obviously empty head about doing differently, you will regret it," he hissed slowly and in such a dangerously low voice that Hermione trembled.

His hand was not limiting her air supply or even hurting her, but the mere presence of his fingers, warm and firm on her skin, did a number of disconcerting things to her senses. She felt like he was letting her know, in no uncertain terms, that he was perfectly capable of snapping her neck with an easy twist. It occurred to her that she'd never actually comprehended the power he held over her.

Slowly, she raised her own hand, wrapped it around his wrist and tugged. He loosened his hold but did not give completely.

"I wish I didn't have to give two shits about your safety, idiot child. But since it has been thrust to me as a duty, a duty it is. And as of now, your safety is compromised. So you will do as I say or I'll shackle you up to your bed in Gryffindor Tower until I see it fit to release you. Do. You. Understand?"

"Yes," Hermione answered, blinking back tears of powerless rage, and castigated herself. It didn't have to take a painful lesson to learn that Snape did not take kindly to

being treated like Harry or Ron when they were particularly dunderheaded about something, and she tried to get her point across.

"Yes?" Snape sneered at her, a clear prompt in his eyes.

"Yes, sir."

"Good girl. Now scram."

Humiliated and hurt, Hermione shot out of his quarters like a bullet. When she was a good distance away from the dungeons and her breath didn't leave her mouth in tiny, hysterical puffs, her hand flew up to rub her throat of its own accord. Most disconcerting things, indeed.

~oOo~

A few days had passed, and not even once had Hermione heard of the blasted quill, its owner or the mysterious Fazeem Noorta from Snape. She was driven mad with worry for the poor sod, whoever it was, her sense of justice gnawing at her innards like a dog at a marrow bone. At her sessions with Snape, they were mainly focusing on trying to figure out the patterns of her 'reading' skills, and once, Hermione had managed to summon enough boldness to ask if she could 'read' the quill again. She had received such a thorough lashing that she had regretted ever taking the quill to Snape, whose status in her own books had gone from that of a mentor with the knowledge she craved to a control freak who wanted to dole out the very air she breathed.

Sitting at breakfast between two swotty fifth years, under the false pretense of giving out tips for their OWLs, Hermione threw covert glances at her two formerly best friends. It was apparent even to a most inattentive daydreamer that there was a rift between Harry and Ron now as well. They munched breakfast, each engrossed in their own business or conversations, with Ginny placed strategically between them, looking as if she were the only link connecting the two boys.

Hermione sighed and, for the first time in a long while, felt like she truly had no backup, were something to threaten her. No one to go to. Abandoning her breakfast, she fled to the Owlery for a much needed respite as well as to send a quick note to Fred and George, asking them if they would fancy a Butterbeer over the weekend. The same tiny owl, which took up to delivering most of her posts, descended down from the dome like a dusty, hooting feather-ball and nipped gratefully at the piece of bacon offered to it. Tying her letter to an outstretched leg, Hermione patted the bird's polka-dotted head and watched it take off in slightly lifted spirits.

At dinner that day, Professor Sprout made an announcement to her sixth-year NEWT Herbology class. The next day, they were supposed to be taking a field trip to the Forbidden Forest and were advised to dress warmly and get re-acquainted with a few mild protection spells, since they would be going to a part of the woods where the thicket of undergrowth was apt to rip one's clothes in shreds and leave a multitude of nasty, little scratches. Amidst all the whining and complaining (which, Hermione suspected, was largely connected with the lack of previous acquaintance with said spells), the Gryffindor Prefect was the only one excited. Finally, something to take her mind off all her worries. She smiled primly at her classmates, but her smile turned into a bland mask a few minutes after Sprout's plump shape found its way back to the High Table. A neatly rolled parchment, tied with a dainty, green bow, popped at her eye-level. She snatched the offending missive before the less attentive Gryffindors started pestering her with questions, but out of the corner of her eye, she noticed the way Draco Malfoy tensed and watched her with eyes like a shithouse rat.

A word with you in my office after dinner.

SS

The note was written in his usual, angular script, and Hermione caught on to the feeling of slight annoyance and a deep-lying worry underneath. Not letting it get to her softer parts, she scoffed and watched the letter disintegrate.

Waiting exactly two minutes after Snape had left his seat at the High Table, towards the end of dinner, and strolled away, she got up, grabbed her bag and set off.

