

A Balance of Three

by magalena

It's seven years after the end of the war and Voldemort's fall; the wizarding world is in shambles. Hermione uses Arithmancy to figure out that a new triad needs to be formed to restore balance to the wizarding world.

one

Chapter 1 of 12

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AN: Written for the 2010 ss/hg_exchange for lady_karelia. I will post the original prompt at the end of the story, as I don't want to give too much away. (I am madeleine on LJ and at the Exchange).

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter. I make no money here.

AN: Many thanks to my super, wonderful beta, dreamy_dragon73.

Hermione sat at the desk in the library of Grimmauld Place, which she used as her study. She furiously scribbled across the page as numerals, runes and complex Arithmantic equations danced upon the parchment. The outcomes were constantly changing as she inserted different options into the mix. Still, when she came to the end of the process, she got exactly the same solutions she had gotten the first twelve times she had run the numbers.

"No, no, no! This just can't be right. There has to be another answer. This is not possible...I must be missing something somewhere...doing something wrong." But that seemed unlikely; she was one of the best Arithmancers at the Ministry of Magic and a rising star in her field.

Pulling out a fresh sheet of parchment, she started again from the very beginning. Maybe, time number thirteen would be the charm, would give her the right answers.

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That was how Harry and Kingsley found her hours later: slumped over her work, her head resting on her arm, sound asleep, drooling a bit on the blotter, her quill still in her hand, pieces of parchment scattered about all across the desk and some fallen on the floor.

"What is all this, Harry?" Kingsley asked quietly, picking up a few of the many parchments from the floor.

"Some pet project she's been working on in her off time. I think she's becoming obsessed with it. She spends all her time in here after work, stays up half the night, spends all her weekends on it. I don't really understand all of it; I was never great at Arithmancy. I can comprehend the basics, and having been around Hermione so long, even a bit more, but all this..." He waved his hand around the desk. "It's way over my head. I have no clue what it all means. Something brilliant I'm sure.

"Let me put her to bed. She's driving herself to exhaustion. I'll be right back." Harry scooped his friend up into his arms and couldn't help but notice how slight she felt; she

wasn't eating properly either, and he was sure she'd lost weight. He had planned to Apparate her upstairs but was afraid it would wake her up, so he just hitched her up in his arms and carried her to her room.

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When Harry came back down, Kingsley was perusing Hermione's calculations. He had a piece of parchment and was making his own notations and mumbling to himself. "What's up, Kingsley?"

"Harry, this stuff she's working on...it's cutting edge. It's unbelievable; she's been trying to find a way to return balance to our world. You know that in the seven years since Voldemort fell, our world has been on a downward spiral into shambles. The economy has never recovered; there have been outbreaks of plagues; rogue Death Eater wannabes terrorize the public; many people's magic itself has become erratic. Our whole world is out of balance. The theory is that there is an abundance of negative energy at play in everything we do. We need a way to bring that back into equilibrium. What Hermione is trying to do here is find an answer to it all. And from what I can see here, she's damn close to a breakthrough."

"So you actually can make sense of all of this?" asked Harry.

"Oh, yes, Harry. It's a special passion of mine. I chose to become an Auror, but Arithmancy was my first love. Do you think she would mind if I took this to look it over?"

"I'm not sure, she's kind of funny about her work. I'd want to ask her first."

"Well, she's redone the same formulation multiple times. It looks like she's trying to find an error. Maybe I could help spot it if I went over it on my own."

Before Harry could answer, a little voice came from the doorway. "Daddy, whatcha' doin'?"

"James, what are you doing up so late, mate?"

"I had a bad dream about the 'Stranges,' the little boy said in a sleepy voice.

Harry sighed, and spoke quietly to Kingsley. "I'm sorry, Kingsley, it appears that Kreacher has been telling James stories again about the ambush at the Burrow. I am going to have to get him settled in. You can show yourself out, yes?"

"Sure thing, Harry, not a problem," replied Kingsley. Looking at the four-year old, he asked in concern, "Isn't James a little young to be hearing about all that?"

"I've tried to discourage him, but Kreacher seems to think James should know that his mother, grandparents and uncles were all heroes. He doesn't tell him all the gory details about the massacre, thank Merlin. But he's always telling him stories about the war and my role, Hermione, Ron, and Ginny, the Order, the Weasleys; you're even included in some of Kreacher's tales. Luckily, for the most part James views them more as fantasies rather than true life," explained Harry. "Goodnight, Kingsley, I'll see you at work tomorrow."

Harry scooped up his son and for the second time that night carried a weary body up the stairs.

Kingsley watched him leave the room with his little boy. They had all lived through horrible times but Harry more than most. He wondered how Harry was even able to function and keep it all together; he thought if it was him, he would have cracked long ago. After the war, at first everything had seemed to be on the right track. Harry had lived out his dream and become an Auror, rising quickly up the ranks. Ginny Weasley had finished Hogwarts the following year, and she and Harry had married; two years after that they'd had a baby, a little boy they'd named James Arthur after both of his grandfathers. They had had a fairy-tale life until that fateful day had changed it all.

The LeStrange brothers had escaped in the chaos following the final battle, managed to evade capture and gone into hiding. They'd never forgotten their thirst for revenge over Bellatrix's death, and Molly Weasley and her family had been the target of their fury. They'd bided their time, and nearly four years ago, after gathering a ragtag band of followers, they'd staged a raid on the Burrow and murdered everyone there. Arthur, Percy, Ron, Ginny, they'd saved Molly for last, making her watch as they'd tortured and murdered all the members of her family present.

Kingsley had been the Senior Auror that night and one of the first on the scene. Molly had been still alive when he'd found her and, much as Snape had for Harry, she had given him her memories before she died. It had been a deciding moment in his life. Certain factions had been trying for years since the end of the war to get him to run for the office of Minister, a position he'd held briefly as Interim Minister at the end of the war. He'd always refused, claiming he liked his job, which was why he'd returned to it. But after that night at the Burrow, something inside him had died, and Kingsley Shacklebolt had walked away from the MLE. He had sworn he would never deal with a situation like that again. He'd become Minister of Magic two years later and was now trying to deal with the woes of the wizarding world instead.

He started to put the parchment down on the desk, but something made him hesitate. As he'd explained to Harry, the way Hermione kept re-doing the same part over and over made it look like she thought there was an error. He would just take it and look it over, then let her know what he found. He knew he shouldn't without her permission, but he justified it by telling himself that her research could make all the difference to fixing the mess they were in. He placed one of the many duplicates of her work in the pocket of his robes and turned to leave.

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The next morning found Hermione at the breakfast table, and when she heard about James's bad dreams, she scolded the aged house-elf. "You must stop telling him those stories, Kreacher; they're giving him nightmares."

"Hmmpff," grunted Kreacher. "Is important for young master to be knowing his heritage. Is noble house of Weasley is home to many heroes. Many brave witches and wizards. Young master is the son of Harry Potter; he needs to know these things!"

"Kreacher, I understand how you feel, but he's just a little boy. These stories are frightening, and besides, it's not good for him to dwell on such things."

"Miss Mymee is one to talk of dwelling on the past," muttered Kreacher, using James's pet name for her.

He was put out that she refused to allow him to make a fuss over her birthday each year. She had refused to celebrate the day for the past two years, and would again this year, as it was on that fateful day that the attack had occurred. Ginny had asked her to babysit James at her flat on the pretense that she had shopping to do. In reality, Ron had planned a surprise party at the Burrow for his fiancée's twenty-second birthday, and he had enlisted Ginny and Molly to help him pull it off. If little James hadn't slept late that afternoon and Hermione hadn't the heart to wake him up, she could very well have popped into the middle of a bloodbath with a baby in her arms.

"Don't change the subject, Kreacher," she admonished the house-elf. "Look, I understand your reasoning, really I do. Just try to tone it down, please; tell him your tales but leave out the scary parts. Okay? He doesn't need to hear those."

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Three days later, after work, Kingsley came to number twelve Grimmauld Place and asked to talk with Hermione. He entered her study and placed the parchment he had taken earlier on the desk.

"This is a copy of my personal work. Just how in the hell did you get a hold of this?" Hermione demanded angrily.

"I'm sorry, Hermione, I took this without asking. I was here with Harry the other night, and I couldn't help but see all your work. It looked like you were running the same formula over repeatedly as if you were searching for an error. I thought if I gave them a look I could maybe help you out."

"So you just helped yourself to my private papers. What were you thinking?" she asked in outrage.

"I'm really sorry. I knew I shouldn't have at the time. But believe me, as Minister, I'm desperate for answers on how to help our world. I have a personal friend who is top notch at Arithmancy. I'd like you to consider bringing him in on this project as a consultant.

"Hermione, your work is very promising. It has such revolutionary concepts that I wanted to examine it more closely. I thought perhaps I could spot the error you were so obviously trying to find."

She wanted to be angry, but at the same time she yearned to be able to talk to someone who was knowledgeable in Arithmancy about her theories. She had kept this project a secret from her co-workers, so she had never been able to bounce ideas off of anyone. "You're familiar with advanced Arithmantic principals?" she asked, rather doubtful.

"Yes, in fact, Dumbledore tried to convince me to go into Arithmancy after Hogwarts; it was my best subject. But I was young and foolish, and the MLE seemed a much more exciting career choice. Still, I have tried to keep abreast of the newest developments in the field."

"So, were you able to find my error?" she asked, waving her hand at the papers.

"Hermione, this is amazing. You are amazing! Sweetheart, there is no error in your calculations. This is it. This is the answer to what ails our world."

"No, Kingsley. You must be wrong. I must be wrong. We both must be missing something because this just can't be right," she argued.

"Tell me how you're interpreting the results, then I'll give you my take on it," he advised.

"Well," she began while nervously shuffling together all the papers scattered about. "The indicators I'm reading suggest that a triad of some sort must be formed, consisting of three very powerful magical entities. These three must come together and work in harmony to form a partnership. And somehow between the three of them, some powerful magic will be performed that will bring the negative and positive energy flow back into balance."

"Good, because that's the way I read it too. So why do you believe you've made an error?"

"Because according to my calculations, I am one part of the triad, Kingsley, and that can't be right; it just can't. I don't want to do this. I don't want this responsibility," she exclaimed.

"Welcome to my world, Hermione," said Harry wryly from the doorway. "Kingsley told me he'd be stopping by, and he also explained his theories about what you've been working on. It looks like this time around you get to be the hero of the wizarding world, sis." He often called her sis to tease her, alluding to her unofficial position as his 'sister'.

"That's not funny, Harry," responded Hermione. "I want no part of this, not any of it."

"And do you think I asked for it when it happened to me?" he countered.

"No, I know... but this is just... I can't. Oh, sweet Circe, this can't be happening," she whispered.

Harry came over and sat next to Hermione on the sofa. He put his arm around her shoulders and gave her a little squeeze of support. "Look, no one can make you do this. It's a decision you have to agree to."

"Yeah, like I have a choice. Like *you* had a choice. Everyone just expected you to take on the mantle of The Boy Who Lived. You didn't get to make a decision about assuming the role; it was handed to you when you were an eleven-year-old boy."

"I could have walked away, left the wizarding world, left everything behind," said Harry softly. "Don't think I didn't think of it...more than once in fact."

Kingsley pulled up a chair and took one of Hermione's hands; they were ice cold. "Hermione, Harry's right. No one can force you to do this. But it will have permanent repercussions on the magical world, or at least here in our little corner of it, if this triad isn't formed. And let's face it, you are not only the brightest witch of your age, but you've grown up to be probably the most powerful witch I know."

Hermione buried her face in her hands and sat silently for several minutes. Kingsley and Harry stayed quiet, letting her come to her own conclusions. Finally, she lifted her head. "How will we even go about finding the other two members of the triad? It seems like looking for a needle in a haystack."

Kingsley looked puzzled until Harry explained, "Muggle expression: looking for something almost impossible to find."

"Ahhh," he replied in understanding. "Maybe not as hard as you might think. We know the other two are very powerful, and I've been doing some research--"

"Oh, my gosh," interrupted Hermione. "Did you ever think the triad could be right here in this room? What more powerful wizard is there in Britain than Harry Potter. And, Kingsley, you are one of the strongest wizards I know as well. Wouldn't it be great if it were that simple?"

Harry and Kingsley looked at each other over her head; they both realized that even now she didn't understand the ramifications of this triadic association.

"It's not us, Hermione, but if you want to run the numbers to rule us out, feel free to go ahead," advised Kingsley.

"Why don't you believe it could be you and Harry?" she asked, slightly disappointed that it wasn't the two wizards before her. At least they weren't strangers. And she believed that they would have been able to work together well.

"Well, as I said, I've been doing some research, and this is type of event has happened before in British wizarding history, more than once, in fact. Harry and I don't fit the parameters. There's a tangible pattern to the event."

"There is? Show me," she demanded.

Kingsley pulled another parchment out and, walking to the desk, smoothed it out. Hermione and Harry both followed him over to look.

"First, as I said, we know they're powerful, and as I said, this has happened before. I've been able to identify at least six times in the last one-thousand years. It shows a couple of patterns. The first is gender based. The triad has always been a mixture; it's never been all male or all female. In almost every case it has been two wizards and one witch. All right then here, let's look at the other pattern I've found," he said, placing a second parchment on the desk.

Hermione studied it carefully. There were a series of letters in a column, three in each group. It appeared that there was a double letter in each group with a single letter. And wherever the single letter was, in the next group it was the double letter, so it looked like this:

HHS

SSR

RRG

GGH

HHR

RRS

SSG

"Okay, yes, I do see the pattern, but what does it mean, Kingsley?" she asked. But before he could answer, her eyes popped wide open and she gasped. "Fuck me! Tell me this isn't what I think it is?"

Kingsley replied in a conciliatory tone, "Now, Hermione."

"Don't you 'now Hermione' me," she snapped.

Harry added, "It might not be as bad you think, Hermione."

"Not as bad as I think? Harry, do you have any idea what these letters represent?" Before he could even attempt to answer, she continued. "I'll tell you what they represent: Houses, that's what. Hogwarts Houses to be specific: Hufflepuff/Hufflepuff/Slytherin, Slytherin/Slytherin/Ravenclaw, Ravenclaw/Ravenclaw/Gryffindor and so on down the line. And here, this last one, that G there, that's me, Harry," she ranted, poking herself in the chest for emphasis. "And what do you see it paired with? Slytherin, that's what! So not only is this... this... thing, pattern, prediction, phenomenon or whatever it is, telling me that I'm supposed to put my life on hold to fulfill this stupid triad thingy but I'm supposed to do it with two Slytherins! No fucking way!" Hermione stormed out of the room and pounded up the stairs.

Harry and Kingsley looked at each other.

"Well," said Kingsley. "That went better than I'd expected."

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Two

Chapter 2 of 12

It's seven years after the end of the war and Voldemort's fall; the wizarding world is in shambles. Hermione uses Arithmancy to figure out that a new triad needs to be formed to restore balance to the wizarding world.

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AN: This story was written for the 2010 sshg_exchange as a gift for lady_karelia. Many thanks to my super, wonderful betas, dreamy_dragon73 and Clairvoyant.

Hermione stewed in her room for the better part of an hour, muttering curse words aimed at Kingsley Shacklebolt while repeatedly blasting and repairing things in her room, venting her anger. He and his stupid theories that paired her up with two Slytherins to complete this thrice damned triad.

Once he left, and she was certain that Harry was busy with James, she slunk back down to her study and started playing with the equations again. Determined to prove Kingsley wrong, this time she factored in different Houses and combinations thereof. It only made her more angry when it turned out that none of the combinations led to a different conclusion other than the one Kingsley had suggested.

Unhappy with the results, Hermione continued to pore over her calculations well into the night. Harry finally came in before going to bed, breaking her concentration.

"Um... Hermione," Harry said softly.

"Oh, hi, Harry. Sorry about losing my temper and storming out earlier," she apologized.

"Well, I guess I can't blame you. The whole idea must have come as a bit of a shock."

"Yeah, I was already having a hard time accepting the whole triad thing, but the idea of being paired up with two Slytherins was just too much for me. I still don't see how it could be right, though. I've been racking my brains, trying to think of who it could be but haven't been able to come up with any strong candidates. What do you think?"

"Ummm... I don't know. There are a few, I guess." Harry hesitated. "Uh... Hermione, how exactly do you think this whole triad thing might work out?"

"I don't really know for sure. I guess I'll check with Shacklebolt and find out what his resources were and do some checking on my own."

"Well, I meant not so much the history part of it as the actual triad part. You found that in your formulations, right?"

"Yes, I guess when we figure out who these other two are, we will have to form a partnership, like a business contract, to work together on this. There is some special magic we have to find to activate the balance."

"Yeah, I guess it's probably something like that. Here," he said, handing her a scrap of paper, "Kingsley left this and said for you to try plugging that into your formula and see what you get."

Hermione looked at the paper. There were two runes: Sowilo and Berkano, followed by the runes Fehu and Othala. She looked up at Harry questioningly.

"He said to try these; the first two runes should go with your part of the formula, then put in the others. If they seem like a match, he has some other figures that might narrow it down more. But try these first because he said if these don't match, he's on the wrong track, and the numbers would be irrelevant."

With a sigh, Hermione pulled out a fresh parchment and started from scratch.

"Couldn't you just plug the runes into the last set you did?" asked Harry.

"Yes, I could, but I don't want to take any chance of errors, so I'm going to run the whole thing from the start," replied Hermione.

