

# Target

*by linlawless*

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A response to the long-ago HP Chapter Challenge; HBP and DH ignored (except for the challenge sentences included!).

## A Credible Threat

*Chapter 1 of 10*

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*A/N: This story is a very belated response to Southern\_Witch\_69's HP Chapter Challenge at Potter Place. (I wasn't even in the fandom until last year, but that doesn't mean I can't have fun with old challenges, right?). I have a complete draft and will be uploading every few days. The complete rules of the Challenge appear at the end of this chapter.*

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### Chapter 1 A Credible Threat

Hermione sat uncomfortably in her parents' sitting room, feeling fully the awkwardness of the situation. Of all the people in the world that she had ever anticipated seeing *here*, Professor Snape was the very last. In fact, he didn't even make the *list*. She really didn't know quite how to handle the situation.

Fortunately, no one seemed to expect her to do much of anything really, she may as well have been absent entirely, considering the way they were conversing around her and about her, but not at all with her. In the circumstances, she took the opportunity to examine Professor Snape. He looked very out of place in his moleskin overcoat, she decided dispassionately. Her Mum had offered politely to take it, when he had first arrived, but he had declined. Hermione wondered if it was so distasteful to him to be forced into polite conversation with Muggles that he wanted to be able to escape without a moment wasted to reclaim his overcoat.

She continued to examine him, as his attention was elsewhere. She had never truly looked at him before it was just too likely to draw unpleasant comment from him. He really wasn't very good-looking, of course, but at least he was interesting-looking, with his limp black hair and his prominent nose and his crooked, yellow teeth. Considering that many of the good-looking people she knew couldn't hold a decent conversation, Hermione decided now that 'interesting' was infinitely preferable to 'good' when one was contemplating someone's looks. It was probably good that she felt that way, considering that she herself wasn't all that good-looking. That was probably why Ron and Harry forgot she was even a girl most of the time. She didn't mind, though. It would be awkward if they thought of her as female, wouldn't it? And anyway, she'd much rather be smart and interesting and nice than good-looking.

Of course, in Professor Snape's case, looking interesting and being smart probably weren't sufficient to overcome his horrid personality ...

Suddenly realizing that everyone was looking at her expectantly, Hermione felt her cheeks warm as she realized someone must have asked her a question while she had been woolgathering. "Er ... sorry," she murmured. "I wasn't listening."

Professor Snape glared at her. "We're putting all this effort into arranging for your safety, and you can't even be bothered to pay attention?"

"Er ... sorry," Hermione said again. "It just seemed as though you all had things well in hand, and that my input was unnecessary."

Hermione's parents looked guilty, and her Mum protested, "Oh, Hermione, of course we want your opinion! After all, this affects you more directly than anyone."

Deciding not to argue, although she was quite certain that her opinion wouldn't matter if it conflicted with theirs, she said instead, "I just don't understand why this is an issue. Nothing material has changed, so far as I can tell, since last year or the year before that. We've known since the end of my fourth year that Vol 1 " Catching Snape's darkening glower, she hastily corrected herself " I mean, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is back. Why is everyone suddenly so concerned about my safety?"

"If you had bothered to pay attention," Snape said irritably, "you would have heard me say that there has been a direct and credible threat against you specifically. The Headmaster feels, and rightly so, that our previous precautions are no longer sufficient."

"What kind of threat?"

"Excuse me?" Snape asked, sounding even more annoyed.

"What kind of specific threat?"

Snape glanced uncomfortably at her parents before answering. "The kind where you wind up being used as a pawn in a variety of ways, none of which are good for your long-term health and well-being."

"Oh," Hermione said. She digested that for a moment, then asked, "What ways?"

Snape looked like he wanted to strangle her with his bare hands. "I do not intend to repeat every word I've said since I arrived, Miss Granger, especially since I have been here too long already. The only material question is the one your mother asked you when you were woolgathering: do you prefer to move abroad and enroll in a new school under an assumed name and in disguise, or do you prefer to remain at Hogwarts?"

"I prefer to remain at Hogwarts, of course," Hermione said firmly.

"Are you sure, dear?" Mum asked. "You've only just got home, and if you come abroad with us, we could spend the summer settling in there. We were thinking America. Professor Snape says you should be safe at the Salem Institute. We could live nearby in Boston, perhaps. There can't be much for you to do at Hogwarts during the summer ..."

"Wait, you're expecting me to go back to Hogwarts~~now~~?" Hermione asked.

"Again, if you had been *paying attention*," Snape ground out, "you would already have heard me say that none of you can stay here. The Dark Lord's determination to acquire you makes that unsafe for all of you. Regardless of what you do, your parents will be moving abroad in a matter of days. The Order will arrange for liquidation and transfer of their assets to wherever they decide to go. Their location will be Secret-Kept."

"But ..." Hermione began.

"Miss Granger," Snape interrupted, "time is wasting. I can't imagine why your parents seem unwilling to make this decision for you *you are*, after all, a minor according to Muggle law but they are deferring to you. Make a decision, and make it fast. We do *not* have time for this dithering."

"Give me a minute," Hermione snapped, as she began to grow irritable herself. "Will I be able to have contact with my parents if I'm at Hogwarts?"

"We will be able to arrange occasional contact, most likely," Snape said impatiently. "However, close contact would put them at risk."

"Would I be able to have contact with my friends if I were with my parents?"

"No," Snape said tersely.

"No? None at all?" Hermione clarified.

"That would defeat the purpose of the entire exercise, Miss Granger, so no, none at all."

Hermione sighed, looking apologetically at her parents. "I'm sorry, but I couldn't just leave them with no contact at all. I just couldn't." Turning back to Professor Snape, she asked, "Do I at least have a few minutes to pack?"

"Hurry up, then," Snape said, sounding resigned.

Hermione dashed up the stairs to her bedroom, and quickly began putting her belongings back into the trunk she had removed them from only a few days earlier. As she packed, she thought it was too bad she was still a student, and therefore not permitted to use magic at home. Packing would be so much faster and easier if she could simply wave her wand and be done with it.

She wasn't sure when or if she would ever get back here, so she took everything that was important to her. As she packed, it occurred to her to wonder why she couldn't spend the summer at the Burrow, or even at Grimmauld Place.

Half an hour later, she came down the stairs, her heavy trunk thumping down the steps as she dragged it behind her. Snape was standing by the door, looking even more annoyed than usual. Her parents were already carefully packing away the photos that usually stood on the mantel, wrapping them in paper and setting them in one of the empty boxes that Snape must have conjured for them. Snape said to them, "It would be best to leave it looking as though you've simply taken a long trip, rather than moved entirely. If they think you're coming back, they won't immediately look for you, which will make it harder for them to find you when they realize you've left permanently."

"Yes, all right," Dad said. "We'll leave some clothing and personal effects, then."

"Someone from the Order will be here momentarily to provide protection until you've finished packing and then to take you to a safe house until your new home is ready." Snape waved his wand, making Hermione's trunk small enough to fit in the pocket she slipped it into. "Miss Granger, if you are ready, I will Apparate us to the gates of Hogwarts."

Hermione quickly said good-bye to her parents, then Snape took her arm and Disapparated.

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Quote for Chapter 1 (determined as outlined below -- my first number is 28 and my second number is 14) from SS/PS: "He looked very out of place in his mesleskin overcoat."

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**SW69's Challenge Rules:** This has been influenced by Doompark's 394 Challenge. Instead of using random books, we will use the HP books for a single quote per

chapter.

Pairings? Choose one below.

Yes, there must be a love match between them.

Hermione/Severus

Draco/Ginny

Harry/Gabrielle

Ron/Luna

1. Take the month and day of your numerical birth date and add them together. (Ex: My birthday is on July the fifth. 07 [seventh month] + 05 [fifth day] = 12 )

2. Divide the sum by 2 to get a second number.

(Ex: I would divide 12/2 and get 6. Round all half numbers up to the higher number.)

3. Open up Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's (Philosopher's) Stone and use your SECOND number to figure out what chapter to open up to.

(Ex: I would open to chapter number 6.)

4. Use your FIRST number to find the sentence to use. (Example: I would scroll down to the 12th sentence of the chapter, even if the sentence is on the next page.)

5. The first chapter should include that sentence.

6. Continue the process with Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets following the same formula and the second chapter will be formed around this sentence.

7. Continue with POA, GOF, OotP, and HBP in the same manner and in this order.

**Each chapter must be 1000-2000 words long. No shorter and no longer!**

BONUS:

An additional chapter or two chapters can be created from the two extra books that J.K. Rowling wrote: Quidditch Through the Ages and Fantastical Beasts & Where to Find Them. These aren't as lengthy as the others, so you'll have to find your sentence and page a bit different here.

Fantastical Beasts...

1. Use your FIRST number to determine what page to turn to. (The highest sum would be 43. Since there are only 42 pages after the foreword, if your sum is 43, use the number 42.)

2. Use your SECOND number to determine which sentence to use on that page. If your number isn't found on the page, simply use the last sentence. (There are so many run-on sentences. You'll probably have to do this.)

3. Record the sentence AND the beast's name in which it falls under. (Example: I would pick sentence 6 from page 12 and note that my beast is the Common Welsh Green.)

4. Write the chapter using the sentence and the beast from that page. Same length requirements as above.

Quidditch Through The Ages...

1. Use your FIRST number to determine what page to turn to.

2. Use your second number to determine what sentence to use. Record the sentence and build the chapter around it. You may not have enough sentences on the page, simply use the last sentence if this is the case. There are many run-on sentences there, and some pictures take up a lot of room.

Same length requirements apply for this chapter.

NOTES:

If you use the six Harry Potter books plus the 2 extra books, you could have an 8 chapter story[\*lin's note: **There are nine chapters in this story because I used the same rule for book 7 as for the first 6, and also included the two bonus books.\***] The chapters won't be very taxing, as the length requirements are minimum. If you do not have all of these books, please ask me or anyone else who might own them. We will gladly give you the quote you need to get started. This challenge starts as of today, April 27, 2005 through December 31, 2005. That should give people enough time to start up something and begin posting. I hope someone takes up this challenge. If you need anything, please post for help here or send an email to me.

## Return to Hogwarts

*Chapter 2 of 10*

Upon returning to Hogwarts, Hermione agrees to undertake a special independent study for the summer, as she ponders the question of who might be the traitor within the Order.

*A/N: Thanks to everyone who has reviewed! A couple of people asked how old Hermione was and/or when this takes place, so I thought I'd mention here the story began just after the end of Hermione's sixth year, which I believe makes her 17 years old at the beginning of the story (but please remember that I've made **no** attempt to be HBP- or DH-compliant!).*

Oh, and, as always, the characters and concepts herein belong to JKR I'm just playing.

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## Chapter 2 Return to Hogwarts

They arrived at the Hogwarts gates, and Hagrid was there to let them in. He grabbed Hermione into a bear hug, lifting her off her feet as he said, "Welcome back, 'ermione! Betcha didn't expect to be back so soon!"

"No, I certainly didn't," Hermione agreed.

"Well, ye'll be safe here, never worry 'bout that. And I'll bet you'll read yer way through the entire Hogwarts library afore the other students come back in September."