The corridors of the ancient castle were always so quiet at meal times. The majority of the Hogwarts populace was accumulated in the Great Hall, and only ghosts and occasional overly studious Ravenclaws roamed about. Hermione carefully trod through the dungeons, dimly lit and frigidly unwelcoming, her brow furrowing the closer she was to her destination. She was still miserably upset about the quill. Fazeem Noorta, whoever the hell he or she was, accounted now for a few dozen hours of lost sleep, purple smudges under her eyes and sparks coming out of her wand spontaneously.

Suddenly, when she was about to round a corner, someone stepped out of the shadows. The young witch stopped dead in her tracks as soon as she saw a swish of finely combed blond hair.

"And what are you doing in the dungeons, Mudblood?" Draco's scratchy falsetto reverberated in the dark arches around her.

"I don't answer to you, Malfoy, now, move," she answered, pushing calm out and trying to hide how unnerved she was by his sudden appearance.

"Granger, you're on my turf. You don't *get* to tell me to move, here. Not that you would get away with it anywhere else."

"Oh, I'm scared," Hermione said, going for sarcastic, and was suddenly visited by a self-mocking certainty that she was, indeed, scared. "Now, let me pass or I'll hex you."

"Maybe I should let you do just that and up the number of times you see my godfather," Draco drawled with a leer.

So, he didn't know of the true nature of her and Snape's arrangement. Thank Merlin for small mercies.

"Maybe you should. If you're sure it's worth it; I know some really..." she started saying but was intercepted by his sudden move, and a flying second later, she was pressed against a wall, banging her head on the stones painfully.

For a moment, Hermione wished she didn't have her excess magic purged from her with a ridiculously wasteful result of a few anemones on Snape's robe ("That would be five points, Miss Granger, since you absolutely missed the colour"). How she wished she could release the unfettered thing upon Malfoy's sorry arse.

"I hate touching you, you know?" Draco's face twisted in a horribly genuine disgust inches away from hers, as he held his forearm across her throat. "Your very blood reeks and makes me want to spit in your face."

"Then let me go, you ferret, before you waste your bodily fluids on me," she answered heatedly, hurt, though she had long ago promised herself to ignore his hateful barbs.

"Not unless I know what it is about you that makes your godsdamned existence so necessary."

"If this is your subtle way of letting me know you were sent to watch me and learn things about me," she hissed, "you can't conceivably know the first thing about subtlety."

This made the blond Slytherin so angry that he actually bared his teeth at her and growled.

A surge of desperate (and foolish, her inner voice would have added) bravery possessed her, and she laughed, a bitter, angry sound which made him press on her throat and down, scraping her already injured head on the roughness of the wall.

"Look at you, snarling like an animal," she observed in her mad mirth.

"Filth! Are you sure you want to take such liberties with me?" he returned with such unchecked malice that Hermione had to pull all her courage about her to suppress a shudder. He was strong, he was absolutely (and quite rightfully so) assured of his perfect impunity, and he was dangerous.

Just about when she thought his next move would be to backhand her, a nastily pitched voice sing-songed from above.

"Ickle-fickle Muddybloody, cheating on Potty, hiking skirts up for Ferret Boy!"

Hermione had never been so glad to see Peeves in her entire life at Hogwarts.

Draco's anger was immediately redirected at the sniggering poltergeist, and Hermione thought there was a flash of red behind her as she ran, Disillusioning herself on the go and trying to calm down her breathing.

A few minutes later, she was mincing about in front of Snape's door.

Snape took in the frazzled look of his charge and motioned her in, rolling his eyes.

"What, didn't your tracking thing work this time?" Hermione spat angrily, pathetically fighting tears, now that she was out of immediate danger.

"Why, should it have? You weren't on the verge of another magical overflow, as far as I know," Snape replied, sounding supremely bored.

"I was in danger."

"The main purpose of the tracking device, Miss Granger, is not to protect you, but to protect *from* you," he explained with malicious satisfaction.

That stung.

Biting her lip, Hermione held back an angry snarl.

"What did you want me for?" she asked, looking into the space next to Snape's shoulder pointedly.

"Aren't you going to require assistance, first? I think I heard you mention being in... danger," he returned with a mock concern.

"Don't act like you give two shits," Hermione bit back and folded her arms protectively across her chest.

"Watch your tongue, girl, or I'll be forced to resort to such measures as washing it with soap." He narrowed his eyes at her, and for a second, she was overwhelmed with their fire.