Soon the magic that was Arithmancy took shape; the numbers and symbols were moving and shifting, swirling in patterns that were practically psychedelic. Hermione's eyes darted from point to point across the parchment as she watched the changes and anticipated what was going to happen next. Her brow wrinkled in concentration, and she pursed her lips as she tapped her index finger nervously on the desktop.

As the process seemed to slow to a stop, Hermione looked up at Harry. "It does look like he's on the right track. Of course that could all change depending on the other numbers he's got. Did he tell you who this represents, Harry?" Hermione asked, pointing to Fehu and Othala.

"No... not specifically," he hedged, then gave her shoulder a conciliatory squeeze. "But I'm fairly sure that he knew the answer wasn't going to make you happy," he finished with a yawn. "Well, I've got to get to bed. You should get some rest too, Sis."

"I will, Harry, in a few minutes, I promise."

It wasn't until after Harry had left that Hermione realized that he'd been very vague about Kingsley's candidates. 'Not specifically' could mean anything, but knowing Harry, it probably meant 'I've got a pretty good idea, but I'm not saying because you might hex me.'

Hermione sighed. Things were not looking good in her opinion.

Half a world away in the far north of Ontario, Canada, in a small town called Marten Falls First Nation, a tall man, clad in black, strode into town. He approached the home of the town elder and knocked politely on the door.

An ancient looking Indian man answered his knock. "Mr. Greyfox, I presume?" said the stranger in a silky voice with an English accent.

Looking the newcomer up and down, he said, "You must be Snape."

Severus nodded.

"I got your letter. I've been expecting you. Come in, come in. I welcome you into my home. Am I correct in my understanding that you wish to learn the ways of the old ones?"

"Yes, to a certain extent. I wish to learn about the plants and things your people use for healing. It is a specialty of mine; I make medicines from things I find in nature. I am going to be gathering ingredients for my po... medicines. I'm looking for some extremely rare ingredients that I've been led to believe might grow in this area; they can only be found at the very first spring thaw when the new shoots start to spike. While I am here, I would also like to learn what other kinds of things your people find in the wild that are of value for healing and such."

"Ah, yes. You are a medicine man then, a Shaman. A powerful one too, if I am any judge, and I am." The old man laughed at his own joke. He was the small town's mayor, police chief and as a tribal elder a kind of judge, as well.

"Well, I wouldn't go so far as to claim to be a Shaman, but I have studied many different cultures. In the last six years, I've traveled the world to learn whatever I can in each place I stay and gather ingredients in that locale. You said in our correspondence that you have a cabin I could rent for a month or two while I harvest my ingredients?"

"Yes, but it's a bit isolated...about eight miles west of town." The town itself was more than a bit isolated, being home to fewer than six hundred people. There were no roads leading here, and the only access was to charter a plane, unless of course you were a wizard, but Severus didn't tell Mr. Greyfox that. "I will drive you out there; we can talk along the way. You can pick up supplies at the store before we leave."

The two men had a lively conversation during the drive on the rough, snow-covered back roads leading to the cabin. Mr. Greyfox had a sister who was quite skilled in herbal remedies, and he offered to introduce her to Severus. The cabin was small: basically, one large open area with a wood stove for heat, a small kitchen area to one side with a sink, a propane refrigerator and cook stove, and a table and four chairs. Art (Mr Greyfox had told Severus to call him Art, short for Artemus) was quite proud to point out that the cabin actually had electricity provided by a gasoline generator and 'indoor' facilities, as he showed him the bathroom just off the bedroom. Other than the one bedroom he had pointed out, the sofa could be made into a bed, and there was a loft area above that had extra room and a couple of bunks, if Severus planned to have any company while he was there.

Severus informed him that it suited his needs and paid Art for one month's rent with an open end agreement that he might stay on longer, if he was finding the things he hoped to in the area. This was the off-season for tourists, and this far north people didn't just pop by and rent the cabin on a whim. It was mostly fishermen who came in the summer months. They would fly in, stay a week or so and leave. To rent it out for a whole month and in March no less, when it always sat empty, was boon for Art. He left Severus to settle in and promised to bring his sister in two days.

Severus brewed himself a cup of tea and sat by the window to enjoy the sunset. He had a good view of the lake, although he had to keep casting a warming charm, as it was getting damn cold as night came on. He worried he might have misjudged the timing of the spring thaw, if the temperatures were any indication. He used his magic to get a nice fire going in the wood stove, and before too long, the room was toasty warm.

Looking around, he decided that the small cabin suited his purposes well and, Merlin knew, he'd certainly stayed in a lot worse places over the last seven years since he'd left England. He'd basically been a nomad, wandering from one place to the next, learning different variations of magic in various cultures and gathering rare and unusual potions ingredients along the way.

He'd spent several months immediately following his recovery from Nagini's bite traveling about Europe, staying in Malfoy holdings. When it became clear that there was no danger of prosecution for his past, he could have returned to Britain. By that point the question in his mind was why? Return to what? He had no burning desire to return to teaching. He had no family or close friends other than the Malfoys to draw him back there. Most importantly, he had no obligations to follow a master's orders.

For the first time in his adult life, he was free to do as he wished, and he had decided to visit a myriad of locales in the wizarding world. He had always been fascinated by both the differences and the similarities of magic in different cultures, and so he had devoted the last seven years to studying throughout the wizarding world.

He'd made many fascinating discoveries in those years and learned things that even he had never thought possible. What had brought him here was a rumor: a very special plant that grew only in this area and needed to be harvested at precisely the right time for it to be a viable potion ingredient. He only hoped his timing was right as a lot would depend on nature's whims as to when the spring thaw would come to the area. That's what it ultimately came down to. It was all a matter of timing.

Hermione awoke the next morning and felt like there was a big black cloud hanging over her. Deep down, she knew it was more than the conflict with Kingsley. It had a lot to do with the date, March first. It was a date that always made her depressed.

She was even more unhappy when she arrived at the Ministry of Magic. The type of work she did was such that she was often able to work from her study at home, thus she only came into the Ministry one or two days a week. On this day, when she arrived she found that all of the information on the projects she was currently working on had been removed from her desk. In a fury, she called in her assistant, "Meg, where are all the files on my projects? You know I don't want you tidying up my desk; this space is off limits!"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Miss Granger, weren't you notified? Oh, my gosh, I thought they would have told you."

Hermione could see the girl was clearly upset; she looked near tears. "Told me what, Meg? What's going on here?"

"The memo came directly from the Minister's office. It said all of your projects were to be reassigned to other Arithmancers because you were going to be working on a special project. I'm really sorry, Miss Granger, I never would have touched your files otherwise, but it was straight from the Minister," Meg exclaimed.

"Don't worry, Meg, I'll get to the bottom of this myself," she said, heading for the door.

In a matter of minutes, Hermione was at the executive offices of the Minister of Magic, having a shouting match with the Minister's Chief of Staff.

"I need to talk to Kingsley immediately," she demanded angrily. "I want answers, and I want them now."

"Look, Granger, I warned him you'd react this way, but he didn't listen to me on this one," explained Draco Malfoy.

"Do you mean to tell me that you are privy to the workings of my job and whatever this special project is that he supposedly has lined up for me?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. I have direct knowledge of everything that goes on here at the Ministry, and I predicted that you'd be down here ready to bite someone's head off. I swore it wasn't going to be me. Look, he's got vital meetings with international envoys this morning, and his schedule is filled for the entire day; you won't be able to see him."

Hermione opened her mouth to protest, but before she could speak, Draco raised his hand to silence her. "But," he continued, "I will inform him directly the first chance I get that you are extremely upset and want explanations. I promise that he will come talk to you this evening. Are you willing to accept that option?"

She shoved his hand away and gave him a death glare but finally capitulated. "Fine," she snarled, "but he'd better have some damn good reasons. I had several important projects that I've been working on for months. I don't appreciate having them just handed off to other staff."

"I'll be sure to relay your displeasure to the Minister, Granger; you can be certain of it," replied Malfoy with a cheeky grin.

"Grrrr..." Hermione growled as she stalked out of the room.

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Later that evening, Hermione hurried down to her office after Kreacher had informed her that she had a visitor. Fully expecting Kingsley, she was surprised to see someone seated in one of the high back chairs before the fireplace, his back towards her, only the top of his platinum blond head visible.

"Draco, damn it all, if you've come here to make excuses for him..." she began, but gasped when he stood. It wasn't Draco.

"You!" she exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

"Well, good evening to you too, Miss Granger. Is this how you greet all of your guests?"

"Don't try to call me to task for poor manners; I remember quite clearly how guests were treated in your home during the war, Mr. Malfoy. Of course technically we weren't guests, were we? More like captives."

"You'll forgive me if I don't apologize for something that happened years ago, which I really had no control over at the time."

"No control! You wanted to turn us over to Voldemort to save your own worthless hide. You locked people up in your dungeons; you watched as I was tortured; you would have let her give me to Greyback. You have no business here, Mr. Malfoy. Get out."

"Hermione, he is a guest here at my invitation. Kingsley requested that he be here," said Harry firmly, standing in the hallway with Kingsley beside him.

"You would welcome *this* man into our home, Harry? You have a son to protect. How could you let *him* anywhere near James?"

"Don't you dare imply that I would do anything to put my son at risk, Hermione. Not ever," Harry responded angrily. "I can't believe that you would say such a thing to me. Don't try to tell me who I can invite into *my* home."

Hermione couldn't have looked any more hurt if Harry had slapped her. She made as if to leave the room, but Lucius put up a hand to stop her. "It pains me to think that you would believe me capable of harming a child, Miss Granger. I assure you I would never do such a thing."

"Really, Mr. Malfoy? Never?" she asked sarcastically, taking a step back from him. "You expect me to believe that? Is my memory faulty or was it not you who placed Tom Riddle's diary into Ginny Weasley's cauldron at Flourish and Blotts? She was an eleven-year-old girl...did you truly think that no harm would come of that action?"

"And wasn't it you and your cohorts who roamed the country, torturing and killing Muggles whose only crime was having given birth to a child who was a witch or a wizard? Do you think that did not hurt those children, to know that their families, their parents, their siblings were endangered because of what they were...through no fault of their own?"

"And did you not teach your own son to believe that Mudbloods were an abomination, Muggles little more than animals? Did you not teach him that hatred? Did you not wish for the genocide of an entire population of people; people like me, witches and wizards unworthy of living in your world?"

"Hermione..." Harry started, but Lucius interrupted him.

"I would like very much to deny these things, Miss Granger. But in all honesty, I cannot. Everything you have said has an element of truth. But *can* you not find it in your heart to believe that a man can change? That circumstances and events can cause a man to denounce his past and try to make amends?"

"I would truly like to believe there is some good in everyone and a chance for redemption, but somehow, I have my doubts. Let me ask you this, Mr. Malfoy. If, Merlin forbid, the pendulum had swung the other way seven years ago, if *my* side had lost, and Harry had been defeated...would you now be making these claims of change and denouncing your past? Or would you be sitting in glory beside your Dark Lord Voldemort, reaping your rewards as a good little Death Eater?"

tbc

AN: For more information on runes and their meanings, check this site: <http://www.sunnyway.com/runes/meanings.html>

Three

It's seven years after the end of the war and Voldemort's fall; the wizarding world is in shambles. Hermione uses Arithmancy to figure out that a new triad needs to be formed to restore balance to the wizarding world.

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AN: This story was written for the 2010 ss/hg_exchange as a gift for lady_karelia. Many thanks to my wonderful betas, dreamy_dragon73 and Clairvoyant.

Hermione left the room without another word. The three men looked at each other. Lucius shook his head and said, "She is never going to accept this idea, Kings. It's an impossible situation."

"I blame myself for this, Lucius. I shouldn't have tried to rush things. I should have taken it more gradually. Given her some time to come around."

"Come around?" questioned Lucius. "The woman hates me, and although it hurts me to say it, she probably has good reason. That is certainly not conducive to a harmonious partnership."

"Listen," said Harry. "Hermione explodes, but she doesn't stay angry for long. Like Kingsley said, let's give her some time and see if she comes around."

"You do realize that if this plan comes to fruition, her cooperation must be given willingly. You cannot coerce her into this, Kingsley, not in any way. It won't be successful if she's coming into it with negative feelings. In fact, it could make matters much worse, if that were the case," advised Lucius seriously.

"All right, I understand, Lu. But don't give up yet. Like Harry and I both said, give Hermione some time before you write off the whole idea."

The three continued discussing issues involved in the project for the next hour before Lucius got up to leave. Kingsley advised, "In the meantime you keep checking on our other problem and keep me informed on what's happening on that front. Okay?"

"Yes, yes, of course. I'll let you know if I hear anything at all. Of all the times for him to decide to wander off on another of his little adventures, this is most inconvenient. I don't understand why the man can't simply settle down in one place, but...no he has to meander off across the globe."

As Lucius donned his cloak, he pulled a folded scrap of parchment from his pocket and handed it to Kingsley. On it were two runes, Tiwaz and Algiz. "Give these to her and tell her to add them to the equations. Perhaps they will pique her interest."

"Well, if nothing else, she'll be intrigued by the challenge, especially if these work out like I expect them to." Kingsley eyed Lucius speculatively. "Have you already seen the results on this, Lu?"

"Yes." That was all he said as he walked out the door of the study.

Harry eyed Kingsley with a smirk. "Kings? Lu? I had no idea you were so chummy with Lucius Malfoy."

Kingsley explained, "Lucius and I were schoolmates. We were in the same year, different houses. We were very good friends for a time, not an easy thing for a Slytherin and a Hufflepuff. A shared love and aptitude for Arithmancy is actually what brought us together in the first place, but after we left school we went in opposite directions, obviously."

"I heard all of the things Hermione said about him earlier. She's right for the most part. It was the truth, but I remember a different Lucius Malfoy. I remember the man who was my friend, and I have to believe that he's in there still and hope that he can be redeemed."

"I hope you're right, Kingsley," said Harry. Then he chuckled him on the shoulder. "Hufflepuff? Seriously? I would have picked you for a Gryffindor or maybe a Ravenclaw. But a Puff?"

"Hufflepuff through and through and proud of it, Harry...damned proud of it!"

~

Hermione paused in the hallway. Rather than escape to her room after her confrontation with Malfoy, she had gone down to the kitchen and let Kreacher soothe her with tea and biscuits.

She was on her way back upstairs a while later when she heard voices in the hallway. Confused, she paused to listen. Not intending to eavesdrop, but unable to stop herself, she eased forward to hear what was being said and realized it was the voice of Lucius Malfoy. He was speaking to a woman. It took her several seconds to figure out that it was the portrait of Mrs. Black, the harriidan who used to scream and swear at them. She had been much quieter over the last few years, muttering epithets under her breath from time to time, but she was nowhere near as bad as she used to be. Surprisingly, the old lady in the portrait seemed to have developed a fondness for James.

As Hermione stood in the shadows, she heard Mrs. Black speaking. The old lady sounded like she was crying. What the hell?

"Oh, Lucius...my darling little Cissy. I can't believe she's gone...so young. It's terrible, and to think her own sister would do something like that. That Bella, she always was a bad seed."

She heard Malfoy speak, but he murmured so softly she could barely make out the words. "I loved her so much, Aunt Walli; it's so hard now that she's gone. I made so many mistakes. If not for me, for the choices I made, things might have ended differently."

Taking a chance, she quickly peeked around the corner and was shocked to see Lucius Malfoy dabbing the corners of his eyes with a handkerchief. Was he crying? She felt a bit guilty for the things she'd said about him earlier, even though she still felt they were true.

She did have to allow, however, that it was quite possible that the man had loved his wife. From what she had learned from Harry, who had stayed in touch with Narcissa after the war, she'd not had a gentle death. Her own sister had cursed her at the Battle of Hogwarts when she'd realized that Narcissa had lied to Voldemort about Harry's death. But she hadn't cast an *Avada Kedavra*. Instead, she'd used the *Tardus Dolens Nexcurse*, literally 'slow painful death'. Narcissa had wasted away in constant pain that no potion could touch, no healing spell could ease. It had been a long lingering death. An *Avada Kedavra* would have been kinder. But then, Bellatrix had never been kind, the crazy bitch. She'd been Voldemort's loyal servant to the very end. Hearing the door shut, she peeked again to see the hallway empty. Malfoy had gone on his way.

Heading up to her room, she ran into Kingsley and Harry in the hallway outside her study. Kingsley was leaving.

"You owe me an explanation, Minister," Hermione demanded curtly. "You just parcel off all of my projects to other staff without even consulting me about it?"

"Hermione," he responded, "this project of yours is more important than anything else on your agenda. This way you can devote your full time to it instead of just working on it in your spare time and driving yourself to exhaustion."

"You should have come to me, asked me at least," she stated, somewhat mollified by his explanation. "It would be wonderful, though, to be able to spend all of my time

working on my own project."

"I suppose I should have handled it differently. Draco tried to warn me; I guess I should have listened to him. Here," he said, handing her the slip of parchment that Lucius had given him earlier. "Add this to your equation and see what happens. I'll stop by tomorrow, and we can discuss your results." She shoved it into her pocket without even looking at it and turned away.

When Harry returned from walking Kingsley to the door, Hermione was standing by the window gazing out at the street, a glass of Firewhisky in her hand. It was a very bad sign; Hermione rarely drank anything stronger than butterbeer or the occasional glass of wine.

"Hermione?"

"I've been thinking, Harry. Maybe the time has come for me to get my own place."