Hermione laughed as they reached the main entrance. Hagrid opened the door for them, and Snape said, "The Headmaster wanted to see you right away, Miss Granger. Hagrid, I'm certain you have duties to get back to?"

"Oh, er ..." Hagrid stammered, looking guilty.

Just then, Hermione heard something growl. She turned toward the sound, finding herself staring back at what looked like a weird cross between a lion, a goat, and a dragon. "Hagrid?" she asked nervously.

"Yeah, 'ermione?" Hagrid asked, apparently not having noticed the creature growling in the shadows.

Snape had followed her gaze. Hermione heard him sigh, then he looked back at Hagrid. He sounded resigned, yet oddly, uncharacteristically gentle when he asked the half-giant, "Tell us, have you been setting anything mad and hairy loose in the castle lately?"

Hagrid looked even guiltier. "Well, er ... nothing so bad as all that ... it's just ..."

"You *have*, haven't you, Hagrid? Is that a *Chimaera*?" Hermione asked, incredulous.

Hagrid turned to follow her gaze, and a big smile broke across his face. "Ah, there ye are, Hubert! I was wonderin' where ye'd got yerself off ta!" He approached the beast, which seemed to calm down as Hagrid approached, although Hermione knew perfectly well that Chimaeras were deadly and vicious with everyone else.

Snape said firmly, but not unkindly, "Hagrid, get that thing out of the castle and preferably off the grounds. Come along, Miss Granger."

And with that, he led Hermione up to meet with the Headmaster.

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Dumbledore was waiting for them, as Snape had said he would be. "Hermione!" he greeted her happily. "Welcome back! I'm so glad you've chosen to join us for the summer!"

"Oh, er ... thanks," Hermione said uncertainly. Dumbledore certainly wasn't behaving as though he had been worried at all. "I was wondering, sir, why you felt Hogwarts was safer than the Burrow, or perhaps Order Headquarters?"

"Oh," Dumbledore said, suddenly looking serious. "I'm afraid, Hermione, that we suspect there is a traitor amongst the Order."

"A traitor?" she gasped. "But ... who?"

"I'd rather not accuse anyone without proof, Hermione. Professor Snape is working on finding evidence " Snape snorted derisively, but Dumbledore ignored him " but until then, the only place in the United Kingdom that is safe for you is Hogwarts Castle. The enchantments are such that we would know immediately if anyone breached the wards in an attempt to harm a student, thus giving us the chance to protect you."

"Oh," Hermione said, feeling saddened that one of the people she trusted implicitly might have betrayed the rest of the Order, and might be looking for an opportunity to capture her.

"In any event, Hermione," Dumbledore said, changing the subject, "we'll be considerably less formal here for the summer than during the school year. I have arranged for you to stay in the Head Girl's Quarters in Gryffindor Tower for the summer, as the dormitories will likely seem quite empty and lonesome." He winked at her mischievously, adding, "And perhaps you will not have to move when the new term starts." Snape snorted again.

"Oh, er ... all right, thanks."

"Now, you shall have free run of the grounds for the summer, except, of course, the Forbidden Forest, which naturally remains dangerous. In addition, you may freely use the library, except the Restricted Section, as there remain some dangerous tomes in there, as well. However, if you find that you need something specific for your research, please let me know."

"All right," Hermione agreed readily, even as she wondered, *what research?* Fortunately, Dumbledore was already answering her unspoken question.

"Now, so that you don't get bored, we were thinking you might like to undertake some independent study over the course of the summer. You would have time for up to three subjects of your choice, depending on the material you wish to study."

"Of course," Hermione said, thrilled at the prospect. "Are there any restrictions on what subjects I may choose?"

"Anything is fine, so long as someone capable is available to supervise you. Perhaps you should think about fields you may be considering for a career?"

"Great!" Hermione said, unable to contain her excitement. "Could I combine two fields of study?"

Dumbledore looked amused. "Again, so long as someone qualified is available to supervise you, I see no reason why not. Did you have something particular in mind?"

"Well, I had been thinking about trying to use Arithmancy to develop a potion that would protect against use of the Cruciatus curse. I was reading in Charms Quarterly about a new pain-relieving charm, and I got to thinking about pain-relief potions, and then I thought, what if one could take a daily dose of a potion, prophylactically, to protect the nerve endings against curse damage?" Hermione was speaking rapidly now, having forgotten that Professor Snape was in the room.

Dumbledore chuckled. "All right, then. Professor Snape, perhaps you would be willing to supervise the Potions portion of such a project?"

"If you insist, Headmaster," Snape said, although he didn't sound happy about it.

"Wonderful," Dumbledore said. "I shall see if Professor Vector would be available to supervise the Arithmancy portion of the project. Now, as I see it is time for supper, perhaps you would both accompany me to the Great Hall?"

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After dinner, Hermione found herself too keyed up to sleep. The very idea of doing an independent study was so exciting that she had pulled out all her notes on the Charms article she had mentioned to the Headmaster and re-read them. Then she had begun reviewing the section of last year's Arithmancy text that dealt with the use of

Arithmancy in Potions development. Tomorrow, she would begin researching everything she could find on pain-relieving potions.

As she readied for bed, her mind drifted back to the earlier part of her conversation with Dumbledore. She found it hard to imagine that there might be a traitor within the Order of the Phoenix. Everyone seemed so devoted to engineering the defeat of Voldemort. How could one of their own have betrayed them?

She tried for a while to figure out who it was, but she just couldn't believe it of anyone. Well, she supposed she might have thought it was Snape, but Dumbledore spoke of it so freely in front of him, and Snape's own demeanor suggested that he thought Dumbledore should be acting on whatever information they already had. And anyway, despite his avid dislike of her and all her friends, he had always protected them when it came right down to it. But who else could it be? And why couldn't she go to the Burrow, just because the Order might be compromised?

Unless ... No, it was impossible. The Weasleys would never betray the Order. They just wouldn't ...

Eventually, Hermione forced herself to stop thinking about it and get some sleep. Tomorrow she would start her independent study, and she wanted a clear head. She would, after all, be dealing with Professor Snape, and it was never wise to do that on insufficient rest.

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Quote from CS: "Tell us, have you been setting anything mad and hairy loose in the castle lately?"

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## Nightmares, Routines, and Discoveries

### Chapter 3 of 10

Hermione settles into a routine as she works on her summer project, despite some unsettling dreams; when pressed, Snape hints at the identity of the suspected traitor.

*A/N: Thanks for all the reviews ... I'm glad you've enjoyed the story so far, and I hope you'll also enjoy this next installment! I have to admit it I went a bit over the length the challenge called for in this chapter (by 80 words, to be exact). Since I'm not actually competing, I hope you'll forgive me. I think the quote for this chapter was the hardest one for me to incorporate (although I would only really characterize one of the nine I used as even approaching easy ... When the story is finished, I'll be interested to see how many of you can guess which one that was!).*

*The characters and concepts are still not mine, even if the way I play with them is. ;)*

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### Chapter 3 Nightmares, Routines, and Discoveries

*Hermione drifted down the hall toward the boys' dormitory, a chill running down her spine. It was so quiet unnaturally, eerily silent in Gryffindor tower. She reached the doorway at last, glancing in and expecting to see five boys asleep. Instead, she saw a figure standing over a bed, wand raised toward a quivering mass in the center of it. Lightning flashed, and she saw the unmistakable wide blue eyes and red hair of one of the Weasley boys, though the way he was holding the blanket up in front of him, she couldn't see which one ... It had to be Ron, didn't it? What other Weasley would be in the boys' dorm with Harry?*

*She gasped, and the figure with the wand turned it was Sirius Black, which struck her as odd, because wasn't Sirius already dead? She glanced around, confused, until she realized suddenly that this was the third-year boys' dormitory, not the sixth-year dorm where they had lived last year. If this was third year, then naturally, Sirius wasn't dead.*

*This Sirius seemed so different from the one she remembered, though he wore an evil smile and said smugly, "You trusted me, and look what I've done!" He gestured at the other beds in the room. "Four down, one to go ... You know you can't trust anyone at all ..." and in her dream state, it made perfect sense to Hermione that she shouldn't trust Sirius or anyone else that he had killed Harry and would soon kill her.*

*It seemed obvious, now: Sirius Black had proved twelve years ago that he didn't mind murdering innocent people, and this time he had been facing five unarmed boys, four of whom were asleep. They were probably all dead by now, weren't they?*

*Even as she had the thought, Sirius turned and pointed his wand at Hermione. As the word "Avada" crossed his lips, his hair turned red and his eyes blue ...*

Hermione sat up in bed, gasping and willing her heart to slow down. This was becoming ridiculous, she scolded herself. She had had the same nightmare every night for the past two weeks, ever since she had been told that there was a traitor in the Order. She had attempted, after the third night, to obtain some Dreamless Sleep Potion from Madam Pomfrey, only to discover that she was on holiday in Greece for the entire summer.

If this kept up, she would have to ask Professor Snape which she really wanted to avoid. He had been surprisingly tolerant and helpful so far, as she had developed her formal independent study proposal. Naturally, he still got irritated when she asked too many questions, but at least he answered her most of the time. Sometimes, he even seemed truly interested in discussing her theory and how her project was going at least for a moment here or there, anyway.

Hermione had developed a comfortable routine. Professor Vector had agreed to supervise her in Arithmancy, so Hermione met with her for an hour each morning immediately after breakfast. Then she went to the library, where she stayed until lunch, researching relevant Arithmancy theory or working out preliminary equations. After lunch, she met with Professor Snape in his laboratory, where she helped him with the grunt work involved in re-stocking the infirmary's supply of basic potions as they discussed potions issues relevant to her project. She always stayed until the day's potions were complete, even if they finished discussing her project before they were done brewing. Once the potions were bottled and the lab tidied, she took a walk on the grounds, then spent whatever remained of the afternoon, as well as much of the evening after dinner, working on Potions theory for her study.

It was very nearly a perfect existence, Hermione thought, if not for those pesky nightmares that kept reminding her that someone she trusted wanted to harm her. Well, that and the fact that she was thinking far more than she should about Professor Snape.

She didn't know when it had started, really. Perhaps it was simply that she was spending so much time with him because of her project. Perhaps it was because he seemed so different, so much more relaxed, than he ever had during the school year. Perhaps it was because, notwithstanding his complex history, he was the only Order member, other than Dumbledore himself, that she was absolutely certain was not the traitor.

Or perhaps it was because, several times in the past week, she had caught him looking at her with an odd expression on his face. She was accustomed to his sneers and his scowls and his general expressions of sour disdain when he chanced to see her, but lately, his expression was usually neutral. Sometimes, it even looked speculative, like he was curious about something.

She wondered what that look meant. She had almost asked him, once, but had suppressed the question, suspecting that it might disturb the unspoken truce they seemed to have reached.

Now, glancing at the clock, Hermione decided she may as well get up. Although her pulse rate had returned to something approximating normal, she had no desire to risk having the nightmare a second time in one night.

Besides, five a.m. wasn't so early, was it?

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When she arrived at the Potions lab that afternoon, Professor Snape announced, "We aren't brewing today. If you aren't wearing sturdy shoes, go change."