She stood, bold under his fury and scrutiny, holding her ground and her chin up high. After a few small eternities, his physical proximity started to feel difficult to handle, in some vague way, and Hermione took a cowardly step back and averted her eyes.

"Why are you so angry at me, Professor?" she asked quietly.

He ignored her question and started rummaging through a stack of papers on his table.

"Are you quite over your misguided attempts at chivalry?" he questioned, holding a tightly rolled scroll of parchment.

"What?" The question did not make sense to her, and apparently, it was written all over her face because he actually cared to elaborate.

"I need to trust your discretion in this matter and be absolutely confident that you are not going to compromise your safety, if you can help it. Which means, no idiotic plans to rescue this Fazeem Noorta shall be entertained."

Before Hermione could scramble up a reply, there was a knock on the door. It immediately became clear that Snape was not expecting visitors, and whoever came a-knocking was not a welcome guest.

Whipping out a wand, he tapped her head and dragged her into the corner of his eclectic room-study-library, placing her strategically behind a dusty stack of random books as tall as her. Hermione covered her mouth with her hand to stifle a squeak, as the strongest ever Disillusionment Charm rolled over her like a bucket of stinging ice water, and backed into the wall.

Giving his room a quick once-over, Snape measuredly strode to the door and opened it with great flair.

In walked none other than Lucius Malfoy.

"Severus." A regal bow of a majestic, blond head.

Snape answered with a rather elegant, if curt, nod of his own and invited Lucius to occupy one of the chairs next to the fireplace. Farther away from Hermione.

She thought she forgot how to breathe when the elder Malfoy swept by, leaving behind a trail of some elaborate scent Hermione couldn't even start to place, and took the offered chair.

"Lucius, what brings you here tonight? Going about to drop in on Draco?" There was a new cadence in Snape's smooth baritone that was completely unfamiliar to Hermione, and it resonated with something deep insider her and made her long to be addressed in such a tone. Her hand flew to her mouth as she realized that she, in fact, was longing for Snape's affection.

"Severus, I think we have a conversation to have, and it's long overdue," Lucius said as he accepted a dainty cup of tea from the tray, brought by Lop, who popped in from Merlin knows where. Holding the delicate handle with two fingers as if it were a dead rat's tail, Lucius sniffed the contents and placed it on the small, iron-wrought table.

"Quite succinctly put," Snape quipped as he sipped thin, Hogwarts-standard tea, hiding his face behind the cup, "but I would advise you to start it only when our privacy is complete and undeterred by anything, my friend."

Hermione trembled in her little nook, thinking for a second that her trust might be misplaced, but her mentor gestured vaguely at the portrait of Salazar Slytherin hanging over the mantelpiece. Salazar was seemingly napping in his chair, but Malfoy senior took the hint.

"Very well, my friend, very well. I still hope we can come to an agreement, as I am loath to resort to any drastic measures. I always say that I prefer having you on my side, Severus, and I do not care to see it changed, if I can help it." There was a clear, if veiled in courtesy, threat in Lucius's drawl, and it was so completely divorced from the diplomatic well-meaning of his words that Hermione felt bile rising in her throat. No one could be that duplicitous, surely. Or could they?

Lucius rose to his feet and gave the professor a courtly half-hug, placing his hands on his forearms quite cordially.

"Then I shall go see my son," he said and turned to the door.

"Lucius, I am of the opinion that Draco has taken to your task with a great zeal. But sometimes, he takes a plunge for it, and his crass ways may... frighten our subjects and sow the seeds of suspicion."

"Indeed?" Lucius quirked an inquisitive eyebrow, and Hermione thought that it might be something all Slytherins are taught at some secret, compulsory class held in their common room. "I shall have words with him, then. Thank you, my friend."

Snape watched the door closing behind the stately wizard, appearing calm and collected, relaxed even, to Hermione's eye. When Lucius's steps stopped echoing in the

corridor, he released her spell with a quick *Finite* and slumped heavily in his chair.

"To precede the imminent question I practically see bouncing in your brain, Miss Granger, we were talking about you," he confessed, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

Hermione stood, gaping at him, taken completely by surprise by her mentor's honesty.

"What does he..." she started and clapped her mouth shut, as if not voicing the question would make the danger less prominent.

"In the long run...I do not know. For now, he wants to purchase you. He thinks it's a, dare I say, more civil way of going about the matter than kidnapping you."