Harry exclaimed, "Hermione, no! This is about what I said earlier, isn't it? I'm sorry, really. I spoke without thinking."

Hermione shook her head, blinking rapidly to try to stall the sting of tears. "No, Harry, you were absolutely right. This is *your* home, and you have every right to invite whoever you want here. I have no right to question it."

He swallowed. "Sis, please don't say that. This is your home too; you belong here with us. We need you. James needs you... I need you."

Hermione gave her head another little shake. "That was true once. When I moved in here after... what happened... after..." She bit her bottom lip...any harder and it would have drawn blood...then she took a sip of her whisky for courage. "After what happened at the Burrow, we did need each other. Helping you take care of James was the only thing that kept me sane. Having you and George and James gave my life purpose; I don't know how I could have coped otherwise. But things are changing, and life goes on. George moved out last year when he and Angelina got married; he's moved on with his life, and that's a good thing... a very good thing.

"Maybe, we need to do that too, Harry, move forward. But I'm not so sure I can do that while I'm here because even though I live here... it's not really my home. It's your and Ginny's home, and even though she's gone, it will always be hers." She laid her forehead against the window; the glass felt cool on her brow.

"Hermione, I know it's been hard. It's hard for me too, seeing George and Angelina together. I want to be joyful for them, but I still miss Ginny. I remember how happy we were, and I feel cheated. I look at James, and I can see bits of her, and sometimes I see a hint of Molly's smile, or when he wrinkles his brow, I can see a little part of Arthur."

"You know, I envy you that. At least you have James," she said softly, sadly. "I've noticed lately... it's getting harder and harder for me to remember Ron. The sound of his voice, the color of his eyes, the touch of his lips on mine." She traced her fingers over her lips as if trying to remember. "What I had with Ron is gone. I can never change it; I can never fix it. I'm the know-it-all, Harry. I'm supposed to fix things." She choked on a sob. "You know, if it weren't for the fact that I had Jamie with me that day, I almost wish... that I had been there with them. Ginny should have been here with James instead... Then you would still have her, and I'd be with Ron."

"Don't say that, Hermione, don't," Harry exclaimed, spinning her around and hugging her.

"I still miss him so much, Harry. He would have been twenty-five today." She sobbed on Harry's shoulder, holding on to him like a lifeline.

"Oh, no. Aww... baby! It's Ron's birthday today, and I forgot. Oh, gods, Hermione, I'm so sorry." Pulling her over to the sofa, he sat next to her and held her close.

"I want him back, Harry. I want him back. And Ginny and Molly and Arthur and Percy. I want them all back. I want our lives back." Hermione cried in his arms, as if her heart were breaking all over again.

"I hate them! I *hate* the fucking Lestranges! And then, when I saw Malfoy here tonight, I hated him too. I couldn't help but think that he was just like them: a hateful, vicious, pure-blooded monster."

"Shhh..." Harry held her and let her cry out her grief and anger; he shed a few tears himself in the process. "I can understand why you felt that way, but he's not a monster. I never thought I'd see the day I'd be defending a Malfoy, but he's not like that anymore. Maybe he was once, but the things that happened during the war and afterward changed him. I got to know him and Draco a bit through my friendship with Cissy. While I don't consider Lucius a close friend, I do know that he's different now."

"I realize that too now. I saw him when he was leaving; he was talking to Mrs. Black's portrait. He was telling her about how her niece had died. He loved her, Harry. He loved Narcissa. He was crying, and I really felt bad for the things I'd said earlier. It seems the Malfoys have had no kindness from the Lestranges either."

"No, for all that, they were supposed to be family. I saw what that curse did to Cissy. To think that her own sister would do something like that is horrible. You're right, he loved his wife very much. That much was apparent when I saw them together. I think realizing the danger he put his family in has made him rethink the things he grew up believing."

Hermione sniffled and pulled a tissue out of her pocket. Along with it came the scrap of parchment Kingsley had given her earlier. After wiping her eyes and loudly blowing her nose, she looked at the parchment. "This isn't Kingsley's handwriting."

"Don't get upset, Hermione. He was hoping you would agree to allow Lucius to consult on your project; that's why he was here tonight. I know he should have talked to you first, but he's so excited about your ideas that he just wanted to forge ahead. He really thinks that you're onto something that could make a massive difference to the entire wizarding world; he believes in you, Hermione. The reason he asked Lucius here is, according to Kingsley, he's an Arithmantic whiz, a lot like you. I didn't know this myself until tonight, but they were friends at Hogwarts, and did you know that Kingsley was in Hufflepuff?"

"Kingsley? No, it doesn't surprise me, though; he's one of the most loyal, fair, hard-working guys I know. Now the fact that he and Malfoy were friends, that surprises me."

"Yeah, me too. It must have been really hard for Kingsley during the war. I think he's hoping that this project will be a step towards Malfoy's redemption."

Hermione looked at the parchment. "Okay," she said with a sigh. "Let's see what this turns up."

"Fuck! It's cold in here!" Severus exclaimed when he awoke, the blankets pulled up over his head and just the tip of his nose poking out. Reaching over to the bedside table, he grabbed his wand and cast a warming charm. It was warmer under the covers, but the room was still freezing; the fire in the wood stove had obviously gone out during the night. Recasting a stronger warming charm, he threw back the blankets and scrambled to get his clothes on before the charm dissipated. He would definitely need to re-evaluate his habit of sleeping in the nude. Going into the main room, he tossed some logs into the stove and used his magic to get them started. *Thank Merlin for magic*, he thought. *If I had to wait for it to get going naturally, I'd be freezing my arse off.*

Severus decided to hold off on a morning shower until the cabin had warmed sufficiently. He went about fixing a pot of coffee and started a breakfast of eggs, bacon and toast. By the time he was ready to eat, it was once again comfortably warm in his humble abode.

By midmorning he had things squared away. All of his personal belongings, which he had stored shrunken down in large box, had been restored to size and put away about the cabin. He was going to be here for at least a month and quite possibly longer, so he would be more comfortable with his books and things about him.

Judging by how cold it had gotten the night before, he figured that the spring thaw was a few weeks away yet, which would give him time to locate the most likely spots for the Spiralhorn sprouts to grow. The sprouts themselves were practically mythical. It was said they grew only in certain areas in the far northern regions of North America, possibly some parts of the continental United States and most likely Alaska but definitely in Canada. His research had led him to this place in Ontario; he hoped it was right.

He'd read of it in a journal of a Potions master who had traveled here and lived among the Indian tribes during the last century.

The sprouts shot out of the soil at first thawing and had the appearance of a twisted horn, much like a unicorn horn. They needed to be harvested within days of sprouting, preferably by moonlight, or they would lose all of their potency. The plant was also known as the miracle plant, and when brewed in certain potions, it was said to heal the gravest illness, to bring people back from the very brink of death. It certainly would be a very handy ingredient to have in stock.

He only wished he had learned of it earlier; he might have been able to save Narcissa from her sister's curse. He regretted that with all his heart. The Malfoys had been his friends for a very long time, and if not for their help, he would never have survived the war. There were very few people in this world that he gave a damn about; but he was determined that in the future, if someone he cared for was in need, he would be in a position to make a difference.

tbc

Four

Chapter 4 of 12

It's seven years after the end of the war and Voldemort's fall; the wizarding world is in shambles. Hermione uses Arithmancy to figure out that a new triad needs to be formed to restore balance to the wizarding world.

A Balance of Three

Chap 4

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter. I make no money here.

AN: This story was written for the 2010 ss/hg_exchange as a gift for lady_karelia. Many thanks to my wonderful betas, dreamy_dragon73 and Clairvoyant.

The next day, Art brought his sister to meet Severus. If they were at all curious about how Severus had got all of his books and belongings to the cabin, they didn't ask. Art's sister looked as ancient as he; her name was Little Anne. She was a short round woman with a big smile. She had a giggle like a little girl and appeared to find Severus amusing. It seemed she preferred the old ways and usually refused to speak English most of the time, although she understood it well.

Art explained his sister's idiosyncrasies. "When we were young, the government decided that the Indian children should go to school to learn things the 'right' way, but there was no school in our town. So, all the children were required to go away to school, and we had to live there. The school was run by the church, and the nuns there did not like Little Anne much because she did not want to learn their ways. She liked the Anishinaabe ways, and she told the nuns so. That was her mistake," said Art with a sigh.

"A bit of a rebel then, our Little Anne," suggested Severus while arching one eyebrow questioningly.

"Yes, indeed," agreed Art with a laugh. "I tried to tell her: just pretend to follow their ways, then believe what you want. But Little Anne would not. She said she would not deny her gods. She told the nuns that they could worship the great Jesus and that was fine with her, but for herself she would keep the old ways. Her gods were of the earth and the sky: the sun, the moon, the stars, the air, the water, the forests and their plants and animals, too. This angered the nuns, and they were mean to Little Anne."

"Mean to her? What did they do?" Severus asked grimly.

"They tried to make an example of her. They punished her by giving her whacks with a leather strap, or a paddle in front of the whole school. Then, they locked her up in a dark closet. They kept her there for days. They only let her out to go the bathroom twice a day and made her eat on the floor in the closet. But my Little Anne, she was a stubborn girl, and still she would not change for them.

"Then, strange things started happening. The closet door would unlock itself for Little Anne. No matter how many times they locked it, or how many locks they used; as soon as they left the office, the door would swing wide, and she was free. One day, when they tried to spank her, the nun swung the paddle, but when it hit Little Anne, the nun's wrist snapped and broke. The next one who tried to hit her fell and hurt her knee. They quit trying to punish her after that. They sent her home, saying she was a bad influence on the rest of the children, but I think they were afraid of her, although they would not admit it. They thought they were punishing her, but Little Anne was happy. She has lived by the old ways. And in protest, ever since she came home from there, she speaks Anishinaabemowin instead of English almost always."

"That is disgraceful that they treated her so," protested Severus. "I was a teacher for many years. Most of my pupils didn't like me very much. I was very strict, and my teaching methods were rigid, but I always tried to protect them."

Little Anne had sat quietly throughout her brother's tale, nodding occasionally in agreement. She now said something quietly to Art. He translated for Severus, "My sister thinks you were not like the nuns."

"Thank you, Little Anne. However, I'm sure my former students would disagree with you."

She spoke again quietly to her brother and he stated, "She says that she likes you. And Little Anne does not like many outsiders. Truthfully, when I brought her here today, I feared that she would refuse to help you at all. But she says she will teach you what she can of the old ways."

Little Anne said something and Art laughed. "She says that you remind her of the migizi, the eagle, with your black hair, fine like feathers, and your nose like the beak of an eagle."

Severus chuckled. "An eagle, hey? Well, I've been called much worse, believe me."

Little Anne said something to Art, who shook his head and argued with his sister for a moment before capitulating and translated her question for Severus.

"She asks if you are a shape shifter?"

"A what?" asked Severus cautiously. He was startled by her question.

"A shape shifter is a human who can take the shape of an animal. Most outsiders do not believe these tales. They think they are myths and stories told by ignorant Indians, but the Anishinaabe know that these things are real."

Severus considered his reply before answering, not wanting to offend the pair. Then he admitted, "No, I am not a shape shifter. But I have known people who are. I have a very good friend back in Scotland who is one."

"Really?" Art asked in surprise. "It is uncommon for someone like you, an outsider, I mean, to admit that. What is your friend's form?"

"She becomes a cat."

Little Anne grunted and commented.

"She says an eagle would be better because then you could fly, but maybe a cat is not so bad. They are very stealthy and good hunters," Art explained.

Severus smiled thinking of Minerva. "Yes, she can be very stealthy."

Little Anne stepped forward and, laying her hand on Severus' cheek, gently turned his face so she could look into his eyes. Shocked, he felt the invasion of her mind in his. As one of the best Occlumens in Britain, he had withstood Legilimency by Voldemort himself, yet this tiny Indian woman rifled through his mind like the pages of a book.

"If you do not shift shape, how do you fly?" Little Anne asked innocently.

Art looked shocked. Severus didn't know if it was due to his sister's actions, or because she had spoken to Severus in English.

"Little Anne, what have you done?" gasped Art.

"He is not like the other outsiders, brother. He is the animikii, the thunderbird. He says he does not shape shift, but I have seen his mind, his memories. He flies like the eagle. He has battled a snake-man. He is one of the chosen ones."

Art turned to Severus, his eyes wide; he appeared to be shocked by his sister's revelations. Finally, he tried to explain, "We believe that some people are chosen by the gods to have special powers. We have spoken of the shape shifters, but there are many other kinds of powers. Little Anne is a chosen one; she can see into people's minds and knows things about them. She is also a powerful healer, a midewikwe or a medicine woman. I have special gifts with animals, and I am also a good mediator among people. It makes me a good choice to lead the tribal council."

Severus considered his response carefully before confessing, but finally decided, *what the hell*, Little Anne and Art clearly were magical. While they had not been trained in the conventional ways of witchcraft, they weren't normal Muggles; of that he was positive. So, he explained as best he could about his life of witches and wizards and the difference between them and Muggles. He showed them his wand and demonstrated a few simple spells: first, *Lumos*, and then he levitated a book off the table. He told them about being a Potions master and why he had come there, hoping to find the rare Spiralhorn sprouts; he described them and even showed them a sketch from the journal he had found.

The brother and sister were fascinated by his use of magic and the idea that it was concentrated and focused by the use of his wand. They were surprised to learn that in his world, the chosen ones lived in a completely separate society. In their world magical and non-magical people of the tribe lived side by side in harmony.

Little Anne knew a great deal about the local native plants. She didn't recognize the one that Severus was seeking, but she had heard stories of such a plant. She did, however, agree that she would teach Severus what she did know about herbal healing in return for an exchange of knowledge. Severus felt that the exchange was more than fair, and he was encouraged by their accord.

Before they left, Severus made sure to have Art show him how to set the wood-stove up so he would not wake up freezing in the morning. He learned that he had been leaving the damper wide open. The fire burned hot and fast, but most of the heat was going up the chimney, and the logs burned away long before morning. Hopefully, waking up tomorrow would be a bit better. Severus found it a bit ironic after all their discussion of magic to find that there were some things that it couldn't control, things that were still best done the Muggle way.

~

Hermione had plugged the runes into her formula. Runes that, she now figured, had probably come from Lucius Malfoy; or at the very least Kingsley and Malfoy had collaborated on them. The results seemed undeniable. It was a positive factor, however, it was inconclusive; it needed more. She knew that what was needed were sets of numbers, which would identify the missing two-thirds of the triad.

She'd been working on it since early morning. Unable to sleep, she'd come stumbling down the stairs, calling to Kreacher for coffee at six o'clock. It was nine when the fireplace flared, and Kingsley's face appeared.

"Hermione, may I come by in a bit, so we can have a talk?"

Hermione sighed. She couldn't stay angry at Kingsley forever. He was, after all, giving her what she wanted the most: the chance to prove her theory.

"Yes, that's fine and, Kingsley..."

"Yes, Hermione?"

"I'm sorry for yesterday. I'd like to apologize for taking my anger out on both you and your friend... er, Malfoy."

The Minister cleared his throat. "I spoke with Harry this morning, sweetheart. I'm sorry none of us realized it was Ron's birthday. I know it must have been a rough day for you."

She smiled tightly. "Not your problem, Kingsley, but thanks for that." Quickly changing the subject, she continued, "Oh, hey, these runes you gave me are a positive factor, but I'm going to need the numeric series that go along with them. For some reason I think you already know what it is, or if not you, then Malfoy does."

Kingsley chuckled. "I'll see what I can do. I'll see you in an hour or so."

~

True to his word, he showed up an hour later almost to the minute. Kreacher let him in and went to fetch some tea and snacks. Kingsley entered Hermione's study to find her absent. He took a seat in one of the comfortable chairs in front of the fireplace, but within a few minutes he could hear squeals of laughter from down the hall. Curious, he slipped down the hallway and gently pushed the door open a crack to see James and Hermione hard at play.

They had made a fort of tents by draping blankets and sheets over the furniture and were now sitting atop the back of the sofa which apparently was a dragon that they had just used to escape from Gringotts. Pretending to jump off the dragon, Hermione wrapped her arms around the little boy and rolled off the back of the sofa onto the seat and from there onto the floor. Landing in a heap with James sitting on top of her stomach, giggling as he tried to tickle her, Hermione laughed and began to tickle the little boy right back.

Finally, rolling beside her, James patted her cheek and asked, "Did you really ride a dragon, Aunt Mymee?"

"Oh, yes, Jamie. That's a true story. Your daddy, Uncle Ron and I, we flew away on the back of that dragon. The boys liked it very much but I didn't. I don't really like to fly; I was very frightened that day."

"I wouldn't be scared," the little boy bragged. "I want to fly on a dragon someday."

"Well, perhaps your daddy can take you to visit Uncle Charlie in Romania some day. I don't think you can fly on one of his dragons, but you would be able to see them. That would be exciting, wouldn't it?"

"I don't wanna just watch dragons at the 'purrserv'; I wanna have 'ventures like my daddy and you and Uncle Ron did."

"Oh, Jamie, my love. They didn't seem like adventures to us at the time. Kreachter makes them all sound like grand fun, but, sweetie, it wasn't. Most of the time it was really scary, and we made it through more by luck than anything else. I hope you never have to face the things your daddy had to face. I hope you can just grow up doing the kinds of things normal little boys do. Do you know, I think your daddy would have liked that kind of childhood so much better than the one he had. I know I would have."