Hermione tried to hide her surprise at this change in routine. "I've got my trainers on will that be all right?"

He glanced at her feet, then said, "It will do. Take this." He handed her a large basket that had several compartments, then picked up a similar one himself, along with a scythe in a dragonhide scabbard. He fastened the latter around his waist.

He led her down a hallway Hermione had never seen before; she could only assume there was a Notice-Me-Not charm on the entrance. Eventually, they exited the castle near the greenhouses. He glanced at her and said, "Wait here."

She nodded, watching him walk toward greenhouse number five. Professor Sprout came to the doorway and greeted him rather more warmly than Hermione would have expected it seemed odd to think that Professor Snape might have friends amongst his colleagues. They conversed for a few minutes, and Hermione even thought she saw Professor Snape smile once. Then, he pulled a parchment from a pocket in his robes and handed it to Professor Sprout.

When he returned to Hermione, he didn't pause. He said, "Come. We have much to do before sunset."

They headed into the Forbidden Forest, and Hermione was fascinated by all the species of plants they passed. They didn't collect anything on the outward journey, but Professor Snape pointed out a number of things they would gather on their return. She asked, "Why not take them now?"

He gave her a speaking look, but said only, "More ingredients will be fresher if we postpone, and some we cannot shrink, as using magic on them would ruin them."

Hermione flushed. "Right ... er, sorry," she murmured awkwardly, and braced herself for a scathing comment.

But he simply said, "Indeed," and continued walking.

At last, they reached a clearing full of knotgrass. Professor Snape said, "I'll cut the grass. Collect it by Summoning it and catching it in your basket. Do *not* touch it, as the oils on your skin will cause it to lose potency faster in storage. And stay clear of the blade, as I have no desire to visit St. Mungo's today."

Hermione nodded, and they set to work in a surprisingly comfortable silence. Hermione realized quickly that her basket was magicked similarly to her beaded bag, so that, after spelling the others closed, she was able to collect half a field's worth of knotgrass in one compartment.

After a while, Hermione's attention wandered, and she found herself again pondering who might be the spy within the Order. She still couldn't wrap her mind around the idea of it.

Eventually, they had enough knotgrass, and they began walking back toward the castle. They gathered a variety of mushroom and some nettles in a marshy area, then collected several species of fern and moss from a series of wooded areas just off the path. Hermione eventually ventured, "Professor?"

"What is it?" he asked, sounding resigned.

"I was wondering ..." Hermione's voice trailed off, then she decided to take the chance that he would snap at her. "Do *you* know who the Headmaster suspects of being a spy?"

He gave her a sharp look. After a moment, he said, "Yes."

"Oh," Hermione said. She shouldn't have been surprised, as she had thought he seemed to know, but she was. After a moment, she asked, "Do you think he's right?"

"Yes," Snape said bluntly.

Hermione digested that. "Would you tell me who it is?"

"The Headmaster wishes to be certain before revealing that information to you," Snape reminded her.

"Is it ..." Hermione paused, then took a breath before asking, "It's someone I trust, isn't it?"

"Is there anyone amongst the Order you don't trust?" he asked, his voice almost gentle. "Aside from me, of course." He pointed at the base of a tree. "Collect some of those ferns, please, and use a stasis spell on them before putting them in your basket."

Hermione stopped walking and stared at him. "I trust you, sir. Why would you think I don't trust you?"

He stopped, too, and looked at her disbelievingly. "Why would I think you do?"

"I'm not stupid, Professor. I know you've been protecting all of us since the moment we set foot in Hogwarts as little firsties. I have no reason to think you've suddenly changed your mind now."

"Someone obviously has," he pointed out reasonably.

"Yes, but it wasn't you," Hermione said stubbornly. "If it was you, you had the perfect opportunity when you collected me from my parents' house at the beginning of the summer. You could easily have said you were too late."

Snape nodded once in acknowledgement, and Hermione had the strange feeling that she had pleased him.

She turned away to collect the ferns. He said quietly, "It *is* someone you trust. I don't believe he's a particular friend of yours, but you trust him because of his family connections."

Whirling to face him, she asked bluntly, "It's one of the Weasleys, isn't it?" He stared at her, looking stunned. Because she was crazy? Or because she had worked it out? She continued, reasoning aloud, "Well, it's certainly not Arthur or Molly Arthur thinks too highly of Muggle technology to think Purebloods superior. Molly's brothers were killed by Death Eaters in the last war. Ron and Ginny are too young they aren't in the Order yet. Charlie's off with his dragons in Romania, so he isn't in position to spy, and Bill's traveling with Fleur this summer, so it's not him, either. That leaves the twins, who probably couldn't be bothered with anything as serious as spying, and "

Hermione stopped abruptly. "Oh, Merlin, it's Percy, isn't it?" Snape said nothing, so she continued, "It makes a weird kind of sense, doesn't it? He's at the Ministry, and he's so focused on his position, and prestige ... But I didn't realize he was in the Order ..."

Snape asked softly, "What were Dumbledore's exact words?"

"What?" Hermione thought. "He said you suspected there was a traitor within the Order."

"He never used the word 'within,'" Snape said, shaking his head.

Hermione thought some more. "What word *did* he use, then?"

"He said, 'we suspect there is a traitor *amongst* the Order.'"

"'Amongst,' not within," Hermione mused aloud. "Such a subtle difference in meaning ... So it *is* Percy, then?"

Snape gave her an enigmatic look. "It hasn't been proven. Don't trust anyone until it is." He turned and began walking toward the castle, leaving her staring after him in shock. By the time she gathered her wits and hurried after him, he was nearly out of sight.

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Quote from PA: "Black had proved twelve years ago that he didn't mind murdering innocent people, and this time he had been facing five unarmed boys, four of whom were asleep."

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## Birthday Party

Chapter 4 of 10

When Dumbledore insists that Hermione attend Harry's birthday party, Severus takes steps to ensure she will be safe.

*A/N: I'm back within word limits for this chapter. Yay! :)*

*Thanks to all who have reviewed!*

*Characters and concepts still not mine. Sigh.*

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### Chapter 4 Birthday Party

Several weeks had passed since the trip into the Forbidden Forest, and Hermione had begun to accept that Percy Weasley probably was the traitor to the Order, and that he might well try to lure her out of Hogwarts. Strangely, she hadn't had another nightmare since that conversation with Snape, which made her wonder (briefly) if there was something to the study of Divination, after all.

Because of the potential threat posed by Percy, she had resigned herself to the likelihood that she would not be able to visit the Burrow as she, Harry, and Ron had tentatively planned on the Hogwart's Express at the end of last term. She was surprised, therefore, when Dumbledore summoned her to his office immediately after breakfast one morning to discuss plans for her to attend Harry's birthday party, which was to be hosted by the Weasleys.

"Do you think it's safe?" she asked. "You haven't caught the traitor yet, have you? Won't most of the Order members be there? Won't ... whoever you suspect ... be there?" She knew Snape wasn't supposed to have told her who the suspected traitor was, and she didn't want to cause trouble for him with Dumbledore by letting on that she knew. He wouldn't expect her to have caught the subtle distinction in his choice of language, so he would expect her to think it was an actual Order member, not Percy.

"Perhaps," Dumbledore said, "but it's highly unlikely anyone would try anything with so many members of the Order present, and we don't want to alert him that we suspect him. It would be highly unusual for you to miss Harry's party, so you really ought to attend."

They were interrupted by a knock on the door, and upon Dumbledore's call to enter, Snape pushed open the door and stepped through. He nodded politely to Hermione before addressing Dumbledore. "I suppose you're still intent on this madness."

"Now, Severus, you *know* we cannot tip off our spy."

Snape glared at Dumbledore. "She's too much at risk there. I urge you to re-think this."

"It's the only way, Severus. We'll all be there to keep a close eye on Hermione. She'll be perfectly safe."

"Half the people there won't even know who they're supposed to be protecting her from. You haven't even warned *her* who she should be cautious of. At least tell her that much." Hermione assumed that Snape was making that argument because Dumbledore would expect it of him, as he had as much as told her himself who was most likely a threat to her.

"She needs to keep her guard up around everyone, Severus, and telling her who we suspect will put her at greater risk if we're wrong."

"She can't be expected to keep her guard up around *everyone*, and her closest friends don't even know there's a threat to her!" Snape sounded truly upset, which surprised Hermione; even in light of the relatively comfortable working relationship they had developed, she didn't think he liked her much.

Hermione broke in. "Headmaster, perhaps it would be a good idea to tell me who you suspect, if it's someone that I would be otherwise likely to trust implicitly. I promise not to assume that no one else is a potential threat, but surely you can see that if you think someone like, say, Professor McGonagall, or Arthur or Molly Weasley, is a potential threat to me, I should be told. That way, I'll know who to be especially careful of."

"You really should avoid being alone with anyone, Hermione," Dumbledore said gently.

Snape snorted. "You're asking the impossible, Albus. Her friends will want to steal her away to catch up, and if she refuses to go, that in itself will be suspicious. Just tell

her. I'll even go along to keep an eye on her, but it's too much of a handicap if she's completely uninformed."

"If *you're* there, Severus, I'm sure everything will be perfectly fine," Dumbledore insisted, and his tone made clear that the subject was closed.

---

As they left the Headmaster's office, Snape said quietly, "You do remember who you should avoid most assiduously, do you not?"

"If my reasoning in the Forbidden Forest was sound, then I believe I do, sir."

His lip quirked upward. "You have never doubted your reasoning before, Miss Granger; now is not the time to start."

She smiled at him. "Thank you, sir."

He stared at her for a long moment, his black eyes locked on hers. "For what?" he asked eventually.

"For looking out for me," Hermione said simply. "It's the only thing keeping my panic at bay."

He stared at her for several moments longer, his expression unfathomable. Finally, he said, "You're welcome." He turned and strode swiftly away, calling over his shoulder, "I'll see you after lunch. We're brewing Pepper-Up."

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The day of the party dawned clear and warm. As she waited in the Entrance Hall for Snape, McGonagall, Hagrid, and Dumbledore, Hermione was anxious, but as she had told Snape, knowing he would be there was keeping her from panicking. She was sure Harry wouldn't be so thrilled to see him, however.

Snape arrived first, looking disgruntled as usual. Although, as she thought about it, Hermione realized he usually *didn't* look disgruntled lately. Apparently, this party was really making him unhappy.

He nodded a greeting, then spoke quickly and quietly. "I think you should tell your friends that we are specifically concerned for your safety, and that you are not to be left alone for any reason. Even if you cannot tell them who we suspect, they should at least know to look out for you."

"All right," Hermione agreed immediately. "I'll tell them as soon as we arrive."

"Good," Snape said. "Now, put this on." He handed her a barrette as he continued, "It's an emergency Portkey that will land you in my private chambers, which is outside the Headmaster's office the only place at Hogwarts that allows magical entry of any kind." Hermione assumed that had something to do with his status as a spy for the Order among the Death Eaters. "If you find yourself needing to escape, all you have to do is activate it. It is charmed to alert me when activated, so I will arrive right after you do."