For a moment, she was so appalled by this that she simply stood, tight as a wrung string, and trembled violently.

"Purchase me?" she finally squeezed out in a voice that sounded too high-pitched to belong to her. "What does he think it is, the twelfth century?"

"Oh, do spare me another fit of your righteous indignation," Snape spat disdainfully.

"But this is barbaric!" she shrieked.

"I never said it wasn't."

"And you are actually discussing it with him?" she demanded shrilly, feeling betrayed on more levels than she could count.

"What would you have me do, challenge him in a duel to defend your virtue?" Snape was getting more and more angry by the second.

Luckily for Hermione, her brain started to catch up with her temper, and she reined it in, giving it a second thought.

"Does it mean you are not going to... going to... go along with his plan?"

"Right now, I wish I did, more than ever," he replied, his tone bitingly acid, and glared at her.

Hermione swallowed hard and fidgeted. Her sore head started to throb a little. After a painful few seconds, he rolled his eyes and gave her a look that, on him, could pass for an almost amused one.

"Do give me some credit here, girl. Now, come, let's see your head."

It took her all her strength not to dissolve in a disarray of relieved sobs.

Whisked Away

Chapter 13 of 13

Hermione uncovers a disturbing plot.

A/N: My dear readers! I apologize for such a long wait. Real life got a little too busy for my tastes :) and the muse got carried away with a few other things. I hope the next chapter comes much sooner.

As always, I'm very grateful to **potionsmistress23**.

Sleep didn't come. Her mind was cobwebby with a mix of confusion, hurt and a mild pain potion Snape had given her for her throbbing head. Pain and hurt she could deal with, but confusion was something Hermione Granger hated with a passion. She liked to compare her own mind to a neatly organized library. Everything was always sorted, labeled, referenced and kept neat. Or stuffed into her own Restricted Section for later consideration. But when she had to deal with confusion, it was like an onslaught of the simpering first-years searching for their first ever reference materials. Thoughts stuck into wrong frames, baffling contradictions created by leaks of emotions.

Her current source of confusion was, of course, her mentor. Even though she was quite used to his vile treatment in class, she also had become accustomed to and...she couldn't but admit it...fond of his still reserved and acerbic but absolutely not unkind persona that surfaced when she passed through the claustrophobic corridor and the door to his private quarters closed behind her.

"People get used to good things very fast," her father often said, and when Hermione gave it a pondering, she realized how fast she had accepted Snape's hidden persona. She was feeling rather disgusted with herself for the way her confidence buckled under the suddenly heavy weight of his barbs and vicious temper, although, if she were honest with herself, it was nothing less and nothing more than he usually bestowed on his students in class.

And yet, she was unexpectedly raw with hurt. It smarted worse, seeing how his gentle treatment of her head belied his harsh verbal lashing. He had initially called her to give an excuse slip for the next day's outdoor class with Professor Sprout, which he had stuffed in her hand, together with the pain potion, before he ushered her out in haste. It was signed by Professor McGonagall, and Hermione was to present it discreetly to the Head of Hufflepuff somewhere after breakfast and never leave the castle until further notice. This piece of news was piled on top of her little tower of things that couldn't have gone more wrong, but not willing to flirt with his temper more than she absolutely had to, she held her own fury back. She could tell that his mood was getting sourer by the minute and was grateful to be dismissed so quickly.

She spent her evening trying to decipher Snape's temper swings and could only come up with one thing: he was worried sick for her safety and had a twisted, yet very characteristic way of showing it. Her own conceit surprised her, but she still couldn't think of anything more plausible.

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Her own mood descended together with her feet, which dragged her down the enchanted stairs and into the Great Hall. She had got up early and was one of the first to enter the enchanted chamber. A house-elf, one of the many scuttling about Hogwarts in the wee hours of morning, cringed at her facial expression and popped away with a tiny squeak of terror, but she didn't even bother to feel ashamed. Missing one of the most promising Herbology classes of the semester did not particularly constitute a sunny disposition.

"Rough night?" Ginny asked casually, plopping down next to her after Hermione had been pushing a piece of scrambled egg around her plate for a good twenty minutes.

"More like a shitty morning," she grumbled in response, thinking of the blasted roll of parchment that confined her to the castle. And Fred and George never wrote back. Not that she could go meet them.

"Too much to study?" Ginny offered with automatic sympathy, her eyes already on the entrance door, where Harry was slumping his way somberly to the table.