Kingsley quietly closed the door and returned to Hermione's study to wait. Even though she would be twenty-six on her next birthday, she'd seemed like little more than a child herself playing with James. Her words had given him pause. He wondered, *Are we asking too much of her? Do we even have the right to make such a request? Her childhood was already stolen from her, and now we expect her to make a choice that will unequivocally alter the rest of her life.*

Here was a girl who had sacrificed her entire youth to the cause of saving the wizarding world from Voldemort: at only thirteen years of age, petrified by a Basilisk; wounded in a battle in the Department of Mysteries when she was sixteen; on the run with Harry and Ron at eighteen, searching for Horcruxes; a war heroine at nineteen. Then, with the war won and their futures ahead of them, bright and shiny with hope, her happily-ever-after was brutally snatched away from her on her own twenty-second birthday. Kingsley sighed; sometimes he really hated his job.

~

A short time later, Hermione joined him, apologizing for her tardiness.

"It's all right; I peeked in and saw you playing with James," he admitted. "He's a great kid. Harry's really lucky to have him."

"Yeah, he is," she agreed wistfully, thinking of the children she and Ron had dreamed of having someday. "But down to business then. Those Runes were spot on, as I'm sure you already know. I do hope there's more information like that coming."

"That's precisely what I wanted to talk to you about, sweetheart. I've brought a set of numbers for you to play around with. Try matching them to the runes you already have and see what you think." He handed her a slip of parchment that she glanced at before placing it with the rest of her work.

"Hermione, I would really like for you and Lucius to work together on this. As much as I love Arithmancy, I have to admit I'm nowhere near the skill level both of you are. I could be a go-between for the two of you, but I honestly think that you would get so much more accomplished if you could work as a team."

Hermione looked doubtful. "I don't know, Kingsley. This *is* Lucius Malfoy we're talking about after all. I know that you two were friends years ago, but still..."

"He's not the same man you remember, Hermione. I swear that to you. I'm not making excuses for him, please believe that, but I do know that his family was *the* most important thing in the world to him: more important than all his family fortune, more than his pure-blood principles. He would have done anything to protect Narcissa and Draco. I'm sure that he did many of the things he did in an effort to keep them safe."

"Maybe later in the war. But in the beginning? Are you trying to say he didn't join Voldemort willingly the first time around?" She sounded disbelieving.

Kingsley took his time before finally offering his opinion to Hermione. "I think he and many others were a product of generations of pure-blood conditioning. Many of the pure-blood families, the Malfoys included, were actually around during the time of the Inquisition, the witch hunts; those stories were passed down from one generation to the next. As a child, it was drummed into him that Muggles were a threat to the wizarding world and the burning times could return; he was taught that Muggle-borns were something abnormal and unnatural. When Voldemort came along, he re-enforced all these things that the pure-bloods had been taught, and he fed on their fears. I'm certainly not justifying anything they did, Hermione, but if you honestly analyze it, you can see how they were enticed to join him. He promised them all the glory of the perfect pure-blood race, to protect the old ways and prevent Muggles from bringing harm to the wizarding world.

"Lucius might have joined willingly; I won't deny that, but I believe he didn't have any idea of the methods that Voldemort planned to use to achieve his goals. And I'm not saying that everyone on their side was an innocent dupe either. There were a great many truly evil, vile, vicious people on the Death Eaters' side, but there were also people who just got sucked into the maelstrom and simply could see no way out."

Hermione sat and considered everything Kingsley had just said. She didn't really want to give Malfoy a chance. She wanted to dislike him, to blame him for his poor life choices. She didn't want to think of Draco and Lucius as victims of their upbringing. But she did know that he had loved his wife dearly. She also knew that his only concern during the final battle at Hogwarts had been to find his son and keep him safe, not to help Voldemort win.

"Damn you, Kingsley," she grumbled. "I don't want to think rationally about Lucius Malfoy. I want to just continue to hate him blindly."

"But you won't. Because then you'd be no better than they were. Wouldn't you?" he said gently with a knowing smile.

"You bastard," she accused him good-naturedly. "All right then, send him over tomorrow, and we'll review what we've already got. But I swear, Kingsley, if I hear the word Mudblood out of his mouth one time...even one single time...I'm going to hex him to kingdom come!"

"I'll make sure he's duly warned, sweetheart."

tbc

AN: I just want to mention that many of the things I have written of the Anishinaabe, which means The People or original people (also known as the Ojibwe or Chippewa), are true.

* At one point in history, there were Indian schools, and children were often sent far away from their families to be educated "properly." Sadly, there were also documented cases of abuse in some of these schools.

* The legend of the shape shifter is present in many cultures, including the Anishinaabe. The best known shape shifter is *Nanabozho*. He most often appears in the shape of a rabbit and is characterized as a trickster. He is able to take other shapes as well.

* The eagle is a sacred bird and is believed to be a messenger of the Great Spirit. The eagle is a symbol of truth, power and freedom. Eagle feathers are sacred. When one receives an eagle feather, that person is being acknowledged with gratitude, love and ultimate respect. To be given an eagle feather is the highest honor that can be awarded within aboriginal cultures.

* They have powerful healers. A male practitioner is called a *midewinini* ("midew man") which sometimes is translated into English as either "shaman" or "medicine man," and a female practitioner is a *midewikwe* ("midew woman").

I have also created things that are purely fictional, such as the chosen ones. In my pretend world, unlike Harry Potter's world, amongst the Anishinaabe the magical and non-magical folks live side by side, but the magical folks are known as the chosen ones. (I kind of like the concept of them co-existing rather than being separated).

The Spiralhorn sprouts are purely my imagination as well. :)

Five

Chapter 5 of 12

It's seven years after the end of the war and Voldemort's fall; the wizarding world is in shambles. Hermione uses Arithmancy to figure out that a new triad needs to be formed to restore balance to the wizarding world.

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter. I make no money here.

AN: This story was written for the 2010 ss/hg_exchange as a gift for lady_karelia. Many thanks to my wonderful betas, dreamy_dragon73 and Clairvoyant.

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The next morning when Severus woke up, it was chilly in the cabin, but at least he wasn't freezing. He threw a couple of logs onto the still glowing embers in the stove and in a few minutes had a blazing fire again. He'd planned to go out and hike around the area to check for likely spots for the Spiralhorn sprout to grow. Upon opening the door, however, he discovered nine inches of fresh snow accumulated just off his porch and more coming down. Well, it looked like spring was not coming today, or any day soon.

He'd just assumed that this part of Canada was roughly about the same latitude as Scotland, so he'd expected similar weather patterns, but apparently that was not true. He'd also thought that a snow storm would involve howling winds and bitter cold. Although, yes, it was cold; it wasn't really bad, or maybe he was just getting used to it. There was no wind at all, in fact it was completely silent, so much so that he swore he could hear the sound of the snow falling. It was so quiet, so beautiful. He just stood and observed for several minutes in awe of nature before returning inside for a second cup of coffee. That would teach him for not researching things, like climate patterns, a bit more thoroughly.

A few hours later, with another two inches of snow on the ground, he heard a strange high pitched sound coming from the distance. As he listened, the sound got closer and closer. Looking outside, he soon realized that three Snowmobiles were approaching. Art and two of his grandsons were on them, plus they were towing sleds with petrol cans, equipment and Little Anne in one of them.

Severus opened the door and was greeted by Art. "I hope we aren't disturbing you, Severus," he said. "I brought the boys out to split some more wood and stack it, so you will have plenty of firewood. And we brought out extra gas for the generator."

"Thank you. I appreciate your help. Come in, come in, Art, Little Anne. Would you like some coffee or a cup of tea?" he asked. Then, looking over Art's shoulder at the young men preparing to split wood from the woodpile, he asked, "Would your grandsons like something?"

"Thank you, tea would be good for us. The boys are fine; they brought a thermos of coffee. After I warm up, and when the boys are done chopping wood, I thought we might go down to the lake and try to catch some fish to share for supper. It would give you time to talk with Little Anne about your medicine plants and such."

So, Severus and Little Anne spent the next few hours discussing various plants and herbs and their uses in healing. Little Anne showed him her medicine bag, which held not only medicinal plants and herbs but also many other small items of special meaning to her which she explained to him: a smooth round stone...as a child she had picked it up on the shores of Lake Superior while on a trip with her family...that had odd markings and she called it a Petoskey Stone; another stone, rough looking and pale pink, almost translucent, was rose quartz; a small piece of raw copper from the mines in Northern Michigan where her grandfather had lived; a heavy silver ring that had belonged to her great-great-grandmother; a large claw from a black bear; several different feathers from a blue jay, a crow, a loon, a swan and two eagle feathers.

Stroking one of the eagle feathers, she stared at Severus solemnly for a moment before holding it out to him. "The eagle is a sacred bird, a powerful totem. His feathers carry strong magic. This magic is a gift he gives to whoever finds them. I give this to you because you are migiziinini, eagle man: you are a powerful shaman of your people."

Severus hesitated briefly before accepting her gift, realizing what a generous offering it was, as she clearly treasured these items dearly. Taking it gently from her fingers he stroked it reverently. "Thank you, Little Anne. I am honored. Will you accept a gift from me as well?"

The old woman nodded. Severus went to the bedroom and returned with a worn wooden box. Opening the clasp, he rifled through the contents. Finally finding what he'd been looking for, he held it out to her, a small flat rock. Turning it over, he showed her that on the back side was the perfect spiral shape of a shell forever preserved in the stone. "I found this when I was a child near the place where I grew up. It is a fossil from some ancient time. I found it fascinating, so I kept it all these years. I would like to give it to you. A gift from me from far away."

"Thank you, Severus, migizi. I will keep it and treasure it. It is very old; I can feel it. It reminds you of your childhood, your home; that is why you have kept it all of these years in your medicine box."

He smiled. In essence it was just as her medicine bag; things he had carried with him for years, items that all held special meaning only for him.

"May I look at your things?"

At his nod of approval, she carefully leafed through the box. There were several packets of dried herbs, some bruise balm and burn balm, a small shriveled brown stone and a few standard potions. She also found: a group of papers including his Hogwarts letter, his O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. results and his Potions master's certification; a cameo brooch that had been his grandmother Snape's; a ruby ring that had come from the Prince side; a small crystal vial of clear liquid; a Phoenix feather from Fawkes; a fine quill he had never used because it was the last gift he had ever received from Dumbledore; a photo of him and Lily on platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ before boarding the Hogwarts Express for the very first time; and a picture torn in half, showing a much older Lily Evans Potter.

"She was a pretty girl, a pretty woman. You... cared for her?"

Severus took the last photo from her and looked at it, surprisingly feeling no pain. "Once, I did, yes. But she chose another. She's been gone for a long time now."

"It was not your fault, migizi. You could not have stopped him, or what was going to happen. The snake-man had control then. But now you are free. Free from both him and the gray-beard. Now, you must find the strength to make your own way in life, your own future," she advised gently, squeezing his hand.

He looked into her face. "How do you know these things?"

"I am a chosen one, migizi. Or as you would say," she explained with a small smile, "it's magic."

Hermione was surprised how smoothly the first afternoon working with Lucius Malfoy had gone. He had arrived just after lunchtime. They had spent hours discussing and reviewing Arithmantic theories and going over her original formulas. Even though she'd been told about his aptitude for the subject, she was still amazed at his knowledge.

Lucius was on his best behavior and was actually quite pleasant and charming. After about the tenth time she had called him Mr. Malfoy, he'd insisted she call him Lucius. He told her that if they were going to be partners on this project, then she could at least call him by his first name. Feeling it would be rude not to offer the same, she gave him leave to call her Hermione.

After the first afternoon, they began working together on a daily basis. He would come to Grimmauld Place about ten o'clock and they would work until five o'clock, taking a short break for lunch around one o'clock.

After three days working together, Hermione revealed a new theory she had developed. "I've been researching some of the sources from Kingsley, regarding previous triads and running speculative formulations. I think that besides the house affiliation I've found another parameter for the triad. I believe it has to be balanced by bloodlines as well, one pure-blood, one half-blood and one Muggle-born. But what are the odds of finding a half-blood in Slytherin? Not too likely, I'd think," declared Hermione.

"A moderately rare occurrence. But it has been known to happen, more often than you might think in fact. Your theory does make sense, though," Lucius admitted. "After all, a lot of the woes we're facing now stem from the divisions created during Voldemort's rise to power. To solve this, to reach a balance, what better way than for the triad to be formed by a Muggle-born, a half-blood and a pure-blood?"

"But it would make more sense if the combination were two Gryffindors and one Slytherin instead of two Slytherins and one Gryffindor. We'd be more likely to find a half-blood in Gryffindor than in Slytherin; what are the odds in that?"

The following day, after doing a bit of further research, she learned that surprisingly enough, as Lucius had hinted, there were more half-bloods in Slytherin than she had originally thought possible. It seemed that most who were sorted into that house who were not pure-blooded had known enough to keep their bloodlines to themselves back then. Very Slytherin of them. She had toyed with several matches, but none of them seemed to fit the bill.

"I guess we will need to get our hands on the Hogwarts enrollment records," suggested Hermione after the fourth unsuccessful run through of a random half-blood Slytherin into the equation.

"That might not be necessary," replied Lucius, handing her a slip of paper with another series of numbers. "I believe these might be what you've been looking for."

Hermione looked at the numbers. "0-9-0-1-1-9-6-0. So, you obviously know who this series indicates. Who is it?"

"I've actually been thinking for a while...honestly, since the very beginning...that this might be the right match, but it seemed so unlikely I've been avoiding bringing it up. Before I give you a name, I'd rather have you run them through the equations, so you can see for yourself how strong the match is. Then, we can discuss the who and pair it with Tiwaz and Algiz."

Hermione gave him a suspicious look, but proceeded to do as he asked. Just as she had expected, the numerals blended perfectly with the rest of the formulation. By the time it reached the end point, the entire process had worked just like clockwork.

Her hands shook as she studied the results. It was complete, and the results indicated a 98.9% three-way match for fulfilling the triad they were looking for. She licked her lips before biting her bottom one in nervous frustration.

"You know who *both* of these are, don't you? This one and the sequence that Kingsley gave me. You're a Slytherin; who would know better than you? And you're also an Arithmancy expert. You're the one who gave the first set of runes and numbers to Kingsley, aren't you?"

"Actually, *he* figured it out when he saw your work. He worked through it on his own, and he came up with that first set of numbers. After he saw the results and realized what a strong match it was, that's when he came to me; I suggested adding the runes to make it more accurate."

Lucius was looking uncomfortable, almost guilty.

Hermione stood before him as he attempted to avoid her gaze. She bunched the front of his robes in her fists and forced him to look at her. "You know who they are... Tell me," she insisted.

"The first one, the numbers Kingsley first discovered, the pure-blood... It's me."

"3-1-0-5-1-9-5-4. That's *your* birthday then, 31 May, 1954. And Fehu: wealth; it indicates financial strength, hope and plenty, success. Othala: ancestral property, land of birth, inherited property or possessions, what is truly important to one, group prosperity. Those things couldn't spell out Malfoy and pure-blood any stronger if we wrote it in flashing neon lights."

He gave a puzzled look at her Muggle reference. With her fists still clenched in his robes, she leaned her forehead against his chest for just a moment. He raised his hands as if to embrace her, or offer her comfort, but then hesitated. She shoved away from him and stalked to the window, staring out but not really seeing what was there.

"Who is the other?" she demanded, turning to face him.

He hesitated, unsure if he dared reveal it to her. Damn it, Shackbolt should have been here for this.

"Severus Snape," he answered finally.

It was her turn to look confused. "Professor Snape? But that's impossible: he's dead. He's been dead for seven years."

"Not dead, just gone from England."

"No...dead. I was there. I. Saw. Him. Die." She stated it slowly and clearly as if he were unable to comprehend her words.

"No. You saw him being attacked by Nagini. You saw him give his memories to Potter. You saw an extreme amount of blood. But you didn't see him die. Did you even think to check for a pulse?"

"Oh, dear Merlin. He wasn't dead? And we just left him there..." Her knees wouldn't support her. Before they buckled, he grabbed her and lowered her to a chair instead.

"I went back for him, stopped the bleeding as best I could and Portkeyed him away. I sent him to one of my estates in France where he was cared for. After he recovered, he decided there was really no reason for him to return to Britain. He's been gallivanting around the world ever since."

"Tiwaz and Algiz," she muttered. Then, looking up at him, she translated, as if he didn't already know. "Tiwaz: the sky god. It means: honor, justice, leadership and authority; knowing where one's true strengths lie; willingness to sacrifice oneself. And Algiz: protection, a shield; the protective urge to shelter oneself or others; defense, warding off evil, a guardian. That's him exactly, isn't it? All those years, and everything he sacrificed, spying for Dumbledore, and he always tried to protect us...always."

"The runes for me, then. Sowilo, the sun: success, goals achieved, honor, life-force, health, power for positive changes, victory. And Berkano, the birch goddess: birth, fertility, regenerative power, renewal, new beginnings, new growth, the prospering of an enterprise or venture."

"It is him, then. And you, too. Us, as the triad. And all the traits of the runes are things we'll need to carry it through. I can't believe this." She looked stunned.

"Hermione, I don't know what to say. I wanted Kingsley to tell you all this, to prepare you. But he and Potter felt you needed more time to assimilate all of the information."

"HARRY! Harry knew about this too?" She looked shocked, then hurt.