Hermione quickly pulled a small hand mirror from her beaded bag, charmed the mirror to hover in front of her, and carefully pulled her hair back from her face. She fastened the barrette, then turned to Snape and smiled as she returned her mirror to her bag. "Thank you," she said. "It's very pretty." And indeed, it was lovely, made of mother-of-pearl and silver.

His cheeks flushed, and he said tersely, "It was the only thing I had that would be inconspicuous. No one would question a clip in that bushy mess of yours."

Hermione couldn't argue with that, so she laughed. "True enough. But it's still pretty, and it's still a very thoughtful thing to do, so I thank you."

He grunted. "You should keep it even if you don't use it today. Who knows when you'll need a quick exit?"

McGonagall and Dumbledore arrived just then, forestalling any response Hermione might have made, and Dumbledore immediately suggested that they go meet Hagrid along the way. He said, "I have the Portkey right here, so as soon as we get to the gates, we can be on our way." He showed them a sequined high-heeled shoe. Hermione suppressed a giggle, as she wondered where on earth he had gotten that.

Hagrid came hurrying up the path, carrying a large box. Hermione looked at it suspiciously, trying to find signs of movement within. Her gift for Harry, which she had purchased during the week she had been with her parents, was tucked safely in her beaded bag. She offered to shrink Hagrid's package, but he declined, looking decidedly nervous. She could only hope that whatever the animal was, it wasn't a baby chimaera or dragon or acromantula or ... anything else that Hagrid probably considered sweet and harmless.

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The party turned out to be a lot of fun. As Snape had predicted, Hermione's friends immediately dragged her away to catch up. She quickly told them about the threat against her, as well as Dumbledore's suspicions about the presence of a traitor amongst the Order.

"I bet it's Snape," Harry said darkly.

"It's not Snape," Hermione said.

"Of course it's Snape," Ron agreed with Harry, as though it were perfectly obvious.

"It's not Snape," Hermione said again.

"Who else would it be?" Ginny asked, but at least she sounded curious rather than accusatory.

"I don't know," Hermione admitted. "Dumbledore won't tell me until they have proof, but I know for sure that it's not Snape."

"I don't know why you constantly defend that git," Ron grumbled.

"Because it's not him," Hermione said. "He's the one who collected me from my parents and took me to Hogwarts. If it was him, that was the perfect opportunity for him to deliver me to You-Know-Who."

"Except Dumbledore would have suspected something."

"He could have told Dumbledore he got there too late," Hermione said firmly. "It's not him. Now, I'm going downstairs. Harry, they're probably waiting for you to start eating, so let's go."

Harry didn't look happy, but he did come along to rejoin the party.

---

Hours later, after they had all eaten and Harry had opened his presents (fortunately, Hagrid had stuck with a perfectly sweet kitten), they were all sitting around laughing and talking when Hermione felt someone watching her. The day had been surprisingly relaxed, probably because Percy hadn't been there. Apparently, he had too much *important* work to do at the Ministry to take a day off for Harry Potter's birthday party.

Glancing around now, though, Hermione saw that Percy had finally arrived. He didn't seem to be looking at her, but she felt uneasy just the same.



Just then, Snape approached. "Mr. Potter, the Headmaster has requested that we resume your practice in Occlumency, as well as other advanced defense skills, for your remaining year at Hogwarts."

Harry frowned sulkily. "I don't see why," he said, sounding ridiculously immature to Hermione. She elbowed him.

Snape sneered. "I've got one year to teach you how to deal with Dark "

Harry broke in, "Do we have to discuss this now? This is a party, in case you haven't noticed."

Snape was about to say something, but Hermione jumped in. "Harry, you shouldn't be rude to Professor Snape. He's going to teach you skills that you're going to need before long."

Harry looked guilty, but didn't apologize, as Hermione thought he should. Snape looked at Hermione and said, "Are you ready to leave? We'd prefer to have you safe at Hogwarts before it gets too late."

"Yes, sure," Hermione said, glancing anxiously to where Percy had been standing moments earlier. He wasn't there anymore. She jumped when he spoke from behind her.

"Hermione! How good to see you!" he said unctuously. "I was hoping you'd take a walk with me so we could catch up!"

"Sorry," Hermione said, trying to hide her relief. "Professor Snape wishes to return me to Hogwarts now. Perhaps next time," she said, smiling. She took Snape's offered arm, and he led her to where Hagrid, McGonagall, and Dumbledore waited.

When the Portkey activated, Hermione breathed a sigh of relief, thrilled to be getting back to the safety of Hogwarts.

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Quote from GF: "I've got one year to teach you how to deal with Dark - "

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## Fancy me, Fancy you

*Chapter 5 of 10*

As summer ends, Hermione wishes for more time working with Severus, while Severus tries to suppress his increasingly unprofessional interest in Hermione.

*A/N: Concepts and characters are still JKR's, much as I wish it were otherwise. ;)*

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### Chapter 5 – Fancy me, Fancy you

Hermione was in the Potions laboratory one afternoon in late August, where she and Snape were putting the finishing touches on her experimental potion. He said, "I believe that's it, Miss Granger, until it ages the two months your calculations indicated."

"Yes, I suppose it is," she agreed. They began bottling the potion. It would age in a dark cupboard, sealed in single-dose bottles. They worked in silence for a few minutes.

It was disconcerting for Hermione to find that she was reluctant to leave, knowing she had no reason to come back until well after classes had begun. Of course, she would be taking NEWT level Potions, but she suspected that the easy working relationship they had developed over the summer might disappear in the presence of other students. It would have to, really, if Snape was to maintain his cover.

Another thought occurred to her suddenly. "Sir," she ventured, "how will we test the potion, once it has aged sufficiently?"

He glanced at her. "How do you suggest?"

"Well, I don't know," she said reluctantly, half expecting him to make a sarcastic comment about something the know-it-all didn't know. "I suppose we'll need permission from the Ministry ..."

"Yes," Snape said, once again forgoing the easy opportunity to insult her. "Although, as Hogwarts already has permission to use Cruciatus for demonstration purposes in Defense class, perhaps we should just vaguely mention that we are experimenting with possible defenses without specifically mentioning this potion."

"All right," Hermione said thoughtfully. "If you'd rather the Ministry didn't know ..."

"The Dark Lord has spies in the Ministry. I'd prefer that they not find out for as long as we can avoid it – having a defensive potion that they don't know about could be a major advantage when the Final Battle commences."

"Point taken," Hermione said, and smiled at him. He stared at her for what seemed ages, and as had been happening frequently in recent weeks, she found she couldn't look away from his black eyes. Her heart seemed to skip a beat, then resume in a rapid tattoo that she was certain he must be able to hear. After an eternity, he cleared his throat and looked away.

"We'll most likely need to borrow one of Hagrid's creatures to test the potion on," he said abruptly.

"Do you think he'll let us?" Hermione asked.

"If it's put to him properly, he probably will," Snape replied. "I'll see if the Headmaster will discuss it with him."

"All right."

Hermione watched him as he began clearing up their work area. After a moment, she asked, "Are there any more potions to be brewed for the infirmary?"

"A few," Snape said. "You needn't concern yourself with them. You have completed your independent study, and you may as well enjoy what's left of the summer."

"That's all right, I don't mind helping," Hermione said hastily. When he looked at her skeptically, she shrugged, "I'll get bored if I don't have anything to keep me occupied."

"Don't you usually read ahead the entire year's worth of textbooks each summer?" he asked dryly. "You must feel dreadfully behind."

She stared at him, shocked. Was he teasing her? She dared not ask, as he would probably only deny it anyway. "Oh, I'm nearly finished with that already," she admitted, feeling a flush creep into her cheeks. "I owl-ordered the books weeks ago, and I've been reading them in the mornings ever since I finished the Arithmancy portion of the project last month."

Snape rolled his eyes. "Of course you have. Silly me."

Hermione barely restrained the question on the tip of her tongue. *Sir, are you flirting with me?* Instead, she asked, "So, shall I assist you with the remaining potions?"

"If you must," Snape replied, but his tone was rather more pleased than not. She smiled at him as he added, "Come by after breakfast. We'll have an early start and you can finish off the year's syllabi in the afternoon."

---

After Miss Granger left the laboratory, Snape let out a relieved breath and headed into his office. He was definitely getting too comfortable with the girl.

Well, comfortable wasn't really the right word, exactly, he thought, shifting uneasily in his chair. Informal, perhaps, would be a better word for it. The problem was, he was having trouble remembering that she was a student – *his* student. She simply wasn't annoying him the way she once had, or the way most students still did.

In fact, he was increasingly finding her company pleasant. Her conversation was intelligent, her mind stimulating, her thought processes fascinating. Not that he would ever admit that out loud. He was barely willing to admit it silently, to himself.

And he certainly couldn't acknowledge that he was finding it increasingly difficult to ignore the fact that she was an attractive, adult female ...

That, of course, was dangerous – for both of them. He couldn't afford to slip and be pleasant, or even neutral, to her in front of any of the other students, once they returned, unless he wanted to undermine years of work and decades of sacrifice by blowing his position in the Dark Lord's Inner Circle.

He glanced at the magical window, which was charmed to show the fields and greenhouses that were on this side of the building just one floor up. It was still only mid-afternoon, so he could work for a few hours on his plan for the lessons Dumbledore had asked him to teach Potter this year. Sighing, he pulled it out, not wanting to think about how unpleasant that chore would be.

Hours later, he glanced up again at the magical window, setting the lesson plan aside. Sunlight had crept halfway across the room while he had been working on it, and he could now hear distant sounds of movement from the dormitories above. He was confused for a moment, before he realized that it must be dinnertime; the house-elves likely had assumed he had gone to the Great Hall and were taking the opportunity to begin getting the Slytherin dormitories sorted for the upcoming term. They did so each year around this time, and after all these years, they knew better than to do anything so close to his office during his usual working hours.

Pushing the lesson plans aside, he headed to the Great Hall. He ruthlessly suppressed the anticipation that tried to surge up at the thought that he might see Miss Granger, and she might smile at him. He could not afford to think of that now. Going soft would certainly get him killed.

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Quote from OP: "Sunlight had crept halfway across the room while he had been working on it, and he could now hear distant sounds of movement from the dormitories above."

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## Change of Season

*Chapter 6 of 10*

Hermione's tension grows as the new term starts; Severus arranges a reason to spend more time with her.

*A/N: Thanks to those who have reviewed! I'm glad you're still enjoying the story ...*

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### Chapter 6 Change of Season

On the afternoon of September first, Hermione waited anxiously for the boys and Ginny to arrive. She had briefly entertained hopes that she would be able to join the boys for this last trip on the Hogwarts Express, but had quickly realized that Platform Nine and Three-Quarters was simply too chaotic to be safe.

So, she just waited at Hogwarts, and as she waited, she thought about whether she ought to tell the boys about Percy. She felt odd keeping such a huge secret from them, but she suspected that Ron would explode at the mere suggestion that anyone in his family might be on the wrong side of the war. Harry's reaction might be more measured, unless, of course, he discovered the source of her information.

So, perhaps she wouldn't tell them anything about Percy or Snape.

At last, Hermione heard the whistle signaling the train's arrival at Hogsmeade Station, and a short while later, the carriages began arriving with all the returning students. Fortunately, Ron, Harry, and Ginny arrived in one of the first carriages, with Luna and Neville right behind. After a round of hugs and excited greetings, they headed into the Great Hall for the Sorting.