"Oi, Ginny, it's considered something rude to say if you're talking to Hermione," Ron said with a bit more snark than she could tolerate on this particular morning.

Hermione shot him a death glare, and Ron cringed away.

Harry approached the table with an absent face, mumbled a half-hearted good morning and plopped down next to Dean.

"Any success with Harry?" Hermione asked, stomping on her wish to smack Ron upside the head for being his usual, tactless self.

"Not really," he replied with defeat. "He wouldn't talk. He brushes me away. Not that you would have any success, either," Ron added and looked at her meaningfully. Apparently, her own secret-keeping antics still rubbed him the wrong way quite a bit.

Looking into his honest, blue eyes, Hermione felt a sudden desire to hug him close, like they were still best friends, and everything was not so complicated between them.

It probably showed in her eyes, because Ron suddenly looked all of thirteen, and a crooked, wistful smile tugged at his face.

"Hey, you know what we can do? That Herbology class today, the one in the Forest. Sprout is just going to blather on about leaves and sticks and roots, and we can, well, ambush Harry and just be blunt?" he asked, hope dancing in his eyes.

"Oh, Ron..." If she could possibly get more upset, she did. "I... can't go. I have an excuse slip from McGonagall," she said and clasped her hands together apologetically.

"You do?" Ron asked, doubtful at first, but then hope ebbed from his eyes and contempt clouded them. "Oh, I get it. Don't ask, right? Your secrets again?"

She was about to cry and looked away from his dear face, trying to focus on something else, something neutral. Instead, her gaze landed on Draco Malfoy's face. He was passing the Gryffindor table on the way out of the Great Hall, his ever-present retinue of Crabbe and Goyle teetering clumsily behind him.

Something had made him halt his step, and now he was looking at her with confused anger, as if she were holding clues to some particularly tricky question and was not budging. Before she could process what was happening, Crabbe and Goyle, who were muttering something between themselves, bumped into Draco's back, making him stumble. Snapping out of whatever trance he was in, he whipped around, wand drawn, making his goonies recoil. Hermione watched the scene unfold with an uneasy tension and closed her eyes, suddenly remembering the harsh, violating feel of the little ferret's forearm pressing across her throat. When she collected herself enough to go back to the world around her, Draco was gone.

She got up, suddenly having the need to move, flee somewhere and calm. Breakfast was not over yet, and she still had time before she had to go to Professor Sprout and get excused from the class. Her feet automatically took her to her usual sanctuary.

The Owlery was quiet; most birds were slumbering after a long night of hunting. Only a few drowsy hoots met her when she wiggled her treats of bacon strips and toast. She waited for a minute for her usual, dotty dwarf of an owl to come down. It never did, and she gave it a few more minutes, politely declining an offer of an outstretched leg from a frazzled, elderly barn owl. Sometimes, she wished the school birds had names. Another owl, indiscreet and gray, glided down and offered its service, and Hermione hastily tied the note to the twins, which said that she had to postpone their plans for the meeting. She watched it take off out of a tall window and thought of the tiny, speckled creature, which resembled a sparrow more than an owl. Perhaps, morning caught it chasing a mouse in the forest, and it hid in a hollow tree.

Heaving a heavy sigh for the bird, whom she had come to think of as sort of her own little messenger, Hermione looked at her Muggle watch and started for the Herbology classroom. She still had time before the sixth-year Herbology students were to assemble in the Entrance Hall for the class.

She reached the level where she had to turn for the Hufflepuff part of the castle, finding her way intuitively among the winding corridors. Immersed in thoughts, she paid little heed to her surroundings, and as she was rounding yet another corner, she suddenly collided with something heavy.

Landing on her arse, she watched in dismay as her bag burst, and the numerous books, notes and rolls of parchment went flying out and rained down on her in miserable disarray.

A high-pitched snigger and a few barking, booming guffaws startled her from watching the world that fit in her bag collapse. Crabbe and Goyle, the two oafs, were looming above her, looking like two stone giants beside Pansy Parkinson, who stood observing her smugly, her beady, wide-set eyes dancing in amusement.

"Oh, clumsy!" she crooned with mock sympathy.

Hermione started to get up, discretely fingering her wand in its pocket.

"Here, we'll help you pick it all up. I am a Prefect after all, and that's what Prefects do." Pansy's mean, little voice sounded in her ears, its practiced condescension churning her.