Before he could stop her, try to explain things to her, she was up and out of the door. He heard the door slam and knew that before he could catch up she would already have Apparated to Medusa-knew-where, probably to confront Kingsley, or most likely Potter. "This is not how it was supposed to happen," he muttered aloud. "If only you would listen to me when it really counts, Kings, you utter idiot."

~

Not knowing where to find Hermione, or what else to do, Lucius had gone home, but he'd left a message with Kreacher to tell her to contact him when she was ready to talk about the project. He was surprised later that night to get a Floo call from a worried Potter who didn't know where Hermione was. Lucius explained what had happened, but could offer no other suggestions as to her whereabouts. He was even more surprised when Tillie, his head house-elf, popped into his study and announced that there was a cold, wet, bedraggled Missy at the door, asking to talk to him.

Curious, Lucius hurried to the front door to find a soaking wet Hermione standing in his foyer.

"Hermione, for Merlin's sake, what happened to you?"

She looked a bit bewildered, as if she couldn't quite figure out why she'd come to Malfoy Manor. "I was so upset this afternoon when I left. I just wandered around London for the rest of the day... thinking. Then, it started to rain, but I didn't want to go home to Grimmauld Place. I ended up sitting on a park bench, but then it started to get dark. I just couldn't go home yet." She shivered, and her teeth started to chatter a bit.

"You're soaked to the skin, you silly woman. Come in and get warm."

"No, I'm all wet," she said, stating the obvious.

"That's what I'm trying to tell you." He tried to lead her into the study.

"No, I mean I'll drip all over your fine rugs, ruin your furniture," she protested.

"Bugger the rugs! We need to get you dried off and warmed up. What were you thinking? You're a witch. Did you forget that? Why didn't you Transfigure something into an umbrella, cast a drying spell... something... anything?"

"I don't know," she cried. "I wasn't thinking. I've just been trying to figure it all out."

In a conciliatory tone, he convinced her to come by the fire to get warm. Once there, he cast drying charms and conjured a warm blanket to wrap around her and called Tillie to bring some tea.

Once she'd warmed enough to speak, she turned to Lucius. "There's more to it, isn't there? Something extreme, I know there must be. If it were just having to work with you and Professor Snape, Harry and Kingsley wouldn't have kept it from me. I might not like the idea but it's not *that* upsetting.

"What does Professor Snape think of the whole thing? He never liked me very much, you know?"

"He doesn't know yet. We haven't been able to find him."

"You can't find him!" Hermione exclaimed. "What do you mean? I thought you must have kept in touch with him; aren't you still friends?"

"Yes, but as I said earlier, he's never come back to England. Once he realized he had his freedom to do anything he ever wanted, he decided he wanted to see the world. He's spent the last seven years after his recovery traveling to different places, studying magical practices and cultures, searching out the rarest of potions ingredients.

"The last time I actually visited him, he was living in the Amazon rain forest amongst a magical native tribe there. Since then, he's moved on and was studying the Mayan cultures in Central America. The last time he wrote, he'd just discovered an old journal by a Potions master who claimed to have discovered one of the rarest ingredients ever recorded. Severus was most excited to seek it out. The problem is he didn't say where he was going. It could be anywhere in the world."

"So we don't even know if he would agree to this whole thing; it could all be a moot point," she declared.

"Oh, there is little doubt in my mind that once he has a chance to consider it, he won't turn down the opportunity."

Hermione eyed Lucius suspiciously. "You do know something. Obviously, there's more to it than just working on a project with two Slytherins that happen to be you and Professor Snape. As I said earlier, if that were all then I don't think Harry would have been unwilling to tell me. Or Kingsley either. There must be something more. Please, Lucius. You know, I know you do. Tell me what it is," she pleaded.

He sighed, not quite knowing how to approach it. "Let me ask you a question first. How exactly do you see this whole thing proceeding? Why must there be a triad, and how do you think it might work?"

"Well..." she began slowly. "I suppose that now that we've identified the prime candidates for the triad, we would have to work together to find the answers we seek. Each of us using our strongest skills. Obviously, you and I are very strong in Arithmancy. I'm strong in charms as well. The professor in potions and defense. I'm sure you have other areas you excel in besides the Dar..." she stopped suddenly, looking a bit embarrassed.

"Besides the Dark Arts." He completed her sentence. "Yes, I do have other skills; but like Severus or anyone who has advanced knowledge of the Dark Arts, it gives us an edge at defense. I also have a very strong background in Ancient Runes, and I'm not half bad at Transfiguration either."

"See, that could all be helpful. We have no idea what skills we might need," she said approvingly. "I am very good at research. So I assumed we would have to find a particular spell, or perhaps a ritual, probably something ancient. Once we've found it and studied it, then we'd have to carry it out. That's how I envision it all working out."

Lucius swallowed, unsure how to tell her the truth. "Well, you are on somewhat the right track. It does involve a ritual in fact. And indeed it is a most ancient practice..."

"Oh, for fuck's sake! If you know what it is, just tell me!"

He cleared his throat. "What do you know of... Tantric rituals?"

tbc

AN: If you are interested in more information on runes, this is the site I used for my interpretations:

<http://www.sunnyway.com/runes/meanings.html>

Six

Chapter 6 of 12

It's seven years after the end of the war and Voldemort's fall; the wizarding world is in shambles. Hermione uses Arithmancy to figure out that a new triad needs to be formed to restore balance to the wizarding world.

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Hermione looked shocked, eyes wide, mouth hanging open, all color drained from her face. Lucius thought for a moment she might faint.

"SEX MAGIC!" she screeched. "This is about sex magic!" She looked appalled.

"Well, you needn't act so revolted. It isn't as though Severus and I are thoroughly disgusting. I know we are both much older than you, but we are both still in quite good shape and..."

"Oh, Harpyshit! It isn't that it's you two in particular; that part could have been worse, much worse, I suppose. I could have ended up paired with Slughorn, or someone like Dumbledore... Ewwww! It's not just that it's you and Snape, although I will admit this is not what I was expecting at all. It's just the whole bloody idea of it. Sex magic indeed!"

"Hermione, Tantric magic is very, very powerful," Lucius explained, trying to take the focus off the sex and emphasize the magic. "The rituals date back to ancient times and can generate tremendous magical energy. It makes sense that something like this could be just the thing to dispel the imbalance of negative energy in our world. And performing the ritual through a triadic relationship would increase its power tenfold, I believe."

Hermione shook her head, and said, "This can't be true. I can't even begin to imagine it." She looked up at him and realization dawned in her eyes. "You've been researching this, then?" At his nod, she continued, "But you can't want this anymore than I do. I know how much you loved Narcissa. Harry said so, and I overheard you talking to Mrs. Black's portrait at Grimmauld Place. I'm not someone you would ever want to be with. In your eyes, I'm just nothing but a lowly Mudbl..."

Lucius held up his hand in protest. "Stop! Do not say it. If I shouldn't say that word, then neither should you. And besides, I no longer hold to the beliefs I was raised with. I know now how false they are. You are a very powerful witch, and any wizard would be grateful to have a chance to be with you. But you are right; that is one of the things that make this commitment so hard. When I married Cissy we both loved each other very much; that's one reason why this is all so difficult."

At the word commitment, Hermione froze, and all the color drained from her face.

"But it's not like it would be forever," Hermione protested. "Right? It would just be completing the ritual, then we could all go our separate ways, get on with our own lives."

Lucius did not agree with her; in fact he looked most uncomfortable.

"That's right, isn't it?" she insisted. "That's all there is to it? Isn't it?" When Lucius still didn't answer, she became even more frightened. "Tell me the truth, Malfoy, damn you! Or by Salazar's saggy bollocks I swear... Arghhh! I am fucking tired of people keeping information from me. Now tell me!"

He acquiesced reluctantly. "We're looking at a very specific Tantric ritual here. Once this ritual is completed, it becomes, in essence, a bonding ceremony. If we do this thing, the three of us, you, Severus and myself will be magically bound to each other. We will be life partners, and nothing known in the wizarding world can sever that sort of binding. It is unbreakable except by death."

Hermione stared at him in horror. "Unbreakable," she whispered in disbelief. "And Harry knew all of this? And Kingsley, too? And they let me go forward with this without telling me that? This changes everything."

"In all fairness, I don't think that Potter knew anything about the binding; he was aware only of the Tantric ritual, and I believe he may possibly have known about Severus being part of the triad. Kingsley, however, knows everything. You should be aware, however, that when he first came to me he knew that you did not want to be a member of the triad. He hoped that I might be able to find a suitable substitute. Unfortunately, it is what it is. The magic doesn't want anyone else."

"Hermione, it's not as if anyone can force you to do this. I made that very clear to Kingsley when I explained what my research had revealed. Everyone involved must do so of their own free will. You cannot be coerced into taking part. You do understand that, don't you?"

"Yes, Kingsley and Harry both said that to me. But I think we both know that while in theory we could refuse, in actuality, how would we be able to live with ourselves? If we know that we had the capability to help fix the wizarding world, and we let the opportunity pass us by, it's unthinkable. I just wish if they had known the truth of this all along they would have simply told me instead of keeping me in the dark."

"I'm not sure why. I think they were hoping you would figure it out by yourself. That if you had enough time to come to the realization on your own, it would soften the blow somehow, or make it easier for you to accept. Perhaps, they hoped if you got a chance to know me better, as I am now and not as you knew me in your childhood, then it would also be more acceptable. I really am not sure what they thought, Hermione." He sighed.

Hermione leaned her head against the back of the sofa and stared sightlessly at the ceiling. "I can't believe this is happening to me. To us." Her voice was flat and empty; she looked devastated.

Lucius gently took one of her hands, knowing what a shock this all was to the witch. "Hermione, I know it's not anything you had considered, but would it be so very terrible to end up with Severus and me?"

Hermione turned her head to look at Lucius, and, lifting the hand he wasn't holding, she softly touched his cheek briefly before dropping her hand to her lap. "If you had asked me that question two weeks ago, or even one week ago, I would have said, yes, it was too terrible to consider. But now? Now I'd say no, it's not that horrifying a thought. It's just... it's just..." she stopped and a single tear slid down her face.

"It's just what, Hermione?" Lucius asked.

She heaved a sigh. "It's just that I really loved Ron. A lot of people said we were too different...that we would never work out. That didn't matter to us because we were friends first. We knew each other so well that our differences weren't an issue. He was funny and caring and clever. People didn't think that about Ron, that he was clever, but he was. Not book-smart like you or me, not O.W.L. or N.E.W.T. smart, but he could figure things out when it really mattered, and somehow he always knew just the

right thing to do in a tight spot. Well, except when it came to spiders; he hated spiders. Sorry... I'm rambling, I'm just so nervous. Anyway, he was strong and brave, and we were good together...really, really good."

The tears were falling faster now; she wasn't sobbing, but the tears just wouldn't stop. "And I always thought that some day in the future, somehow, some day I'd get over his death. And then I'd be able to fall in love again, and I'd be able to find what I had with him with someone else. Oh, not the same, it would never be the same, I know that. But still, I thought I'd be able to find love eventually, to be happy again. And now this whole triad thing... if I accept this, then I have to give up the dream of ever having that again. It seems so unfair."

"I know." Lucius threw caution to the winds and pulled Hermione close to him, wrapping an arm around her in comfort.

"Oh, Lucius. I'm so sorry," she said, laying her head against his shoulder. "You more than anyone must understand how I feel. I know that you loved Narcissa as well, and she was taken from you just as tragically. This can't be any easier for you."

"I don't know why it's us, Hermione. Why we were chosen for this, by magic or fate or whatever the hell is pulling all the strings. Maybe it's because we have known true love before. We've that advantage, to have experienced it already. So, maybe it's not as bad for people like us to have to enter into this triad. Unlike someone who's never known love; that would be even more unfair if you'd never got the chance to love someone at all, and then still have to make a lifetime commitment."

"But I don't understand where that leaves Professor Snape in all of this?"

"Well, that shoots that theory all to hell, doesn't it? I don't know where that leaves Severus as the love of his life was an unrequited love. That hardly seems sporting, does it?" Lucius admitted. As his cheek rested against her hair, he sniffed lightly, taking in the scent of her peaches and cream shampoo.

"It certainly doesn't to me. I'm beginning to believe that magic must be a heartless, fucking bitch," replied Hermione, choking on a little sob.

~

Severus had spent the days familiarizing himself with the area around the cabin. Making sure he was able to Apparate back without getting lost in the Great North Woods. He spent each day searching out likely spots for the sprouts to grow. He had no positively conclusive idea where to find them; it was basically hit or miss. Very little was known about them, or whether they even existed in reality. All he really had to go by were mythical tales and the Potion master's journal that he had discovered in an old book shop in Mexico.

According to the journal, in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century the man had lived for several years among the Anishinaabe in the northern part of Ontario, from what he could tell, in roughly the area that Severus was in right now. Of course things had changed a great deal in the last one-hundred years; some settlements were completely gone, and others had moved. According to Kristoff Kettering, the Potions master, the sprouts would appear only for about a week during the spring thaws when the shoots would burst through the soil and grow from nothing to eight to ten-inches long in a mere matter of days. But if they were not harvested by the fifth day after sprouting, they would shrivel and die, not to be seen for another year. The shriveled-up sprouts were useless for potions.

Kettering had indicated that for the most part low, damp areas were not prime territory. They liked to grow best in sunny spots and also seemed to have an affinity for south-facing slopes in areas near hard wood trees but not pines. And yet, after saying all this, he described finding one of largest groups of sprouts he'd ever seen in a low swampy area on a north-facing slope beneath a spruce tree...conflicting information at best.

According to Art and Little Anne, the spring thaws could vary by weeks each year. There was no way to know from one year to the next when it would come. Sometimes it was as early as late March to early April; in other years it could be as late as mid-May. As it was already mid-March, and snow was still heavy on the ground, it looked like spring would be a several weeks away yet.

Little Anne educated Severus on healing ingredients that could be harvested even in winter. Different barks could be brewed to make a tea for headache and pain relief. There were bushes and trees that bore tiny berries that remained on even in winter if the birds had not harvested them all. The berries could be eaten raw or cooked. Pine needles made a tea high in vitamin C that could prevent scurvy, and the bark could be brewed into a cough remedy. She taught him many other things, and Severus found himself enjoying the time he spent with the tiny Indian woman.

In return for the lessons, Severus reciprocated by teaching Little Anne how to make the bruise balm and burn balm he carried in his box. They were made of fairly common ingredients for the most part, and a little research yielded ready substitutes that could be found locally or purchased by mail order for the few ingredients not on hand.

He spent a great deal of time just talking with the old woman. She shared stories of her youth with him. He ended up telling her things about his childhood, youth, and the years leading up to Voldemort's downfall that he had never shared with any living person. She just seemed to lull him into a sense of security wherein he felt safe revealing these things to her. He wondered sometimes if she was using her Anishinaabe form of Legilimency on him, but he couldn't detect it if she was.

Little Anne was fascinated with the idea of Severus flying and asked him often to describe it to her. Severus offered to take her for a short flight, but she merely giggled and declined, saying she was not a migiziikwe, an eagle woman. She would keep her feet on the ground.

~

After discussing their options, the obvious thing to do was to try to locate Severus Snape. Thus, Hermione had bid a tearful goodbye to James and had taken a more somber leave from Harry, as she was still angry with him for withholding information from her. Then she had set out on the quest with Lucius.

He'd arranged a Portkey to Brazil, the last place he had visited Snape. Then they had to secure a local Portkey to take them to the small magical native village deep in the heart of the Amazon rain forest.

No one there had heard from Severus recently, but the elder of the tribe had given them the location where he'd gone in Mexico. Snape's plan had been to study the Mayans amongst several secret magical communities there.

Lucius and Hermione had spent over two weeks searching for traces of Severus' trail. By their calculations that there were no second choices available; if they couldn't find him, then completing the triad was an impossible task. Hermione seemed to be convinced that might inevitably be the case even if they did find him. She kept insisting to Lucius that Professor Snape had never cared for her, and she didn't see this whole triad business changing that anytime soon.

There were Mayan ruins, which were the gateways to hidden magical communities, scattered throughout southern Mexico and parts of Central America. They were able to pick up his trail in Mexico, follow it to Belize, then into Honduras. The trail went cold there for a couple of days, but then they found a clue that he had moved back to a different site in Mexico, from there to Guatemala, and then back to Mexico again.

Hermione was so frustrated. She swore if they did find Severus Snape, she was going to hex his sorry arse so hard he wouldn't think of moving it anywhere else for months.

"What is wrong with the man?" she asked Lucius after an unproductive day of searching for clues as to where Professor Snape might have gone from here. "Why couldn't he just settle down somewhere and make a stable life for himself? Is this how he's lived for the past six years? Just wandering about from place to place with no rhyme or reason?"

Lucius considered her question. "I think it most likely that after being forced to answer to both Riddle and Dumbledore for so many years and then being tied to Hogwarts, this life probably seems like heaven to Severus. The ability to go wherever he wants, whenever he wants, to be able to just pack up and leave on a whim or at the hint of some rare potions ingredient; it spells freedom in a way he's never had before."

Hermione thought about Lucius' theory. "But don't you suppose it must be lonely for him? I mean, yes, he has the freedom to go wherever he wants, but he's all alone. He

has no one to keep him company, to share his finds, or the knowledge that he's gathered."

With a sad half-smile Lucius answered, "He's never really had anyone to share things like that with before. Severus has been essentially alone for nearly all of his life; I suppose he's become rather used to it by now."