Soon after they found their seats, the din of excited voices died down as Professor McGonagall led the firsties in. Hermione, looking at their young, apprehensive faces, wondered if she and her friends had ever been that young and innocent. They had seen so much in the six years they had spent here that their own sorting felt like it had occurred lifetimes ago, or perhaps to someone else entirely.

Sitting with Harry, Ron, and Ginny, Hermione dutifully listened to the Sorting Hat's song, then watched as the newest witches and wizards joined their assigned Houses, cheering loudly for the additions to Gryffindor House. Between, they whispered amongst themselves about the happenings of the past month and the latest gossip Ginny had heard on the Hogwarts Express.

Eventually, after the feast had begun, Harry asked quietly, "Hermione, has there been any progress on identifying the traitor to the Order?"

"I haven't been informed of any new developments," Hermione responded cautiously. She gave the other two an apprehensive look. The last thing she needed, she thought, was for Ginny or Ron to find out that their brother was suspect. She awkwardly tried to change the subject, blurting out the first thing that came to mind. "Are you prepared for your private lessons with Snape?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "I guess so. Dumbledore seems pretty adamant that it's necessary."

"It won't be so bad," Hermione consoled. "Professor Snape's really all right when there's no one else around. Or at least, he was actually rather pleasant this summer when I was working on my independent study."

Harry looked skeptical. "He's a git, Hermione. Always has been, always will be."

"He's not," Hermione said mildly, but not wanting to have the same old argument again, she didn't press the issue. Harry's expression said clearly that he didn't want to hear it, anyway, so she focused on the facts that he might actually hear. "In any event, he has knowledge that you need if you're going to defeat You-Know-Who, so you really have to try to control your temper and show him some respect, Harry. It's *important*."

"I know, I know," Harry said. "Let's talk about something else, please."

"Hermione, guess who was really disappointed that you weren't taking the Hogwarts Express this year?" Ginny broke in, looking and sounding like she was bursting with a secret.

"Who?" Hermione asked curiously.

"Oi, Ginny, get over it," Ron said. "Hermione's not gonna care that Percy was asking where she was."

"Percy?" Hermione asked, trying to hide her dismay. "Percy was asking where I was?"

"Yeah," Ron said, rolling his eyes. "He was threatening to come visit soon, too. Wanted us to let him know when the first Hogsmeade weekend is said he's gonna owl you to arrange a date."

Hermione felt the color drain from her face as she tried to suppress her panic. Harry said, "I don't know what makes him think Hermione wants to date him." Feeling like she was about to start hyperventilating, Hermione stole a glance at the Head Table. Snape caught her eye, frowning in apparent concern. She gave a slight shake of her head and looked away, but she felt his thoughtful gaze on her for the next several minutes.

Forcing her attention back to the conversation her friends were having, she found Ginny was defending Percy to Harry and Ron. "Maybe she does. He's not that bad, is he?"

"Yes, he is," Ron said. "Don't worry, 'Mione, we'll help you get out of it."

Hermione shuddered. *If they only knew.*

---

Snape watched Miss Granger laughing and talking with her friends. Other than that single moment, when she had looked momentarily panicked, she seemed to be enjoying herself. He couldn't quite suppress the satisfaction he felt at the realization that her instinct, when frightened, was to look to him to help her calm herself.

In the last few weeks, despite his stern admonitions to himself, he had found himself relaxing his guard more and more readily around Miss Granger. He couldn't resist the desire to store away happy memories of this time with her before he was forced to revert to the nasty, biased professor she had known for the previous six years.

Still, perhaps there was a way to continue spending time with her outside the classroom. Narrowing his eyes thoughtfully, he decided to speak with Albus about it. Perhaps Miss Granger would be interested in continued independent study. After all, there were other curses and hexes that might do well with a prophylactic potion ...

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After the feast had concluded and the Prefects had led the new students to their dormitories, Hermione and Terry Boot, as Head Girl and Head Boy, set off together for a meeting with Dumbledore and the four Heads of House. They arrived at the gargoyle ten minutes early, and chatted idly about the Sorting as they waited.

At precisely the appointed time, the gargoyle admitted them, and Dumbledore greeted them at the door to his office. He got right down to business, quickly outlining their duties. Most of these weren't unexpected; they had both worked with previous Head Girls and Boys as prefects during the past two years.

Hermione had to force herself to pay attention, as she found her gaze constantly drifting to the corner of the room where Professor Snape stood. He was observing quietly, seemingly watching her, and Hermione wondered if she would have an opportunity to interact with him at all now that the castle was brimming with students.

Eventually, the meeting wound down and Hermione rose to leave. However, before she even managed a step toward the door, Dumbledore said, "Miss Granger, Severus, if you would both remain for a moment, there's something else I'd like to discuss."

After bidding everyone else good night, Hermione reclaimed her seat and waited until they had all left the room. When the door closed behind them, Dumbledore said, "Hermione, Professor Snape tells me that your independent study is complete, but for some aging of the resulting potion."

"Yes, sir."

"Very good," Dumbledore said. "I shall speak with Hagrid about getting appropriate test subjects. I suspect he'll need some time to come around to the idea."

Hermione smiled. "Thank you, sir."

"Now, Professor Snape feels that your experimental potion has a good chance of success. Is that not so, Severus?"

"Yes, I do." Snape said simply.

"It occurs to me that there may be other hexes and curses that may be amenable to prophylactic potion use, or perhaps there may be a way to develop a single potion to protect against multiple hexes, curses, and jinxes. Would you be interested in working on such a project with Professor Snape, Hermione? He has agreed that, should this proceed as he expects, he will credit the hours spent on this project toward an Apprenticeship, should you decide to pursue a Potions Mastery after finishing school."

Hermione tried to contain her excitement, but couldn't quite manage it. "That's a brilliant idea, sir! I would be honored and *thrilled* to undertake such a task."

"All right, then, I'll expect you to work out a reasonable schedule and plan between you, then." He smiled, looking very pleased. "Good night, both of you. Severus, you will ensure that Miss Granger arrives safely at her quarters?"

"Of course," Snape replied smoothly.

---

As they walked toward Gryffindor Tower, their footsteps echoed loudly in the otherwise silent corridors. After a moment, Snape asked quietly, "What upset you earlier?"

Although she was surprised by the question, Hermione didn't pretend not to understand what he meant. She said, "It was nothing, really, sir."

He said, "The look on your face, then and now, suggests otherwise."

She glanced at him, then decided she may as well tell him. "It's just ... apparently Percy was looking for me rather keenly at Platform Nine and Three-Quarters. Ron and Ginny said he told them he was going to owl me for a date at the first Hogsmeade weekend."

Snape glanced at her. "Ah," he said. "We will have to discuss this further, then."

She smiled. "Well, on the positive side, Ron has promised to help me get out of it."

"You didn't tell him of our suspicions, did you?" Snape asked, sounding alarmed.

"Of course not. He'd hardly be speaking to me if I had. No, he just thinks Percy is a pompous arse, so ..." She felt her cheeks grow warm, realizing what she had just said, and to whom. "Sorry, sir," she murmured awkwardly.

To her surprise, Snape chuckled. "It's all right. Percy Weasley *is* a pompous arse. If only that were his worst fault ..."

Hermione laughed quietly with Snape. As they reached the portrait guarding her quarters, she turned to face Snape. "Sir?"

"Yes?"

"Thanks for arranging for me to continue my independent study." She paused, then said, "I don't think I would like it if I only got to see you in class or in the Great Hall."

His expression was enigmatic as he leaned down to whisper in her ear, so quietly that she barely heard him, "Neither would I, Miss Granger." Straightening, he said in a more formal tone, "Good night, Miss Granger."

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Quote from HBP: "She gave the other two an apprehensive look."

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## Accident or Curse?

*Chapter 7 of 10*

Hermione ponders her growing feelings for Severus and copes with anxiety about an upcoming Hogsmeade weekend, until she is distracted when one of her friends is injured.

*A/N: Sorry for the delay in posting this chapter. As I will explain further in a future chapter, I was reworking the ending of the story in response to reviews at other sites, and I wanted to make sure this still worked with the revisions. Anyway, thanks to those who have reviewed I'm so glad people have been enjoying this story. It has turned out to be a wonderful exercise in both discipline and creativity I encourage other writers out there to try it!*

*As always, concepts and characters belong to JKR. If they were mine, my net worth would be in the black, rather than deep, deep in the red ...*

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### Chapter 7: Accident or Curse?

On a Saturday afternoon in mid-October, Hermione was enjoying the unseasonably warm autumn sunshine. Harry and Ron had dragged her out to the Quidditch pitch, where the Gryffindor team was scrimmaging in anticipation of an upcoming match with Hufflepuff. She was theoretically watching the scrimmage, but really she was skimming the book she had brought along on common curses and hexes, trying to decide if it would be worth reading more carefully later for her independent study.

Unfortunately, Hermione was having difficulty concentrating, due to her worry about the Hogsmeade weekend that was scheduled for next week. According to Professor Snape, a great deal of discussion had been focused on whether she ought to go or not, with Snape certain that she ought to stay safe at Hogwarts, and Dumbledore equally adamant that she must go, in order to avoid tipping off Percy as to their suspicions.

Hermione wasn't sure how she felt about it. She obviously didn't want to get caught by Death Eaters, but she also didn't want to stop living her life. Ultimately, she would probably go, she thought, unless Snape talked Dumbledore around to his view. Perhaps they could set a trap for Percy ...

Hermione sighed. Percy would just be replaced by someone else someone unknown if they caught him.

Feeling relaxed and drowsy, Hermione put her book aside and idly watched the match as her mind continued to drift. Her experimental potion would be ready for testing tomorrow, so she and Professor Snape were to meet Hagrid at his hut tomorrow afternoon. After much persuasion from Dumbledore, he had agreed that they could test it on a variety of animals he would provide. Hermione had been on tenterhooks with nervous excitement all week, much to the amusement of her friends and professors.

Professor Snape in particular had been teasing her mercilessly about it every time she met with him for their usual work on her new project. They met three evenings each week after dinner, and Hermione found that when they were alone, they had continued to develop a friendship of sorts. Only when others were present did he treat her the way he always had before the summer.

Sometimes, Hermione quite forgot that he was still her professor, rather than a peer. So, when he had suggested on Wednesday that perhaps they ought to brew a Calming Draught for her instead of researching ingredients for their current project, she had told him to bugger off before remembering to whom she was speaking. She had blushed and stammered an apology, fearing that all the progress they had made would be wiped out that he would kick her out and tell her never to return.

But he hadn't. Instead, after staring at her for several seconds, looking shocked, he had burst out laughing, sounding rusty at first. He kept laughing, though, and soon the mirthful sound was echoing through the lab. Hermione could only stare at him, which seemed only to keep him laughing; every time he started to bring himself under control, he would glance at her and laugh harder. Eventually, she began to get irritated and said, "It's not *that* funny."

He finally managed to gasp out, "Sorry, but it is ... Oh, the look on your face!"