"Don't bother, thank you," Hermione muttered through gritted teeth and conjured a bag for her things, unwilling to make a scene or suffer another minute of uneasiness alone with Draco Malfoy's little clique.

"Don't be so proud, Granger. It's quite unbecoming in a Mu... It's unbecoming," Pansy retorted, her little slip obviously deliberate. "Well, boys? Help!"

Before Hermione knew, the three of them started gathering up her notes and books and various know-it-all paraphernalia that filled her bag. Coy, meaningful looks were exchanged, and she realized that she was not being let in on something. Stuffing her belongings into her makeshift, substitute bag, she hurried away, mumbling an absolutely not heart-felt thank you.

When she reached her destination, a tiny sliver of worry started ticking in her head. The door to the classroom gave under her nudge and revealed a very Sprout-less room. A seventh-year Hufflepuff boy, who was always so indiscernible that even she could not remember his name, despite the fact that he'd been Sprout's unofficial assistant during the last two years, stopped clearing the blackboard and dropped his wand.

"Oh, hello. I'm, uh... I need to talk to Professor Sprout, erm..." She fidgeted.

"Elias," the boy supplied, with no obvious offense taken.

"Elias," she echoed and looked around the room.

"She's not here. She had something brought to her attention and left immediately after breakfast. She has a class with... well, with you, so you may as well find her there half an hour."

"She's not here? Maybe I can catch up with her, then," she said half to herself absently.

"Don't think so. Draco Malfoy came here right after breakfast and told her that she is required at the lesson site immediately," the boy answered and eyed her unrest curiously.

"Yes, well... thank you, uh, Elias," Hermione said, turning on her heel. She still had good twenty minutes before the sixth-year Herbology NEWT class had to assemble for the trip, and the little gears in her head meshed and ground, set in motion by a gut feeling of something being off.

She rushed down into the Great Hall where a few Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs were already waiting like docile little doves, casting mild protection and warming spells onto each other.

"Have you seen Professor Sprout?" she asked Hannah Abbot and was surprised how frantic her voice sounded.

"Oh, no, she's not here yet. Is something the matter, Hermione?" Hannah, ever the concerned one, asked, giving her a searching look.

"No, no, everything is just fine," Hermione replied, staring around her, as if the very walls of the Great Hall could help her out.

As her gaze skimmed the entrance door, she spotted Pansy Parkinson, looking smug and extremely pleased with herself. She walked towards the ever growing group of sixth-year students, flanked by Crab and Goyle, both of whom somehow managed to get into the class, and the very sound of her clicking heels seemed arrogant.

Suddenly, something else clicked...in her head. She rummaged in her conjured bag and pulled out her destroyed one, looking for clues. Soon enough, she noticed the slightly frayed edges of the ripped seam, which signified very neat spell work. Horror rushed like a hot wave through her in the wake of understanding, and she continued searching for her excuse scroll.

It wasn't there. Hiding discreetly in a nook behind an arch, she upturned the entire contents of her bag and even tried to *Accio* the scroll, but in vain.

Why would Pansy need it? And how did she know that Hermione had one, in the first place? Her mind obligingly provided an image of Draco Malfoy scowling at her as he passed by just when she was telling Ron...

Oh, bugger.

She flew out of her little hiding place, ready to drag the pug-nosed bitch into a corner and demand her slip back.

"There you finally are, Miss Granger," a low contralto said right behind her with mild annoyance. "We've been waiting for you, and now that everyone is here, I'll escort you to your class.

Hermione turned around and gave Professor Sinistra a wan smile.

Aurora Sinistra was not Hermione's favourite teacher. And since she had taken it to mind to pass Astronomy OWLs with flying colours in her fourth year, the sentiment was returned by her Astronomy professor in spades. After Hermione had the audacity to point out a mistake in one of Sinistra's astrological formulas, which was later confirmed by Professor Vector and even by McGonagall herself (who was quite a dab hand in Astrology), there was no love lost between the teacher and the student.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting, Professor," Hermione apologized, trying to keep her voice neutral and quiet. "I actually have an excuse slip for the class and..."

"Do produce it then, Miss Granger. I haven't got much time for dawdling: there's a class of third-years waiting for me."

"I, uh... actually, I lost it but if you..."

"Well then, it looks like you don't have it," Sinistra said sweetly and turned to address the rest of the students, "Class, please follow me."