~

Hermione later pondered Lucius' statement and found it all very sad. She'd never really considered what Professor Snape's life must have been like before the end of the war other than to assume it must have been horrible. Especially that last year, living amongst former colleagues while having to pretend to be doing Voldemort's bidding and yet trying to protect the students as best he could. He must have felt so alone. It made it seem all the worse to her that he still seemed to be isolating himself now that he actually had got a chance to go out and live.

She moved to the desk in the hotel room to look over her papers. They'd been using Arithmancy in their search, trying help narrow down their choices and decide which direction to go from there. She was soothed by the routine she'd become so accustomed to. With a touch of her wand, the numbers and figures and runes moved together in a magical dance across the page. She could trust the numbers; they didn't lie or withhold information from her. She might not like the answers she got, but at least she knew there was truth in her equations and formulas even if she didn't always understand the results at the time.

"Lucius," she called as she heard him enter the other room. They were renting connecting rooms in a small hotel and for the most part kept the adjoining door open during the day. She had begun to get used to the idea of the triad. While she was not willing to jump into a full-fledged relationship with Lucius at this point, she found the handsome pure-blood quickly growing on her. He was extremely intelligent, witty, amusing, with a dynamic personality and likeable in so many ways she had never imagined possible. He had certainly proven his loyalty by the way he'd taken care of Severus after the war, and she admired that. In truth, when they had embarked on this journey, she had expected to tolerate the man and little more. Instead she found herself drawn to him, against her better judgment.

"Hermione!" He sounded excited. "I've found a lead."

"Really? What is it?" she asked as she hurried to his room, eager to learn what it was.

"Remember that used book shop we saw when we got into town?"

She nodded. They'd been checking book shops in every town because in his last letter to Lucius, Severus had mentioned that he'd purchased a journal belonging to an old Potions master. That was what had sent him off in search of the mythical potion ingredient.

"It was open this afternoon, and I talked to the owner. He remembered Severus and the journal."

Hermione grabbed his hands and pulled him towards her. "Please tell me that the man had read the journal and knows where he's gone off to!"

"No, not quite. But he gave me the address of the young wizard who had brought in the boxes of books from his grandfather's attic. I went and spoke with him, and while he hadn't read the journal himself, he recalled stories that the old man had told him about how he had traveled in search of one of the rarest of plants; he claimed that he had found it in Canada."

Hermione immediately dropped Lucius' hands and looked rather disappointed. "Lucius, have you any idea about the size of Canada? It's huge; he could be anywhere."

"You did not let me finish the tale, my dear," he chided her. "Having recalled this, he remembered some letters that had been left, and he looked them up for me."

"Well, for Merlin's sake, why didn't you say so," she cried, clutching his shoulders and giving him a little shake. "Tell me... tell me, Lucius, you tease," she demanded.

"Ontario, a small settlement called Marten Falls. He stayed amongst the Indians there, a group called the Ojibewe."

"Oh, this is wonderful," she cried, throwing her arms around his neck and hugging him tightly.

Lucius hugged her back and spun around with her in his arms; they were both laughing.

"Stop, Lucius, stop." She laughed. "You're making me dizzy. I'm going to fall over."

He stopped twirling her. His fingers tangled themselves in her hair. He tipped her head back and stared down into her eyes. Then his eyes wandered down over her face to settle on her mouth. The tip of Hermione's tongue traced over her lips, and she worried her bottom lip between her teeth. She looked up at him, her breath caught in her chest, then her eyes dropped to his lips.

Before she could tell herself it was the wrong thing to do, or talk herself out of it, she wrapped her hands around his neck. Threading her fingers through his silky hair, she pulled him down so she could take his lips in a soft kiss. It was slow and gentle at first, exploring, then deepening until she was pushing her body against him. She actually felt the exact moment when her nipples tightened into hard little nubbins, and the tingle made its way from her breasts all the way to her very core.

While he hadn't been expecting the kiss, Lucius knew what to do with a willing woman in his arms; he kissed her back. One hand cradled the back of her head as his other dropped to her gorgeous arse to lightly stroke at first, then he kneaded the firm flesh and pulled her tightly to him. He deepened the kiss, and she responded in kind.

Suddenly she wrenched herself away, her hand covering her mouth in dismay. "Oh, my... Oh, gods, I'm sorry... I shouldn't have done that. I got carried away. But I can't... we can't, Lucius, we just can't."

He took several deep breaths as he attempted to regain control of himself. "I understand, Hermione," he replied in a tight voice. "I don't like it, but I do understand. It's all right. You're just not ready yet. But you do realize, don't you my dear, that completing the Tantric rituals will involve us actually having sex."

She looked at him sharply and realized that he was trying to tease her, to lighten the situation. "Oh, Lucius. I've come around to believing that wouldn't be so very bad, even more so now after what just happened. I rather liked it," she replied with a smile. "But still, there's no guarantee that we're going to find Severus." She had begun...just recently...thinking of him as Severus, rather than Professor Snape. It made it easier somehow to consider him as part of the triad if she thought of him by his first name. "And if we don't, then there will be no triad. At this point I'm not ready to indulge in recreational sex just to break the tension."

"Is that what you think it would be, recreational sex?"

"Maybe, maybe not, I'm just not sure of myself. I'm not sure of anything right now. Please don't be angry with me, Lu," she begged, borrowing Kingsley's nickname for him.

"I'm not angry with you, love. Just a bit frustrated right now, although I certainly can understand your reservations even if I don't entirely agree with them. Let's plan to be on our way tomorrow and see if we can't find ourselves a Potions master."

tbc

Seven

Chapter 7 of 12

It's seven years after the end of the war and Voldemort's fall; the wizarding world is in shambles. Hermione uses Arithmancy to figure out that a new triad needs to be formed to restore balance to the wizarding world.

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter. I make no money here.

AN: This story was written for the 2010 ss/hg_exchange as a gift for lady_karelia. Many thanks to my wonderful betas, dreamy_dragon73 and Clairvoyant.

Tired and disheveled, Hermione and Lucius arrived in Marten Falls. Their travels had not gone as planned. What should have been a two-step Portkey journey had ended up being a two day nightmare. First, they'd Apparated to Mexico City to get a Portkey which they thought would take them all the way to Chicago. But it hadn't; it was faulty, and they'd ended up in New Orleans. After some confusion and nine hours of waiting, they were sent to Milwaukee, Wisconsin and eventually on to Thunder Bay, Ontario. There they had been politely informed that no Portkeys were available for the north woods areas and they would have to hire someone to discreetly side-along them into the area.

Luckily, Lucius was well versed in diplomacy and knew how to pull a few strings when necessary. He was able to secure them a guide who knew the town mayor, police chief and tribal elder all rolled into one, an Artemus Greyfox. Their guide assured them if their friend was staying in that area, Art would know about it.

Upon arrival they were escorted to Mr. Greyfox's home. Hermione felt grimy from her travels and wanted nothing more than to find a place to shower and a bed to sleep in; at that point, she hardly cared if they found Severus, she just wanted to lie down.

After introductions and a brief explanation that they were friends of Severus', Hermione inquired about finding some place in town to stay.

"I'm sorry, Miss," Art responded to her question. "No hotels here."

"What? No hotels? There must be something, a bed and breakfast, a boarding house?"

"No, sorry. But if you're friends of Severus, I'm sure you'll want to stay with him. He's renting a cabin from me. It's rather isolated, but it seems to suit his purposes. Is he expecting you?"

Lucius answered, "Not exactly. We've had a devil of a time tracking him down. We've got some news from back home, and it is imperative that we find him."

"Oh, well, I hope it's not bad news."

"No, not bad. It's just that an opportunity has become available, but we need Severus' input and to learn if he's willing to join us on the project. That's why we've come looking for him."

"Well, I know that he's not home right now; he's gone with my grandsons up to the sugar shack to see how we make maple syrup and sugar. I'm not sure I'd feel right about letting you into his place without his permission."

"Mr. Greyfox, my companion is exhausted. Couldn't you allow her to rest at Severus' cabin? And perhaps you could have someone escort me to Severus' current location?"

The man looked uncertain. Then a short Indian woman stepped into the room and said something to him in a language neither Lucius or Hermione could understand. He turned to them and spoke, "This is my sister, Little Anne. She and Severus have become friends, as they both share an interest in healing plants. She says she will go with your friend to the cabin where she can bathe and rest while we fetch migizi back."

"Migizi?" Hermione asked, her brow wrinkled in confusion.

"It is my nickname for Severus," Little Anne spoke in English so that they could understand, something she had been doing much more lately. "It means eagle. He is like the eagle: sleek, dark and powerful, and he also has a big beak," she explained with a grin, holding a hooked finger to her nose.

Hermione giggled a bit at that mental image and smiled at the old lady. "He is rather eagle-like, isn't he?"

Little Anne nodded, looking pleased that the girl agreed with her.

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On the ride to the cabin, the two women were soon chatting like old friends. Although there was still plenty of snow on the ground, the road had been cleared, but it was still a bit icy. So, Little Anne drove very slowly. By the time they arrived, Hermione was embarrassed to find herself dozing off. Little Anne was not offended and hustled her into the cabin to help her get settled in. She quickly threw a couple chunks of wood onto the glowing embers in the stove and in just a few minutes had a cozy fire going to warm the cabin.

Then leading her to the bedroom, she showed her where the bathroom was and told her she would go out and start the generator to power the water pump. The water that was in the water heater was already hot, so Hermione could be relaxing in the bath in a matter of moments.

"I will wait for migizi to return with your other friend; I think his name will be wabiska waagosh."

"What does that mean? Wabiska waagosh?" inquired Hermione.

"It means white fox. Maybe he is a long lost relative." She joked, referring to her last name.

Hermione laughed too, then added thoughtfully, "That's a good choice for Lucius. You might not realize it, but he is wily like a fox. What name would you give me, Little Anne?" she asked.

Little Anne looked at her carefully. Then she gently took her chin and turned her face down to look into her eyes. "At first, I thought I would call you Ajidamoo; it means squirrel because your hair is full and fluffy and brown like a squirrel's tail." The old lady teased Hermione, tugging lightly on the ends of her hair. "But now, I think I would choose eniwik nigig. It means little otter; it seems to suit you better, I think."

Hermione was shocked. "Why did you choose that name for me, Little Anne?"

"It just seems to fit you," she replied. "When I looked into your eyes, I see a spirit otter, and she swims through the air, twisting and turning like the playful otters on the river banks."

Hermione didn't know quite what to make of the woman's insight. "How are you called in your own language, Little Anne?"

"I am eniwik wawashkeshshi; it means little deer." She grinned. "When I was younger, I was very swift; I could run like a deer. I was not always this big," she said, indicating her girth, "but I was always short." They both laughed at Little Anne poking fun at herself.

"Go and take your bath now, Hermione. I'll put some extra blankets and pillows on the couch in the other room. You can rest there until Severus and your friend return. I will be outside for a bit. I want to check on some things that grow in the woods and along the river bank. Even under the snow there are plants and other things I can make use of for my healing."

Hermione entered the bathroom; she considered just taking a shower and then lying down on the couch for a short nap. She was so tired she was sure she could fall asleep instantly. But as she started the water, the idea of soaking in a tub of warm water was just too appealing. She washed her hair in the shower, then closed the drain and filled the tub. She quickly toweled her hair and ran a thick comb through it, else she would never be able to comb it once it had dried. Then she sank down into the soothing warmth; it took only a few minutes before she had dozed off.

~

Severus Apparated onto the porch of his cabin. Wiping his boots on the mat, he entered through the back door. Being distracted, he did not even notice the blankets and pillows laid out on the couch, and the bags behind it were out of his line of sight. A few years earlier would never have found him so careless, but he was out of practice at "constant vigilance." All he was thinking right now was he was cold, damp and reeked of wood smoke; he really needed a shower.

He'd been out in the woods with 'the boys,' which is what Art called his grandsons, although none of them were boys, ranging in age from nineteen to damn near Severus' age, as the oldest was forty-two. Severus suspected he used the generalization of 'the boys' simply so he didn't have to remember all of their names. At any rate, they had been collecting and boiling huge vats of maple sap to cook down into pure maple syrup and maple sugar. This was a source of income for the family, as they sold it in town and to various tourist shops in the southern parts of the province.

Severus had of course used a few carefully applied and discreet warming spells, but after one became damp and cold it was hard to get warm with a simple spell. Once they started cooking the sap down, it was a round-the-clock process, which was still going on. But he'd been there since early in the evening yesterday, and had grown tired, so he'd decided to return home. Of course while at the sugar shack, 'the boys' had provided plenty of home brew to keep everyone's spirits up. The resulting headache combined with his lack of a hangover potion on hand did not help improve his attitude.

Stripping out of his clothes, he pushed the bathroom door open and stopped in complete shock. There was a woman in his bathtub. A naked woman. A naked, sleeping woman.

He backed slowly out of the room and looked around. *No, it was his room.* Glancing out into the great room confirmed it was his cabin. For a brief, frantic instant, he thought in his hungover, drunken haze that he'd accidentally Apparated to someone else's cabin.

He stepped back into the bathroom; *What in hell was happening here?* he wondered. He gazed down at the vision gracing his tub; she was rather spectacular. Slender, but rounded and curvy in the right places. Her knees had sagged apart, and he could clearly see the thatch of wiry brown hair between her legs and just a tiny, teasing hint of her tender, pink slit there. She had lovely breasts, too, plump, but not too big. Her nipples and areola poking above the water level were rosy pink and a pale pinkish tan respectively. Gods, he ached to touch them, fondle them, pinch them, taste them, suckle them, watch them pucker and tighten under his ministrations; he had always been a breast man. His cock jerked and hardened a bit as he thought about those sweet, luscious tits, and all the ways he could enjoy playing with them. Her face was turned slightly away and obscured by her madly curled, chestnut-brown hair. She had hair just like that know-it-all, Granger.

Granger! He snapped to attention as realization struck like a sledge hammer. *What the fuck was Hermione Granger doing naked in his bathtub?* As he staggered back, he bumped against the sink, and something clattered to the floor. At the noise the girl jerked awake, her eyes going big and round and surprised as she realized Severus Snape stood there stark naked, his cock half hard, ogling her. She popped to a sitting position with a startled yelp.

"What the hell! Get out of here! GET OUT!" she screamed, trying to cover herself. When he didn't move immediately, but just stood there frozen like a deer in the headlights, she flung a sopping wet washcloth at his face as she surged up and grabbed a towel to hastily wrap around herself. "Get out, get out of here. RIGHT NOW!" she yelled as she shoved him out and slammed the door.

He stood still in utter shock for about half a minute before springing into action and tossing on clothes as fast as he could. In less than two minutes, he was pounding on the bathroom door.

"Get the hell out here and explain yourself, Granger," he demanded angrily. "What the fuck are you doing in my cabin in the middle of nowhere, Ontario?"

~

Suddenly the door was flung open, banging against the wall. She stormed out, dressed, but still damp from her bath. She hadn't even taken the time to cast a drying spell. "What do you mean? 'What am I doing here?' Looking for you, of course, you bloody rude git! And do you know what else, you sorry excuse for a wizard? You arsehole. You... you... you peeping Tom. Now, I'm actually sorry that we've found you. In fact I wish I'd never even begun this stupid search. I knew you wouldn't have changed, that you'd still be the nasty, horrible prick you always were." She assumed if he was back here at his cabin, then Lucius had found him and explained why they were looking for him. Apparently, he wanted nothing to do with the triad if his reaction was any indication.

Before they'd arrived in Marten Falls, she'd actually been excited at the thought of seeing Severus again, especially after believing him dead for so many years. She'd always respected him as a teacher and then had secretly admired him when she'd learned about his true role in the war. But this was not how she had imagined their reacquaintance to happen. Before she could say anything else to him, he went on the offensive.

"Still the same fucking little know-it-all even after all these years, aren't you, Granger? Oh... or is it Weasley now?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, I..."

"Oh. No? What happened? Did you dump him? Wasn't he good enough for the Gryffindor Golden Girl?"

"What? No, I..."

"You always did think you were better than everyone else, didn't you? Or did you drive him away with your constant, holier-than-thou nagging?"

Hermione just stared at him wide-eyed, not knowing what to say.

"Or did *he* just find someone better than you? Found you inadequate, did he? Not surprising, is it? So, who took your place? Was it that Brown girl, or Lovegood? Or maybe one of the Patil twins? Don't tell me it was one of my Slytherins? What's the matter, Granger? Kneazle got your tongue?"

"Poor, simple-minded Weasley. Maybe he just figured out that he wasn't clever enough for such a know-it-all and that he'd never be good enough in your eyes. He could spend years and years and never be able to live up to your lofty standards. Hell, he'll probably die before he's able to get anywhere close to your unreachable expectations."

Something inside Hermione snapped. If she'd had her wand in her hand right at that moment, she most likely would have *Avada'd* him without a second thought. Luckily for him she hadn't picked it up from the bathroom floor before she'd slammed the door open. Instead, she attacked him like a Muggle, physically, going at him with hands and fists and nails and feet.

"You bastard! You stinking, fucking bastard!" She screamed as she flew at him, slapping him hard across the face before pummeling him with her fists.

Unprepared for a physical attack, his shock was evident by his lack of reaction. He didn't even try to fight her off.

"I loved him. Ron Weasley was twice the man you are or could ever hope to be. How dare you say such things about him, you filthy sack of Thestral shit!"

She continued to punch and slap and kick and scratch at him. He'd recovered from his initial shock and was trying to fend off her blows when a voice exploded from the door way.