Her irritation had reluctantly turned to amusement, and as she thought about it now, she realized that that was the moment when something had irrevocably shifted in the way she thought of him. No matter how nasty or sarcastic he was forced to be when other people were around, since then she could only see him as the laughing, teasing, attractive man he had been that evening.

She was finding it increasingly difficult to suppress her attraction to him, and she was slowly starting to hope he might be attracted to her, too. Sometimes she caught him looking at her, his eyes full of warmth, while they worked companionably on her project or on additional potions for Madam Pomfrey's stock.

Certainly, he must be very comfortable with her; if he hadn't been extremely relaxed, he would never have laughed like that. She wondered idly how frequently he laughed with other people, like McGonagall or Dumbledore, then dismissed the question as unanswerable. She suspected, however, that it wasn't very often.

In any event, she knew very well that any attraction between them mustn't be acknowledged not so long as Hermione was still his student, or so long as he was still spying in Voldemort's camp. Sometimes she thought they had reached a tacit agreement to avoid mention of the subject for now, until such time as it was safe and proper for them to bring it out into the open.

Now, Hermione forced herself to put thoughts of Snape aside. She wasn't *entirely* sure her attraction was reciprocated, and while part of her was tempted to ask him, she knew no good could come of that in their current situation. Since her book clearly wasn't holding her interest, she decided to watch the scrimmage, just in time to see Ron block a shot by his sister, looking smug.

Suddenly, a rogue bludger caught the side of Ron's head, and he plunged toward the ground, broom tumbling after him. Hermione barely retained the presence of mind to cast a Cushioning Charm beneath him just before he hit the ground; then she hurried down toward where he had landed on the grass, calling his name anxiously. She dropped to her knees beside him and cast a warming charm, knowing that he was likely already going into shock. Then, she glanced up to see what was happening above her.

Katie Bell, who had apparently been about to toss the Quaffle to Demelza Robins, had gasped and stopped mid-toss. Coote and Peakes, the Beaters who had replaced Fred and George, looked on in horror, obviously unsure what to do. Ginny shouted at them, "Catch the damn Bludgers before they hit someone else!" Then she raced toward the castle, calling for someone to get Madam Pomfrey to come at once. Harry, who had been facing away from Ron when the accident had happened, didn't stop right away, seemingly not realizing what had happened until he heard Ginny's shouts as his hand was about to close around the Snitch. He caught it and hurried back to Hermione and Ron, whose eyes were now half-closed, strips of white eyeball all that were visible between his lids.

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"Severus, I think you're worrying over nothing. Aurors will be all over Hogsmeade and she'll be with her friends, all of whom are well aware of the threat to her safety," Dumbledore said insistently.

Severus bit back a growl of frustration. Albus had persuaded him to discuss this in the course of a walk around the lake, since the day was so unexpectedly fine. Now, he stopped walking and stared at the Headmaster. "Why are you so determined to be optimistic about this? Why can't you see that the danger she'll be in if you're wrong is too great to warrant the risk?"

Whatever Albus might have said in response went unvoiced, as shouts from the direction of the Quidditch pitch reached their ears. Turning to see what had happened, Severus saw the Weasley girl racing on her broom toward the castle. They were too far away to hear what she was saying, but it was clear something was seriously wrong. By unspoken agreement, they tabled their discussion and hurried off in the direction from which Miss Weasley had just come. As they drew near, Severus saw the back of Hermione's unmistakable bushy head, and his heart skipped a beat before he realized that she was uninjured. Otherwise, she would have been lying on the ground with a crowd of people bending anxiously over her, rather than being among the number bending over the still form of someone Severus could not yet see.

"What happened?" Albus asked.

"Rogue bludger," Potter said. "Ginny's gone for Madam Pomfrey."

"We saw her," Dumbledore said. "I'm sure they'll be here shortly." He paused, then asked, "Was anything unusual happening?"

Potter narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean?"

Dumbledore looked like he didn't want to worry them, but Severus thought they *should* be worried, so he said bluntly, "The Headmaster is concerned that the Bludgers may have been cursed."

The students gasped, and Severus might have been amused by the fact that they did so in unison were he not so concerned about Hermione, who was looking very upset. Part of him hoped, for her peace of mind, that this was a mere accident, but another part thought that a cursed Bludger might just be sufficient to convince Albus to keep her safe at Hogwarts next weekend, after all.

Madam Pomfrey arrived just as the fool Beaters were explaining that they just hadn't noticed that Weasley wasn't paying attention, and by the time they had, it had been too late to intercept the Bludger before it hit him. Thus, the Bludger probably wasn't cursed, after all although Severus resolved to check it anyway. Who was to say that this wasn't a ploy to create a distraction that would permit someone to kidnap Hermione in the chaos?

Madam Pomfrey cast some quick stabilizing spells and then conjured a stretcher to transport Weasley to the hospital wing. The entire group followed her toward the castle, but Severus caught Hermione's eye, gesturing for her to hang back for a moment. "What happened?" he asked quietly. "Did you see any indication that the Bludger was cursed?"

She shook her head, looking pale and shaken. "No, but then, I wasn't paying close attention. Ron had just blocked Ginny's shot and was smirking at her when the Bludger hit him in the head and he fell. I cast a Cushioning Charm, but he was still unconscious when I got to him. Thank Merlin I happened to look up when I did. Otherwise, he would have landed really hard."

"All right," Severus said. They began walking together to the Hospital Wing.

After a bit, Severus said quietly, "It looks like the Headmaster is set on you going to Hogsmeade next weekend. I've had no luck talking him out of it. You must stay with your friends at all times, Hermione."

"I will," she promised.

"You still have the Portkey I gave you for Potter's birthday party?"

"Yes, of course," Hermione said. "I'm definitely planning to wear it."

"Good," he said. He paused, then glanced at her. "I would be seriously displeased if something untoward were to happen to you. Please be very, very careful." She glanced at him sideways. He said, "You look surprised. Did you think I wouldn't care?"

"No, it's not that," Hermione demurred. "You've demonstrated repeatedly that you will go to great lengths to prevent harm coming to one of your students, and I like to think that we've developed a friendlier relationship than you have with most of your students." He nodded once in acknowledgement. She continued, "It's ... I suppose I didn't expect you to be so forthcoming about the fact that you care."

He nodded again, then said, "If there's any chance it will convince you to be more cautious than you often have been in the past, it's worth speaking more plainly than I otherwise might."

Hermione smiled at him. "I promise to be extremely cautious, Professor, if only because there is a conversation I am hoping to have with you, once certain events have transpired."

Snape nodded in acknowledgement. "I shall look forward to it," he said softly, just as they reached the hospital wing, where he quickly took his leave, saying he thought her friends would be more comfortable if he didn't wait with them.

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Quote from DH: "He caught it and hurried back to Hermione and Ron, whose eyes were now half-closed, strips of white eyeball all that were visible between his lids."

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## Making a Move

Chapter 8 of 10

It's Hogsmeade weekend. Will Hermione be safe?

A/N: This chapter contains implied (non-graphic) violence/torture.

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### Chapter 8: Making a Move

The day of the Hogsmeade visit dawned clear, but much chillier than the previous weekend. Hermione found herself anxious as she dressed for the outing in one of Mrs. Weasley's Christmas offerings. She really would rather not go at all, but as Snape had predicted, Dumbledore would not be swayed on the question of her attendance.

Percy had, indeed, owled her to ask if she would have lunch with him at the Three Broomsticks; she had politely thanked him and declined by return owl, saying she and her friends had already planned to have lunch together. In his reply, he had indicated he was disappointed, but not deterred, as he would simply plan to join the entire group. Ron had groaned and rolled his eyes when she informed her friends of his plan. "Couldn't you have told him you were sick or something?" Ron asked, and Ginny had smacked him.

"He's still our brother, Ron," she had said sharply. "It won't be that bad. Besides, it's only for lunch. We have the whole rest of the day without him, don't we?"

"Yeah, if he doesn't decide to horn in on that, too," Ron had grumbled.

"Just promise not to leave me alone with him," Hermione had said. "I don't want to have to turn him down too harshly if he takes it in his head to try to kiss me or something."

"Eww," was Ron's response, but Harry and Ginny had both laughed and promised.

Now, pulling a comb through her still-wet hair, Hermione fastened the Portkey barrette in much the same style as she had worn to the Burrow the day Professor Snape had given it to her. Thinking of him now, she smiled at her reflection in her Muggle mirror. Knowing that he was concerned enough about her to give her a Portkey to his chambers gave her a warm, fuzzy feeling that she was sure would make him roll his eyes if he knew of it.

Ready to go at last, she grabbed her beaded bag and headed for the Great Hall, where she and her friends were meeting for breakfast. They would leave straight from there to go to Hogsmeade. They had had a long discussion last night, and Hermione was reasonably confident that they understood how important it was to stay with her at all times.

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After an enjoyable morning wandering through several shops, Hermione, Harry, Ron, Ginny, Neville, and Luna were walking into the Three Broomsticks when Percy hailed them. He kissed his sister's cheek and shook hands with Ron, Harry, and Neville, then greeted Luna politely before turning to Hermione. "Thank you for inviting me to join you," he said, managing to sound stuffy and self-important and sycophantic all at once.

Hermione resisted the urge to point out that he had, in fact, invited himself, but Ron had no such scruples. He snorted and said, "She didn't. You invited yourself." Percy ignored him.

As they sat down and looked at their menus, Percy dominated the conversation. Hermione mostly tuned him out, but she tried to respond enough that he wouldn't notice. Despite herself, she couldn't avoid learning that he had recently moved over to the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. He seemed to feel that this was an upward move, as he was now the assistant to the Deputy Chief Liaison for Merpeople.

Hermione occupied herself wondering how he was planning to get her alone and kidnap her as he droned on about how helpful his prior experience with the Department of International Magical Cooperation was in his new position. "It's fortunate that the Ministry has seen fit to place someone with my extensive international experience in this position. After all," he continued pompously, "merpeople exist throughout the world, though they vary in appearance as much as humans."

Just as Hermione was thinking she might die of boredom and save Percy the trouble of kidnapping her, a commotion by the door caught her attention. Several masked figures swept through the door, firing hexes in all directions. She palmed her wand to join her friends in defense of the restaurant and its patrons, but then she felt someone grab her around the waist. As she felt herself pulled into a Side-along Apparition, she thought, *So **that's** how he planned to do it...*

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They landed in an unfamiliar area, and Hermione was disappointed but not particularly surprised to find herself quickly disarmed and to hear the cracks of Death Eaters Apparating into the clearing. She looked at Percy and said disgustedly, "Your parents are going to be *so* disappointed." She didn't bother looking for the Dark Lord, though she knew he must be here somewhere.

Percy sneered importantly, "What do *they* know? They've deluded themselves into thinking that a mere *boy* can defeat the most powerful wizard in history. At least *one* of the Weasleys will be on the victorious side."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Regardless of who wins or loses, Percy, your parents are on the *right* side, and you're just ... *wrong*."

Hearing more and more Death Eaters arriving, Hermione decided she'd better not wait any longer. The last thing she heard before her Portkey tugged her away was Percy's outraged shout.