Hermione felt blood rushing from her face, ringing like annoying rusty bells in her temples. Magicking her bag ripped, luring Sprout away under some undoubtedly fake pretense, stealing her slip, having Sinistra to accompany the class...she was positive that there was a carefully orchestrated scheme at play. Part of her wanted to run and hide and deal with it later, when the mad beating of her heart stopped. And when Snape was out of classes, her mind slipped in. And yet, her other part, the one that still could not reconcile with all the shifts in her existence that Mageness brought about, rebelled. What possible danger could come to her within Hogwarts grounds? Under the supervision of one, possibly two professors? Amidst a couple of dozens of students? All she had to do is be cautious, not cause a scene, follow Sinistra and explain it all to Sprout. Who would be much more inclined to believe a Gryffindor Prefect.

Imagining that her resolve was made of steel, she held on to it and followed her classmates, now trickling out of the Great Hall and scurrying to exit the castle.

As her feet carried her, following some blind crowd instinct that had moved humans to follow their peers mindlessly for ages, Hermione tried to pep-talk herself into a calm state. She'd broken rules and regulations before, and she wasn't even breaking any right now...just going against her mentor's caution...and she'd almost always got out unscathed. Trying to take her mind off the nagging worry, she wondered if she could come up with an Arithmantic equation in her mind, to calculate the possibility of something happening to her while technically still in Hogwarts. Shuffling constants and variables about in her head, she kept going past the Greenhouses and down a gently sloping hill to the outskirts of the Forbidden Forest.

A small, moving dot in the sky caught her attention. The dot rapidly grew and gradually took on the outlines of a bird. A small, frantically flying owl. Squinting slightly, Hermione recognized the ever ruffled, freckled form of her little owl friend and was suddenly very happy to see the poor mishap of a bird. Even before her brain registered it and her eyes saw the proof, she knew that the owl was carrying a missive for her. Must be from Friend and George, she thought with elation, and as soon as the bird was close enough, she reached out to snatch a roll of parchment, tied neatly with a red and gold band.

It was only when she was opening the letter that she noticed how the pattern of the dots on the owl's head was a off, and the colour was not... exactly the same. Not her bird, no definitely not.

And it was only when she touched the inner side of the blank parchment and instantly felt a sickening tug at her gut, and the world whirled out of focus that she remembered that Portkeys only didn't work within Hogwarts' actual walls; the grounds weren't protected with the Anti-Portkey wards. The magic took her somewhere pitch black, and without being able to see where she was landing, Hermione fell down in a heap, successfully knocking herself out in the process.

~ooo~

When she came to, she couldn't tell how long she had stayed unconscious, because there was no daylight to indicate the passage of time. The space around her was cold and soggy, the very air damp. She touched the floor and her fingernails scraped on moldy stones. Dungeons? Surely not. Despite being rather creepy, the dungeons of Hogwarts had never instilled such a strong feeling of wrongness in her. It was like the very building or place she was currently in rejected her presence.

There was a very dim beam of a slightly lighter air, coming from somewhere above, and by its length, Hermione could tell that the ceiling was rather high. Standing up, she felt her head spin and held her hand to the wall to prevent herself from falling down. It would be useful to know how big the place was, she decided, and started walking along the wall, dragging her palm over the rough stones. Immediately, her fingers ran into some kind of indentations, which had a certain pattern to them: six vertical strokes, crossed out by a horizontal one. Her brain was suddenly attacked by a rush of images and alien sensations: hunger, fear, despair, hope, despair again, not being able to understand, mother, missing, monkeys in palm trees.

Hermione walked faster, counting the stroke patterns on the wall, until she had reached the count of fifteen and her feet bumped into a body.

Two screams ripped the air, one of which was hers and the other belonging to someone sitting close to her. She finally remembered that she was a witch, reached for her wand and lit it up. The light was very dim, which made her suspect that the room or a cave or wherever they were, was protected by some kind of anti-magic wards: only basic spells would work, and they would be weak, at best.

In front of her stood a rail-thin, jaundiced boy of no more than twelve. He had ragged, black hair which probably hadn't seen shampoo or even water in months, olive skin

and a look of a small, caged animal in his eyes. And just like she knew that she was Hermione Granger, Gryffindor Prefect and a Middler Mage, she knew clear as day that in front of her stood Fazeem Noorta, aged thirteen, speaking not two words in English, and a Taker Mage.