"Hermione! Severus! What in the name of Merlin is going on here!" exclaimed Lucius.

If Severus had been surprised to find Granger naked in his bathtub, his astonishment was tenfold when she turned from him and flew into Lucius arms, clutching him tightly and burying her face in his chest. "Coming here was a mistake, a huge mistake, Lucius. The biggest mistake I've ever made in my entire life," she sobbed.

Lucius held Hermione, trying to soothe her. Art and Little Anne stood in the other room looking at Severus as if he'd just stepped on a helpless kitten or torn the wings off a butterfly. They must have heard everything, or at least enough to make Severus look like a complete heel.

"Shhhh... sweetheart, don't cry, it's all right." Lucius cooed, alternately rubbing her back and stroking her damp hair.

She pulled away from him, wiping her face with the back of her hands, and stated flatly, "I don't know what I was thinking, or what you were thinking to believe that this was possible. But it's never going to work. I tried to tell you that before. He hates me; nothing can ever fix that or change it. Never. I'm done. Just done." She walked out of the room and out of the cabin.

There was a moment of awkward silence.

Little Anne said quietly, "That was not good, migizi. Your words were hurtful." Then she grabbed Hermione's coat and hurried after her.

~

Lucius turned to Severus, rubbing his fingers across his forehead as if he was trying to stave off the world's largest headache. He asked, "Severus, what in the name of Beelzebub's bollocks have you done?"

"What have I done? *What have I done?* Why are you putting this on me? I merely came home wanting a hot shower and found that harpy in my tub. She attacked me first. I may have got a bit carried away with some of the things I said about Weasley, but the little bitch attacked me like a common Muggle."

"Most likely you are fortunate that she didn't have her wand on her or there certainly would have been Unforgivables flying. How could you say those things about the boy? They were engaged. For you to attack his memory like that..."

Severus' shock was apparent on his face. "His memory? He's... he's dead? I had no idea, how... when?"

Lucius sighed heavily. "Yes, he and a good number of his family as well. Several years ago, nearly four, I believe, in the Burrow Massacre. Severus, I know you have never wanted to hear news of wizarding Britain from me. Whenever we've been together you would only let me talk of Draco or Narcissa, but surely you must have read the papers."

Severus shook his head. He swallowed. The Weasleys. He had known them well, eaten at their table, respected them, even considered them compatriots. "That would have been the year I was in seclusion in Tibet. I didn't know. They're dead... the Weasleys? Arthur... Molly... who else?"

"Dear Merlin, man. How could you not keep up with this kind of news? Even in Tibet. It was the Lestranges, Rodolphus and Rabastan, in retribution for Bella's death. They stayed in hiding for years, plotting their revenge. Finally gathering a group of flunkies, they managed to get the drop on the Weasleys at their own home. Molly and Arthur and three of their children, Percy, Ronald and Ginevra. The two oldest sons, William and Charles, were both living abroad at that time, and George was out of town on business that night. If not for circumstances, they would have got Harry Potter and Hermione as well, except they weren't scheduled to arrive until later, and Rodolphus couldn't wait to enjoy the fruits of his labors.

"They arrived earlier in the day when Molly was there alone. You know what a powerful witch she was, but there were eight wizards in their raiding party. They secured Molly and simply waited as her family popped in one by one only to be captured as well. The Weasleys were preparing a surprise birthday party that night for Hermione. She'd just become engaged to Ronald. To keep her busy and out of the way, she was given the task of caring for Potter's son, just a baby. Lucky for Potter that the boy was with Hermione. You know what they were like, Severus. They wouldn't have hesitated to torture an infant as well.

"They kept Molly alive until the very end as they tortured and slowly killed her family in front of her. The things they did to her three children, all eight of them taking turns... It's nauseating to think what that family went through that day. I never cared for the Weasleys personally, but even I would never have wished that kind of end on anyone, not even my worst enemy.

"Kingsley was the first on the scene, alerted by the use of Unforgivables. They were careful early on not to use them to avoid detection by the Aurors. But as the 'festivities' wore on, the minions became careless. Molly was dying when he arrived, but still conscious enough to give him her memories. He had nightmares for months... probably still does."

Severus was completely silent for several minutes, thinking of the family he'd come to know so well. He'd taught all the children and fought beside most of them in the Order. Molly, the ultimate earth mother, fiercely loyal to her brood. Arthur, the affable easy-going father figure. Percy, the prat, had chosen the Light in the end, returning to the bosom of his family. Ronald, the loyal friend and side-kick, a bit of a clown, but his heart was in the right place. And young Ginevra, pretty and vital and feisty, barely a woman. All dead. He couldn't help but picture in his mind's eye how their final hours must have been, the nightmare of pain, humiliation and abuse. Suddenly, he rushed to the bathroom, slamming the door. The sounds of his retching were heard in the great room of the cabin. Lucius noticed for the first time that the old Indian man still stood in the kitchen area.

"Mr. Greyfox..." he began.

"Art, call me Art," the old man instructed him. "I knew our friend Severus had been through some truly horrible times, but these people you speak of, these monsters... Please, tell me that they have been taken care of, that they no longer walk the face of this earth. That justice has been done."

Lucius nodded. It was one of the ways he had gotten to know Harry Potter personally. In addition to Harry's friendship with Narcissa, Lucius had been a key figure in helping Harry and Kingsley hunt down the gang. It wasn't known publicly and never would be, but the supposed explosion that had occurred at the house where the Lestranges and their band of merry men were hiding had been no accident at all. Fiendfyre had destroyed the entire place. Vigilante justice? Perhaps so, but Harry Potter and Lucius Malfoy were assured that the Lestranges would never come after their families again.

"Yes, they are all dead. We made absolutely sure of that."

Art nodded in full approval.

Severus stood in the doorway, looking a bit better, but still shaken. "It would seem that I owe Miss Granger an apology for my atrocious behavior. But first, Lucius, I must know why on earth are you here and the two of you together?"

"I will not go into specifics right now. I will only say this, Severus, tread very carefully, for that is our future bride you are dealing with. I think it best for that apology to come

first, my friend, lest Hermione think that you are merely trying to insinuate yourself into her good graces."

"What the fuck? That is either a very bad joke, or you've gone completely mad, old man. You cannot possibly make a statement like that and simply leave it unfinished," demanded Severus.

Before Lucius could offer any sort of explanation, Little Anne appeared in the doorway, breathless, with Hermione's coat still in her hands. "She is gone. I cannot find eniwik nigig anywhere."

tbc

Eight

Chapter 8 of 12

It's seven years after the end of the war and Voldemort's fall; the wizarding world is in shambles. Hermione uses Arithmancy to figure out that a new triad needs to be formed to restore balance to the wizarding world.

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter. I make no money here.

AN: This story was written for the 2010 ss/hg_exchange as a gift for lady_karelia. Many thanks to my wonderful betas, dreamy_dragon73 and Clairvoyant.

"What do you mean, gone?" asked Lucius. "Where would she go?"

"I do not know. I waited on the porch for a while to give the girl some time alone, a chance to compose herself. But when she did not come back to the cabin, I started looking for her. She is nowhere around. I looked in the trucks, all around the cabin, down the road. I cannot find her anywhere," Little Anne said.

"She was quite angry with me. Perhaps she took a walk to clear her head," suggested Severus.

"She had no coat when she went out, and she has been gone for at least twenty minutes, probably closer to half an hour. It is getting colder. Surely, she would have come back inside by now," said Art in a worried tone.

"Can she fly like you, Severus?" asked Little Anne.

Lucius' eyes widened at the old woman's question, obviously surprised that his friend had revealed such a secret to these people, and he looked at Severus pointedly.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake, Lucius. They aren't wizards, but they aren't exactly Muggles either. Art and Little Anne can be trusted; you may speak freely in their presence.

"In answer, Little Anne, no, she can't fly on her own; even among my people that is a very rare skill."

"She wanted to get away from here and from you, Severus. Perhaps, she Apparated back to the town," suggested Lucius.

"Fuck!" exclaimed Severus, dashing into the bathroom and coming back out, holding Hermione's wand. "She wouldn't have gone very far without this."

"Damn," cried Lucius. "We need to find her. Could she have tried to walk back to town?"

"Eight miles?" asked Severus. "That's doubtful."

"She is known to have a temper; she may not have been thinking rationally. I've seen her storm off several times in a fit of pique," said Lucius.

"If we do not find her soon, we will need to get search parties," said Art. "It is going to get dark in a couple of hours, and the temperature will be even colder at night. It might be as you said, Severus, that she just took a walk to clear her head. But it is easy to get lost quickly in the woods. We need to find her."

They hastily developed a plan. Little Anne would take one of the trucks and drive back towards town, looking for Hermione along the road. Art and Lucius would search the area immediately around the cabin and on the path down to the lake. Severus would search from the air while there was enough light to see. If they didn't find her within the next hour, they would call in help.

Severus had circled the area several times, taking into consideration how long Granger had been out and how far she might have gone before they started searching. He had just decided to widen his search area when he spotted her. He had gone over the same area three times previously and missed her, as her brown sweater and dark jeans had blended in with the underbrush.

She was unconscious and huddled in a ball, half hidden by a clump of bushes. Upon examining the situation, it appeared that she'd slipped off the path, slid down a steep bank and hit her head on a rock. There was a quite a bit of blood on the snow, but he knew head injuries could bleed copiously. He probed as gently as possible and found quite a goose egg on the back of her head. Scanning her with his wand, he determined she had no broken bones, but her right ankle was bruised and swollen, and she was scratched up from her fall down the hill.

The thing that concerned him the most was her low body temperature; her shivering was actually decreasing and her skin was cyanotic, which were both bad signs. Her respiration and heart rate were low and irregular. All these things he knew were symptoms of hypothermia which could be deadly. He decided to get her back to the cabin before trying to revive her. He sent his Patronus with a message, "*Lucius, I've found her but she is injured. Let Art know and meet us back at the cabin.*" Removing his coat and covering her with it, he scooped her up. He lifted her easily and Apparated back to the cabin.

Little Anne had returned and was waiting inside when he arrived. Looking at the girl, she immediately hurried to the bedroom and pulled back the covers so Severus could lay her on the bed.

"I'll build up the fire," said Severus as Little Anne examined Hermione.

"No," ordered Little Anne. "She is too cold. If you warm her too fast, it could cause her to go into shock."

Lucius and Art had returned and stood in the great room. Severus quickly explained where he had found her and what he figured had happened.

As he was speaking, Little Anne had removed Hermione's shoes and socks and was going to attempt to undress her when she turned to Severus. "It is best not to move her arms and legs about too much; movement pushes the cold blood towards her heart. Do you have some sharp scissors so I can cut her clothing off?"

"Here, I can take them off magically. You won't even have to move her," he responded. Pulling out his wand and pointing it at the girl, with a flick of his wrist, he said, "*Divesto*."

Little Anne seemed pleased with the results. "That is a useful thing to do...no movement, no jarring the body." She quickly checked Hermione for signs of injury. "It looks like just a sprained ankle and the bump on her head...no frostbite. Luckily, she was not out there that long. But because she was without a coat and unconscious on the cold, wet ground for so long, her body temperature dropped quickly. We must warm her slowly." She turned to Severus and Lucius and ordered, "You two, get in here now and strip down to your shorts."

Both of them looked as if she had hit them with a bludge.

"Don't just stand there and stare at me. You are wasting precious minutes. She needs to be warmed slowly; body heat is one of the best ways. Skin to skin contact. If she weren't so cold and were conscious, we could give her warm liquids and warm her by the fire, but she *is* too cold. As I told Severus, if she is warmed up too fast it could send her into shock. Her heart could stop beating. It must be done slowly. Now get in here; one of you behind her and the other in front."

Lucius looked at Severus. "Is there any treatment we can do magically that would be safe?"

Severus shrugged. "I'm not sure, but I don't want to attempt something that might harm her. We'd better do as Little Anne says."

The two quickly stripped down, pulled back the covers and crawled into the bed.

"Holy fuck, she feels like ice," exclaimed Lucius as he settled in front, pulling Hermione up against his chest. He murmured something in her ear as he cradled her gently. Severus barely caught the words, "Don't you even think of leaving me now, little witch. We need you...damn it...I need you."

Severus climbed in behind her and settled as close as possible. Little Anne pulled the covers up over them tightly.

"Do not massage her or move her limbs about while she is so cold," Little Anne reminded them. "It can force the cold blood from her limbs to her core, her heart. She must warm up gradually. All we can do now is wait." So saying, she left the room.

It was silent in the bed for several minutes before Severus spoke softly. "Clearly, I am not going to be able to apologize to her first. You might as well tell me what this is all about, Lucius. Why are the two of you here looking for me?"

Lucius spent the better part of the next hour relating all of the information about how wizarding Britain had fallen into shambles where plagues and crimes and economic crisis abounded. He explained Hermione's project to try to find a solution with Arithmancy, the resulting discovery of the triad and the history of former triads. Severus asked questions throughout, and Lucius answered them as best he could.

Lucius finished his tale. He looked into his friend's eyes over the top of Hermione's head. "I must say, this is a bit awkward, Severus," he commented with a chuckle. "I had pictures in my mind of the first time we might all come together in this position, but this is nothing like I had imagined."

~

Severus awoke the next morning to his raging hard-on pressed firmly against Granger's curvaceous arse, his own right hand fondling a warm plump breast and Lucius' arm draped across both Hermione's body and Severus' waist, lightly caressing his butt cheek through his boxers. *The girl is obviously warm now and out of danger*, he thought. *Now, to extricate myself gracefully without waking anyone.*

He carefully removed his hand from her body and slowly slid back a few inches. Instead of sliding off his arse, Lucius' hand tightened and gave him a knowing squeeze. Looking up, he saw his friend's eyes crinkled in silent laughter.

"Lucius, you idiot, let go of me before the girl wakes up, screaming bloody murder to find herself naked and in the same bed as me," he whispered sternly.

With a sigh and a final squeeze, Lucius withdrew his hand and cuddled up closer to Hermione.

Once Severus exited the bathroom, Lucius rose as well, saying, "I suppose you're right, best not let her wake up to find me in her bed. It might be difficult to convince her it was all in the name of administering first aid."

Severus looked from the bed to Lucius. "You mean you haven't... I mean, the two of you don't...?"

"No, not due to lack of desire on my part, believe me. She didn't want to start anything if it wasn't going to lead to the final result, namely the triad. But no recreational sex, as she put it. Hermione seemed convinced that even if we found you, you might decline to join the triad. For some reason, she seems to think that you don't like her. I must say, after hearing the two of you go at it yesterday, I'd have to think perhaps her fears were not unfounded."

"It isn't that I dislike her so much as... it's just... well, I don't understand it myself. But seeing her here suddenly brought back memories, memories I've kept buried for a good long while. Those years. Voldemort. Dumbledore. The war. Potter. Lily... I don't know why, but I just wanted to lash out at her, hurt her for bringing them all back to the surface. It made me angry, and when she started calling me names, I just lost it. Stupid of me, I know...childish...but what's done is done."

"Hermione's a sensible witch. With suitable groveling, I'm sure she'll forgive you."

"I. Don't. Grovel," said Severus pointedly as he stalked from the room.

"Hmmm... bad choice of words," said Lucius, thinking of all those years Severus had to do just that, as they all had, at the feet of Voldemort. Just as he was about to follow him into the other room, a soft groan came from the bed.

Sitting carefully on the edge, he gently cradled Hermione's face. "Are you all right, love? How do you feel?"

She groaned again. "Ooohhh, my head is pounding like someone hit me with a Quidditch bat." She shifted a bit in the bed and gave a little yelp. "Ow, my ankle hurts like hell, too. What happened to me?"

Still holding her, he commanded, "Open your eyes and look at me." She did, and he examined her pupils. "What to you remember?"

She thought for a minute, her brow wrinkled in concentration. "I was arguing with Snape, but then he started saying things about Ron, and I lost it. I started hitting him. Then you came in, and I went outside. I was furious, and I just wanted to walk a bit to calm myself down. But then, I... I'm not sure... I think I slipped on some ice or something. I hurt my ankle, and when I tried to get up I fell again, I think, but I don't remember anything after that for a while. I remember vaguely being very cold and trying to scrunch up to keep warm."

"When you slipped, you fell down an embankment, and you must have hit your head. That's why it's pounding right now. It looks like you twisted your ankle pretty badly too, but nothing's broken. Severus checked for that when he first found you."

"Snape found me? Why didn't one of you fix my head and my ankle?" she asked, puzzled.

"Because at the time we were more concerned with saving your life. You'd become dangerously hypothermic. You seem to be doing better now. I'll have Severus take a look at you. He's much better at healing spells than I am."

"Just give me my wand, and I'll do it myself," she demanded, holding her hand out.

"No, I think not. You are still a bit muzzy with that head injury. I don't think it would be a wise choice for you to be pointing a wand at yourself right now."

Snape came and healed her foot and head as best he could. After waiting so many hours, there was some lingering soreness, more so than if her injuries had been healed right away. He offered a perfunctory apology for his behavior the day before. Hermione offered an equally perfunctory acceptance and apologized for losing her temper as well. After that little else was said between the two of them for the next few days.

~

Hermione stayed in bed most of the first day, recovering from her ordeal. She could hear the two men in the other room, talking, chuckling together, renewing their friendship. She felt a bit left out of things, all by herself.