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Severus was walking through his sitting room, about to leave his quarters to respond to a summons from the Dark Lord, when Hermione landed awkwardly a few feet in front of him. He instinctively reached out to steady her, and a small amount of tension left him as he acknowledged to himself that he had suspected the summons meant that they had grabbed Hermione. He had feared they might have discovered her Portkey before she had a chance to activate it.

When she had regained her balance, he looked her over carefully and, seeing no sign that she was injured, asked, "Are you all right?"

She nodded, then said, "Death Eaters attacked the Three Broomsticks, and Percy grabbed me and Apparated. He took my wand."

"You were supposed to *avoid* Percy," he snapped.

Hermione didn't take offense, apparently recognizing the concern his irritation signaled. She soothed, "I couldn't completely avoid him, with none of my friends knowing we suspected him, and I wasn't alone with him. He must have tipped them off to where and when we were meeting. Anyway, your Portkey worked perfectly, as I knew it would, so I'm fine."

Snape nodded, forcing himself to calm down. It wouldn't do to be upset in the Dark Lord's presence. "All right. I have to go. I'm being summoned. Wait here, please, until I come back. I doubt it will be long. They probably wanted an audience for what they were planning to do to you, and now they'll want to quietly pretend it never happened."

Hermione nodded. "All right." As he reached the door, she cried, "Wait!"

He paused, turning to give her an impatient look. "What is it?"

"Did you take the potion? Just in case?" Their tests in the past week of the Prophylactic Pain Potion had met with resounding success even Hagrid was pleased when his creatures gave no sign of noticing when they were hit with Cruciatius and Snape had promised he would use it whenever he was summoned from then on. He had suffered that particular Unforgivable enough times that he was certain he could mimic the effects well enough to fool anyone, even the Dark Lord.

"Yes," he said simply, and gave her a small smile. "See you soon. Feel free to read anything you find, except what's on the top shelf. Some of those books aren't safe."

"Thanks," she said. "Be safe."

Although he wasn't sure he could promise that, he said, "I'll do my best."

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Hermione found that, despite her best intentions and efforts, she was too keyed up to settle down and read. She was not looking forward to telling her friends that Percy had delivered her to a Death Eater gathering, with the apparent intention that she should be tortured or worse. More than that, though, she was worried that somehow Snape would be blamed for her escape from their custody. She shuddered to think what might happen to him if this blew his cover.

So, because she couldn't focus long enough to choose a book, much less read one, she paced. She quickly discovered that she could comfortably take nine steps before turning around. She was so distracted with worry that she barely noticed the merpeople who occasionally frolicked in the lake, which was just visible through a magical window on one wall. She had started counting steps after the first few minutes, and by the time Snape came back, she had counted all the way to one thousand, nine hundred and twelve.

When the door opened, she froze, turning anxiously to see if he was all right. She gave him a quick once-over with her eyes and, seeing no injury, she asked, "You're all right?"

He nodded, and she had to force herself not to throw herself across the room and into his arms. He said wryly, "You could have sat down, you know."

Feeling herself flush, she said, "I was too keyed up. I couldn't settle down. I was ... worried," she admitted. "What happened?"

Snape sighed. "The Dark Lord was *extremely* displeased with Weasley and not much happier with those people who were already there when you activated the Portkey."

"Is Percy ...?" Hermione stopped without finishing her question, wondering why she even cared if Percy was dead.

"I don't know," Snape admitted. "I didn't wait to find out. He was in bad shape, though. I expect that, if he was still alive, someone will have taken him to St. Mungo's." After a moment, he changed the subject. "I couldn't get your wand back. I'm sorry."

Hermione smiled at that. "I didn't expect you could. How would you explain it, after all?" She shrugged, trying to convince herself it didn't matter. "I suppose I'll have to contact Mr. Ollivander."

He said, "I'm sure something can be arranged. I have to go brief the Headmaster, and I imagine your friends are most concerned about you. Shall I walk you to Gryffindor Tower?"

"All right," Hermione said. He gestured for her to precede him. As they walked, she asked, "Did anyone suspect you?"

"No," Snape replied. "The general opinion seemed to be that the Headmaster had somehow got wind of Weasley's true loyalties, or perhaps had just been generally concerned about you as Potter's confidant, and had provided the emergency Portkey himself. They assumed that it took you directly to the Headmaster's office."

Hermione nodded. After a few moments, she asked, "Why do you suppose Percy never outed you to the Dark Lord?"

Snape shrugged. "I can only assume he is mistaken about where my loyalties lie. He's not actually in the Order, after all, so he probably doesn't know that I am. Even if he were, most of the Order has doubts about whether I'm trustworthy, so ..."

"Right," Hermione said pensively. "Well, I suppose that's best, although I hate the idea that people don't trust you as you deserve."

He smirked. "It's best they don't, really. If the entire Order trusted me implicitly, the Dark Lord might begin to wonder if their belief in me was well-founded. If I'm trustworthy to one side, then by definition, I'm *un*trustworthy to the other side."

"True," Hermione said. "But I still hate it."

"It's not forever," he replied, sounding unconcerned.

"No," Hermione agreed, "it's not." They arrived at Gryffindor Tower, and Hermione glanced around quickly to ensure they were alone, then whispered, "Thank you for saving me." She reached out and squeezed his hand once, then quickly whispered the password and slipped away before he could respond.

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Quote from FB: "Merpeople exist throughout the world, though they vary in appearance as much as humans."

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A/N: In this revision, I finally figured out a way to work in the merpeople, as the challenge required. Yay!

# Showdown

## Chapter 9 of 10

Ron and Harry finally realize who they can trust, which leads to a powerful alliance against the Dark Lord. Meanwhile, Hermione and Severus wait (im)patiently for a time when they won't be constrained by their roles.

*A/N: In a previous incarnation, reviewers felt that this, which was originally the last chapter, was rushed. So, I took myself to the library, where I got out "The Tales of Beedle the Bard." There, I found another quote using the same rules as applied to "Quidditch Through the Ages" and "Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them," and split the chapter in two. The quote from "Beedle the Bard" worked better with this chapter, as you'll see, which is handy considering that the quote from "Quidditch Through the Ages" was in the second half of the original chapter 9, and is therefore now in chapter 10.*

*I want to remind everyone quickly that this fic makes no attempt at all to be either HBP- or DH-compliant. Therefore, as you already know, Dumbledore is alive and Hermione's parents went to America (not Australia) without any kind of memory alteration; similarly as you'll see in this chapter I've ignored both the Horcrux thing and the Elder Wand thing (may I say that with the complexity of all that, I understand why DH was about a million pages long?).*

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### Chapter 9: Final Showdown

Upon discovering Percy's role in Hermione's abduction, followed quickly by his death at the hands of Voldemort, Harry was furious. The Weasleys were more conflicted, as they were both irate at Percy's betrayal and grief-stricken at the sudden loss of their son and brother.

One positive outcome of Hermione's brief abduction was that Harry and Ron finally and fully accepted that Snape really was on the right side. When Hermione showed them the Portkey Snape had given her, they were shocked that Snape would make such an effort to protect her. Harry even began to question Dumbledore's judgment, both in failing to tell them that he suspected Percy was a traitor and for leaving it to Snape to provide Hermione with a way out in case she was captured.

Harry and Ron were so relieved that Hermione was unscathed that they insisted on thanking Snape personally for protecting her. Thus, the very next time Harry met Snape for his private lessons, Ron tagged along; they apologized humbly for doubting Snape's loyalties and thanked him profusely for saving their friend. Snape managed to accept their apologies and thanks with reasonable good grace, and a tentative truce was formed.

After that, Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Snape began meeting weekly. Whenever Harry had a lesson with Snape, Hermione and Ron would sneak down to the dungeons under Harry's invisibility cloak, and they all considered whatever information Snape had brought them. They agreed not to inform Dumbledore of their meetings; if he knew anyway, he didn't comment. Gradually, as they tried to develop a foolproof plan to eliminate the Dark Lord, an odd sort of friendship developed amongst them all. If pressed, Snape would admit to himself, and perhaps even to Hermione, that Harry and Ron had matured into tolerable allies not that he would ever tell anyone else (including the two young men in question), of course.

Despite their new detente, their meetings were often frustrating, as they always seemed to come back to the problem of Nagini. Even if they managed to find the Dark Lord without too many Death Eaters around, Nagini was always there; that being the case, they just weren't sure how they would get close enough to Voldemort for Harry to kill him nor had they come up with a way to kill Nagini with the Dark Lord and his Inner Circle present.

And of course, there was the added concern of additional possible attempts to take Hermione. She was never permitted to be alone, except when safely tucked away in Gryffindor Tower or her own room. This severely curtailed the amount of time she could spend in the library researching new ideas. Eventually, they all agreed that she would work in the Room of Requirement, with one of her trusted friends accompanying her. At least the Room would provide her companions with whatever they needed, too. Still, she quickly grew tired of needing an escort everywhere she went.

Hermione also continued to meet with Snape three times weekly to work on her independent study. The more generalized prophylactic potion was far more complex than the one specifically designed for Cruciatius, and Hermione was beginning to doubt that they would succeed with it. Nevertheless, they were still trying, and as frustrating as it was to feel that they were unlikely to prevail, Professor Snape told her that she had already learned more about Potions than most apprentices learned by the time they attained their Mastery. Therefore, they agreed that Hermione would write up the project, regardless of outcome, along with the Cruciatius Prophylactic, and submit it to the Society of Potions Masters for consideration to obtain her Mastery Certification.

In addition to their comfortable working relationship, Hermione found that she and Professor Snape continued to grow closer, though without explicitly acknowledging it, on a personal level. Gradually, they reached an unspoken understanding: the moment Hermione's schooling was complete, or the moment Snape was no longer needed (or able) to spy for the Order whichever came last they would explore the attraction that simmered constantly below the surface of every interaction they had with one another. Neither of them knew *how* they knew this was understood, but they both understood it with complete clarity and confidence.

One evening in May, the four co-conspirators met as usual and discussed for what seemed the hundredth time the possibility of breaking into Malfoy Manor. They argued (yet again) about how to protect themselves from Voldemort, Nagini, and whatever Death Eaters might be present. Eventually, Ron threw his hands up, exclaiming sarcastically, "Shame we can't just Imperius Nagini and order him to kill You-Know-Who." A sudden silence descended over the room as everyone looked at Ron, then at each other, then back at Ron. Ron asked, "What?"

Harry turned to Snape and asked cautiously, "Could it be that simple?"

Snape shrugged and mused aloud, "Perhaps ..."

Hermione interjected excitedly, "Remember fourth year? When Crouch Imperiused the spider? Why *couldn't* we Imperius Nagini?"

Snape said thoughtfully, sounding pleased and impressed, "Mr. Weasley, I believe you have unexpectedly and fortuitously stumbled upon the ideal solution to the Nagini problem." Having said this, he smiled slightly, and Hermione was amused at the shock this seemed to engender in her two friends.

Energized with new hope, Hermione quickly researched to ascertain that nothing would prevent a familiar being Imperiused to kill its master. Once they were reasonably certain it could be done, they planned carefully, and the next time Snape got information that the Dark Lord would be relatively unprotected, they tipped off Gawain Robards, who arranged a raid to distract and capture whatever Death Eaters were there.

At the critical moment, Harry, beneath his Invisibility Cloak, slipped in with the Aurors. The few Death Eaters who were present seemed unwilling to yield without a fight, even though they had clearly been caught unawares and were outnumbered by a margin of at least three to one.



In the ensuing chaos, with various hexes, jinxes, and curses (including even some Unforgivables) flying, no one noticed as Harry let Ron and Hermione in. They had Disillusioned themselves, so they moved slowly in order to avoid rippling the air and drawing attention to their movements. Looking around, Hermione realized that the disadvantage to their invisibility was that they were vulnerable to stray curses from the Aurors, though that was probably outweighed by the fact that they weren't being specifically targeted by the Death Eaters.

Hermione quickly surveyed the room, trying to ascertain who was present as they made their way along the wall toward the corner where Harry had spied Nagini. She knew better than to draw attention to herself, and she knew that Snape didn't want her here. He had argued adamantly that she was still a target and therefore should stay safe at Hogwarts. She had refused, however. She and Ron had outvoted Snape, insisting that the Aurors would be too busy with the Death Eaters to adequately ensure Harry's safety. Snape had tried to argue that he could take care of that, but Hermione and Ron had eventually won through sheer stubbornness along with Hermione's solemn promise to keep a Shield Charm up at all times and to stay out of the line of fire as much as possible.

Now, as she surveyed the room, she immediately recognized Dolohov despite his robes and mask she thought she would always recognize him after what he had done to her in the Department of Mysteries. He had just taken a shot that barely missed Tonks, so Hermione quickly cast a binding spell. Tonks glanced her way in surprise, but was forced immediately to turn her attention to another opponent. Hermione thought she spied a glimpse of white blond hair, which suggested this was a Malfoy probably Lucius, as she found it hard to believe that Draco would be in the Inner Circle at his tender age. Hermione was about to assist her again when Snape's voice hissed in her ear, "Don't you dare. You're supposed to be keeping yourself invisible, and casting spells is *not* invisible."

A mad-sounding cackle from another direction prevented Hermione from replying, as she whirled to see a maskless Bellatrix LeStrange holding her wand aloft as she yelled encouragement to the rapidly dwindling numbers on their side. "Courage, friends, and do not yield!" she cried, wiping the sweat from her brow. Hermione was about to send a binding spell her way when ropes flew from behind her as Snape made her intervention unnecessary. Bellatrix continued to scream until someone silenced her.

Meanwhile, Harry, who had been working hard on non-verbal casting for weeks, silently cast Imperius on Nagini. Hermione turned in time to see the snake strike Voldemort before he managed to realize what was happening. Time seemed to stand still; he began screaming in agony as the venom worked quickly through his system. Everyone in the room seemed to be staring in shock as his body jerked and convulsed, which turned out to be a good thing as uncontrolled spells began flying from his wand. Ron ducked one curse while Hermione barely sidestepped another. Both spells ricocheted around the room, making both sides duck and weave to avoid them before they dissipated. Another stray spell took down Dolohov, who, bound as he was, couldn't move to avoid it. Dolohov toppled, Voldemort's screams faded, and an eerie silence filled the room as both sides absorbed what had happened.

The silence was broken when Snape pointed his wand at Nagini and whispered, "*Sectumsempra*." As the whisper echoed through the otherwise silent room, the few Death Eaters who remained standing dropped their wands and surrendered without further resistance.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione immediately surrounded Snape, as they had all agreed they would do as soon as Voldemort was dead. They didn't want the Aurors to confuse him in his Death Eater garb for one of the enemy; after much discussion, they had decided the only way they could be sure he wouldn't be taken away to Azkaban before his true loyalties were revealed was to prevent anyone from getting near him in the heat of the moment.

Ripping off his mask, Snape hissed, "What are you doing?"

"Protecting you," Hermione hissed back. Before he could voice the objection she was sure would be forthcoming, she added, "We don't want an overzealous Auror to take you away."

He snorted, but didn't try to move out of the circle of their protection. Gawain Robards approached, and Hermione heard him talking quietly with Harry. Her attention, however, remained focused on Snape, who was pushing up the sleeve of his robes. He let out a relieved sigh, and a true smile lit his face at what he saw there. He twisted his arm so Hermione could see it for herself. Nothing remained except a faded-looking scar; Hermione was so excited that she forgot herself completely, threw her arms around him, and laughed happily.

Silence descended on the room again, as those present were apparently at least as shocked by Snape's reaction to this unseemly behavior as by anything else that happened that day; the normally dour, sneering, sarcastic Potions Master simply laughed, caught her up in his arms, and twirled her around, in full view of everyone, before leaning over and kissing her full on the mouth.

Thus, after years of anxiety and effort, the Dark Lord was vanquished in a matter of mere minutes, with a relative minimum of fuss or loss of life, and the wizarding world rejoiced the return of happier days.

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Quote from Beedle the Bard: "Courage, friends, and do not yield!" she cried, wiping the sweat from her brow."

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## Happily Ever After

*Chapter 10 of 10*

At the Leaving Feast, Severus has a surprise for Hermione.

*A/N: I hope you enjoy this final installment. Thanks to everyone who has reviewed – and if you haven't, this is your last chance to let me know what you thought!*

*BTW, I moved Gilbert Wimple from the (canon) Committee on Experimental Charms to the (non-canon) Committee on Experimental Potions. It made sense to me that they would have one ...*

*I sometimes think "fluff" should be available as a warning. Since it's not, consider yourself warned here: this chapter gets pretty fluffy. But perhaps the chapter title is warning enough?*

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### Chapter 10: Happily Ever After

Two weeks after the fall of Voldemort, Hermione sat between Ron and Harry at the Leaving Feast, talking happily about what they had planned for the summer and beyond.

Harry and Ron had both earned tryouts with the Chudley Cannons and were planning to spend the summer ensuring they were in top form for those. Hermione was rather glad that they weren't rushing right into their long-term plans to become Aurors – if anyone deserved to enjoy life, Harry and Ron did. So much of their childhoods had been

consumed with battling evil that she was glad they were going to have some fun for a while as they eased their way into adulthood.

Hermione would stay at Hogwarts to complete the writeup of her mastery projects and – hopefully – to explore the possibility of a true relationship with Snape. She wondered if the boys realized she was in love with the man they used to hate. She decided not to mention it just now, figuring it would be better to wait and see how things developed. Besides, she doubted they'd condemn her for it, considering that they actually rather liked Snape themselves now. They never spoke ill of him anymore, and they had defended him strenuously in the aftermath of Voldemort's demise, when Aurors were arresting anyone who was even suspected of being a Death Eater. Several Aurors had tried to arrest Snape, too, arguing that he clearly had the Dark Mark and had been present at the end, and therefore he should be imprisoned until he could be tried. Between Harry, Ron, and Dumbledore, however, they had backed down. The Minister of Magic had even issued a press release identifying him as one of the behind-the-scenes heroes of the "skirmish" between good and evil; furthermore, they were planning a ceremony to honor him, along with Harry, Ron, and Hermione, with Orders of Merlin, first class.

Given all that, Hermione was reasonably sure her friends would accept her feelings for the man. After all, they trusted Snape with their lives; how could they not trust him with her heart? Still, she really thought she ought to have that discussion she had been hoping to have with Snape himself before she started telling all her friends she was planning to spend her future with the man if he would have her.

She resolved to enjoy the remainder of the Leaving Feast and take things one day at a time with Snape.

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As the Leaving Feast was ending, Severus approached Hermione, who had found her parents. They were newly returned from America, and Hermione looked very happy to be with them. Severus almost hated to pull her away, but he felt he had been waiting so long already that he simply couldn't contain his impatience any longer.

Despite their unspoken understanding, he found himself nervous now that the time to speak openly had arrived. He had little practice expressing his more positive feelings, and even less history of happy outcomes when he had tried.

Fortunately, he could ease into it, as he had a surprise for Hermione.

When he drew near, Hermione smiled brightly at him, her eyes hopeful and her cheeks pink. Severus felt his own cheeks grow warm; to cover his discomfort, he asked, "May I speak with you privately?"

"Of course," Hermione quickly agreed, excusing herself from her parents. He led her into a quiet alcove, away from the crowds. She said, "There's so much I want to say to you."

He couldn't help smiling at her eagerness, which boosted his confidence and helped him relax. He said, "And I to you, but business first." He handed her the letter he had received that morning, and watched her face as she read it.

*To: Hermione Granger, in care of her representative, Professor Severus Snape, at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry*

*The Department of Magical Intellectual Property is pleased to grant patent number POT75389 for your "Cruciatus Prophylactic Potion." The list of ingredients you provided shall be kept confidential, as it is the Department's view that witches and wizards who see the list might get ideas. While we agree that this potion is a major advance in the defense against the Unforgivable Curses, we do not wish to tempt people to cast such curses by widely marketing protection against it.*

*Thank you for submitting your patent to the Ministry.*

*Sincerely,*

*Gilbert Wimple*

*Committee on Experimental Potions*

Looking up at Severus, Hermione asked incredulously, "You got me a patent?"

He smiled and replied, "You earned it." He shrugged. "Since you had your NEWTs to finish, I submitted it for you. I hope you don't mind."

"No, of course not. Thank you." She paused and took a breath. Releasing it, she said, "But I'd rather talk about us."

He felt his lips turn up ever so slightly. "So would I, actually. I wonder if I might be permitted to escort you to dinner tomorrow evening?"

Hermione smiled widely. "I would love to have dinner with you, Severus. I assume I may call you Severus now?"

"Of course," Severus replied, feeling himself smile slightly in response. "It would feel rather odd, I think, courting a woman who didn't address me by my given name ..."

Hermione's smile grew even wider. "It would," she agreed. "However, I was thinking more that it would be awkward to call you 'Professor' just before doing *this* ..." She stretched up on her toes and brushed his lips lightly with hers, then rocked back, apparently to gauge his reaction.

He felt his smile grow, until even someone standing several feet away might have noticed it. "It would, indeed, though perhaps not quite as uncomfortable as calling me 'Professor' just before I did *this* ..." He leaned over and proceeded to snog her as thoroughly as he could manage while fully clothed and in public.

When at last he stepped back, he was pleased to see that she looked thoroughly bemused and delightfully mussed. After a moment, she said, "You know, Severus, I've been waiting so very long to spend time with you on a more personal level. Why does it seem like one more day is just too long to bear?"

He laughed outright, the feeling unfamiliar, but welcome nonetheless. "Tonight, then? And, perhaps, tomorrow also, and the day after that, and so on, for the rest of our lives?"

Hermione smiled again, looking delighted. "Severus, I believe this is the beginning of our happily ever after."

Severus stared at her for a moment, still smiling, though he was slightly bemused at the almost-forgotten feelings of happiness that were surging through him. He decided on a novel way to handle his discomfort – he kissed her again. He didn't tell her that he didn't believe in happily ever after, because suddenly, here with her – and with the Dark Lord truly, finally gone – for the first time in twenty years, he did.

"Yes, Hermione," he said, "I do believe it is ..."

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Quote from QA: "It is the Department's view that witches and wizards who see the list 'might get ideas.'"

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