She was happy when Little Anne stopped by to check up on her. She brought some homemade soup and sat with her while Lucius went out with Snape to look at the sites he was keeping an eye on for his magical sprouts.

Lucius then spent most of the afternoon sitting at her bedside, fussing over her. Truthfully, he admitted that he'd been more than just a little frantic at the thought of losing her. She assumed it was because he was worried about the triad, but he hinted that it had little to do with that at all. Once she'd drifted off to sleep, Lucius continued to sit at her bedside holding her hand, gently tracing runes on her palm. Severus looked in and silently observed his friend's behavior, then stepped back out without comment.

The next day, Hermione insisted on getting out of bed and limped into the great room to sit on the sofa. Still, little was said between Severus and Hermione. She politely asked if she could look at some of his books, and he just as politely granted her permission. That was the extent of their communication for that day, other than mundane things like: 'would you like another cup of coffee?' or 'please pass the salt.'

Severus wandered the forest daily, looking for likely spots for his sprouts and for signs of the ground thawing as the snow was melting more each day. Lucius took the opportunity to have a serious discussion with Hermione, regarding the triad.

"Lucius, realistically I don't know how you can even still consider it. I don't see how it could ever work. He hardly speaks to me, barely even acknowledges that I am here. It seems to me it would be pretty difficult to conduct a Tantric ritual when one third of the triad won't even make eye contact. I would also assume that for this to be successful it would require a modicum of trust between the three of us and right now, to be perfectly honest, I'm just not feeling it."

"You haven't gone much out of your way to be cordial to him either. It's a two-way street, you know?"

"That's not true," she defended herself. "Earlier today, I tried to start a conversation about one of his books I'd been reading. Yesterday, I tried to ask him about his travels. You made more comments than he did. His responses were monosyllabic or mere grunts; it's very hard to maintain a discussion in conditions like that. I just don't know what to say to him to get him to open up to me. I'm sure he still thinks of me as an insufferable know-it-all."

"So, do you want to give up? Just go back to England and tell Kingsley it's not going to happen."

"No, that's not what I want. But I just don't know what to do. I think...no...I know that you and I have come to a point that I would be willing to try. But I don't see how I can do it with Severus. I honestly still think he really doesn't like me, so we can't very well blame him for not wanting to make a lifetime commitment to someone he loathes."

"He doesn't loathe you," Lucius assured her.

"You could have fooled me." She pouted.

"I have explained the situation to him. He says he is willing. Honestly, to be a part of something like this is a magical rarity. According to Kingsley's research, only six triads have existed in the last millennium. To wield that sort of power, carry that responsibility, it is an opportunity that is hard to pass up."

"Is that your only motivation? To obtain power?"

"Well, there is also the fantastic Tantric sex with an alluring woman half my age," he teased. "And I have to admit that to be chosen is a bit of an ego boost. The Malfoy name has taken a beating; it would be nice to be respected again."

Distracted, Lucius toyed with a strand of her hair. "That's funny," he said, winding it around his finger, then rubbing his thumb over the silky softness of it. "I always thought your hair would be coarse, but it's not at all." Giving his head a little shake he brought his attention back to the matter at hand. "What of you, my dear, if we were to carry out this task, what would your motivation be?"

"Oh, you know my reputation as a do-gooder. It would be hard for me to turn my back on a chance to bring balance to the wizarding world. Working at the Ministry, I've seen the statistics. Everything seems to be in a downward spiral. Magic itself is becoming erratic while crime is on the rise and the economy in decline. People are dying from unheard-of, incurable plagues. Even wizards and witches well trained in magic are losing the ability to control it. If we can change this somehow, how can I refuse?"

Her voice shook a bit as she continued. "And yet, honestly, I just don't know if I can spend the rest of my life with a man who despises me...much less perform sex magic with him. Someone who thinks I'm some sort of nagging bitch who is inadequate when it comes to pleasing a man."

Lucius replied, "I don't think that's what Severus is thinking, no matter what you may believe. And I know personally that it isn't true." Tipping her chin up to look into her eyes, he bent his head, bringing his lips to hers, and kissed her.

She didn't pull away; instead she reached behind his neck and pulled out the black ribbon he used to tie his hair back. She threaded her fingers through his hair and kissed him leisurely. They took their time, lips sliding, tongues exploring, teeth nipping and nibbling. When they broke apart they were both breathing a bit harder. She continued to toy with his hair as his tongue traced down her neck again, and he nibbled his way to her collarbone.

She moaned as he sucked gently on her neck while his hand cupped her breast, and his thumb traced circles around her nipple.

"I thought you said no recreational sex?" whispered Lucius in her ear.

Pulling his hair to tip his head back so she could look into his sparkling grey eyes, she said, "This is just kissing... petting, Lucius. I'm not going to have sex with you, not today, anyway."

"Not today. But someday?" he asked expectantly, grinning at her. "Someday soon?"

She grinned back at him. "Yes, definitely someday. Soon." She hesitated a bit then added, a little embarrassed, "Umm... I'm glad you don't find me inadequate, but I must be honest about this. I really haven't got a lot of experience."

"How much is not a lot?" he asked while slipping his hand under her sweater to fondle her breasts.

"Well, just Ron really. But we were very enthusiastic. I guess what I'm trying to say is we did it a lot, but it was only ever just him. I've never been with anyone else." She gasped as he pinched her nipple.

He chuckled as he went back to nibbling his way back up her neck to take her lips again. "Well, that certainly isn't a problem. Good to know that you were enthusiastic, though. Enough talking, more kissing." So saying, he laid her down on the couch and draped himself over her, and they spent the next hour kissing and getting to know each other.

~

Looking up at the clock, he saw that it was nearly three o'clock. Pulling away from Hermione and sitting up, he helped her sit up as well. "Severus will be back soon. I'll have a talk with him soon. But I need to know your intentions, Hermione. Are you willing to go through with this whole thing? Are you willing to join this triad with Severus and me?"

She sighed. "I want to say yes, Lucius. But I'm so unsure of him. I'm afraid," she admitted.

"Let me talk to him. I have an idea. You probably won't like it. He won't either, I'm sure. But I think we need drastic measures, and this may be the only way."

tbc

Nine

Chapter 9 of 12

It's seven years after the end of the war and Voldemort's fall; the wizarding world is in shambles. Hermione uses Arithmancy to figure out that a new triad needs to be formed to restore balance to the wizarding world.

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The next day, Lucius spoke to Severus, just as he'd told Hermione he would. They were outside the cabin, and she could hear raised voices...not angry or like they were fighting, but as if each were trying to talk over the other to make his point. She couldn't make out exactly what they were saying, but in the end it seemed that neither one had triumphed. Lucius came inside, and Severus went to tramp through the woods on his quest for the Spiralhorn Sprouts.

Lucius came and stood before Hermione. He looked serious.

"What is it?" she asked. "What did you talk to Severus about?"

"I'm going back to England," he declared.

"What? Why?" she asked, jumping to her feet and confronting him. "I thought you wanted to try to work it out. Why are we leaving?"

"We aren't, I am."

"Lucius, no. Please. That makes no sense."

"It makes perfect sense. I told Severus this, and now I am telling you. You both know where I stand. I want to try to make this triad work. You have both indicated that you are willing to try, but we've been here a week, and you barely speak to each other. You are using me as a go-between, and as long as this goes on, nothing is ever going to be settled."

Hermione thought for a moment, then stated with a grim little smile, "I find it somewhat ironic that those are almost the exact same words that Kingsley used, except he was talking about you and me. Lucius, I guess what you say does make sense in a way, but I really don't want you to leave."

"I know you don't, love, but it's the only way you and Severus will ever settle anything between you. As I said, you both know how I feel; now you need to hash it out between each other. If you both come to the conclusion that we can realistically make it work, then we shall give it a try." He hesitated a moment before tipping her face up to look into her eyes and continued, "I want you to know this, though, if you decide that you and Severus simply can't work it out...I still want a chance for us to explore this thing between us. Triad be damned."

"Oh, Lucius!" she cried, throwing her arms around him, pressing tightly against his body and holding him close. "If I'd known this yesterday, I wouldn't have settled for just a few kisses and snuggles. I would have shagged you silly."

"Damn," he retorted with a half-smirk on his face. "If I'd only known."

She smiled up at him, pulling him down for a kiss. "Do you really have to go? Severus and I may kill each other."

"I hardly think so, my dear," he said as he nuzzled her neck. "If you feel you are making headway with Severus though, do not hesitate to take whatever action is necessary to convince him."

"What exactly are you suggesting, Lucius?"

"I am saying, my love, that if you have the chance to seduce him, take it. Not that you need my permission, but if it makes you feel any better, I do approve."

Hermione blushed and buried her face against his chest. "I'm a far cry from a seductress."

Slipping his hands beneath her jumper to caress her back, he replied, "You have managed to seduce me quite easily, Hermione. Severus has been alone a long time; I think he secretly craves a real relationship. And whether you realize it or not, the two of you do have a great deal in common. I don't think he is nearly as averse to you as you seem to think; I've seen how he watches you when he thinks no one is looking. He is more interested than he will admit. Perhaps, he just doesn't know how to begin. Give him a chance, Hermione, just give him a chance."

"I'll try, Lucius. This whole triad idea had me horrified in the beginning, but I must admit the idea of spending the rest of my life bound to two intelligent, powerful, sexy Slytherins is beginning to grow on me."

"I am so happy to hear you say that." His hands slid down to cup her arse, pulling her against his growing erection. "I never thought that you would come around to that opinion." Spinning around with her, he pressed her up against the wall and kissed her deeply as he ground his body against hers. Her legs wrapped around his waist as she wiggled, trying to get even closer to him, practically climbing up his body.

"Please, Lucius, let's go into the bedroom. Severus won't be back for a while."

Lucius continued to kiss her, and his hand slid beneath her jumper. He pushed her bra up to bare her breast, and his thumb traced around her nipple before he bent his head to lick it and then suck on it, driving her wild. He moved back up to kiss her one more time before, with a sigh, he backed away from her. "No, if I take you here, now, I will never be able to bring myself to leave. Then you and Severus will never get a chance to work things out between you. I must go."

"I understand what you are saying, but I still wish you didn't have to go," she said softly with tears in her eyes.

"I think it best if I leave as soon as Severus returns. I will keep in touch with you though, you may be sure of that."

~

Severus returned to the cabin shortly after Lucius had revealed his plan to leave, and Severus had stalked off into the woods. But being unable to concentrate, he returned, determined to talk some sense into his idiot of a friend. Sidling up to the back porch, he peeked carefully through the window and saw them.

Lucius had Granger pinned against the wall, his tongue was thrusting into her mouth. While one arm supported her under her arse and the other hand kneaded her breast. After a moment his hand left her breast to roughly pull up her jumper and bra to fondle her nipples, he dropped his lips to kiss and suckle them each in turn. Severus' pulse increased as he recalled the sight of those lovely breasts with their delicate nipples rising above her bath water. Watching her now, he could see she certainly wasn't fighting Lucius off; if anything she looked as if she were trying to shag him with all of her clothes still on. Just watching the two of them had Severus' cock pressing uncomfortably against his trousers.

He performed an eavesdropping spell to hear what they were saying. He heard Granger beg Lucius to take her to bed, but Lucius denied her, telling her if they went to bed, he wouldn't be able to leave her. Finally, she agreed with him, but clung to him and cried softly in his arms.

Severus stood for several minutes, willing his erection away, then made a production of stomping his feet and making a lot of noise before he entered the cabin. When he looked up, they were sitting next to each other on the sofa, Granger's eyes were a bit weepy looking, and her mouth looked as if she had just been thoroughly kissed. Other than that there were no signs that the couple before him had been on the brink of shagging each other's brains out just moments before.

He couldn't convince Lucius to stay, and he left shortly after Severus returned to the cabin. Hermione sat on the porch steps for nearly twenty minutes after he left, and Severus suspected that she was crying. When she came in, she said she was going to take a hot bath.

When she came out again, she seemed composed and offered to help him cook dinner.

"Do you know how, Granger? To cook that is?" he asked.

"It's not rocket science, after all. I'm no gourmet, but I can cook plain old regular food without too much trouble. I do things the Muggle way, though."

"The Muggle way, really? Why is that?"

"I suppose because that was how I learned when I was still at home. The things I know how to cook I learned from my parents," she responded to his question. "Besides, I think food tends to taste better when made without magic."

"That might be true. My own mother cooked mostly without magic; my father didn't like her using it. And I fondly recall the meals she cooked for us. I've already put a casserole in the oven while you were in the bath. If you want you can make a salad or something to go with it."

"I can handle that," she replied, looking over at him. "Can I ask you a favor? Do you think you could possibly call me Hermione?"

"I suppose I could manage." Then he grudgingly continued, "I guess you should call me Severus, then."

"Thank you, Severus. Mr. Snape sounds odd to me and just too formal given the circumstances, and just Snape seems rude. I hardly think I could refer to you as sir...unless you're hoping to establish yourself in some kind of position of dominance over me, and if that's the case, then I should tell you right now that's just not going to happen." She blushed suddenly, and he wondered what thoughts were running rampant in her head.

"I can assure you, Hermione, such a thought had never entered my mind," he said. "Until now, that is."

They managed to make it through the first evening alone without killing each other as Hermione had feared. When it was time for bed, she told him that he should take the bedroom because, although she'd been sleeping there since she had been injured, it was rightfully his.

Severus tried to be polite and offered for her to continue sleeping there, but she pointed out that she fit better on the sofa anyway. He half teasingly offered to share the bed, telling her that it wasn't as if they hadn't slept together there before.

She almost seemed to be considering it for a brief moment, but then she declined, blushing profusely again. Making him wonder again, just where her thoughts might be taking her.

~

The first couple of days were awkward and a bit tense between them, but things did seem to calm down, and they were able to function with greater ease as each day passed. They had settled into a routine: they took turns fixing breakfast and lunch and shared supper duty between them. She read his research and helped him scout out likely spots for the sprout to grow, and she got a chance to know Art and Little Anne better. The evenings were the hardest when it was quiet and they were all alone. Sometimes they read, but then after a while, Severus had begun trying to engage her in more one-on-one activities.

"Would you like to play a game of wizard chess?" he asked politely one night about four or five days after Lucius' departure. "I have a chess set shrunk down in my closet. I'd be happy to get it out for you."

"Umm... I appreciate the offer, but I'm not much for wizard chess," she responded.

"Really? Why is that? Lucius enjoys it, and I thought with your similar interests in Arithmancy that you might also. I figured the analytical aspect of it would appeal to you as it does him."

Hermione eyed him closely to try to determine if he was teasing her or not. This Severus really was quite different from the Professor Snape she had known at Hogwarts. That man would have never made small talk over breakfast or brought her a bouquet of tiny snowdrops he'd found blooming in the woods or teased her about some trivial thing just to get a reaction out of her.

"Hmmm... well, perhaps the reason he enjoys it and I don't is because he didn't have to face down larger-than-life-sized chess pieces when he was twelve years old. Standing on that chessboard, terrified to make one wrong move..." She shuddered. "I had nightmares about it for months afterward."

He seemed to mull that statement over before he commented, "Yes, I suppose that could put you off the game."

"How about a card game, then? Do you know any besides exploding snap? I hate that game," he said, not elaborating. "I found some Muggle playing cards in the drawer. Do you know how to play cribbage? I used to play that with my gran."

"Oh, yes, my dad taught me how to play. I suppose we could have a game or two."

Severus transfigured a cribbage board from a piece of firewood. They each won a game, then they played one more to break the tie, which Hermione won. This began a tradition. Every night after dinner they got out the cribbage board and played best two out of three. They kept a running total of games and over all it was split fairly equally. During these games, they laughed and talked, and barriers began to break down between them.

He asked her about that terrifying chess game and how she had solved his logic puzzle that day. He admitted that he had been more than just a little miffed that a twelve-year-old witch had been able to figure it out. They talked of her many misadventures with Harry and Ron. He didn't tell her, but he was secretly horrified at some of the things they'd got up to that no one, not even Dumbledore, had known about.

He learned that she had been the reason his second best robes had caught fire during her first year. He had always suspected it had been a student prank. Frankly, he'd been prone to believe it was one of the Weasley twins, but they had both been on the Quidditch pitch that day, playing in the game. She revealed that she had stolen from his supplies the following year to make Polyjuice Potion. He'd always suspected Potter but could never prove it; now he knew why.

They talked of his life as well. What it was like for him growing up. His friendship with Lily Evans, and his dislike of and rivalry with James Potter and the rest of the Marauders. He explained how he'd been enticed into Voldemort's service, then had quickly realized what a mistake he'd made. He talked about Dumbledore and how he had both loved and hated the man at the same time.

They compared notes on the similarities and differences of being a Muggle-born as opposed to a half-blood and the prejudices of the wizarding world in general. He actually apologized for his treatment of her as his student. He explained that he'd had no real personal dislike, but that he'd been forced to scorn her and her friends as part of his role of one of Voldemort's minions.

After about a week of spending the evenings in this manner, Hermione found herself becoming more at ease in Severus' presence. She also found herself rediscovering the man she had respected and admired. This was the Severus Snape she had hoped to find when she'd set out on this journey with Lucius. He was extremely intelligent, sharp, witty in ways she had never expected and had a rather dry sense of humor that sometimes had her guessing whether he was serious or pulling her leg. From his years of travel after leaving England, he had an endless supply of stories about the places he'd been and the things he had learned. Oh, yes, Hermione was completely intrigued by this man.

~

Severus awoke from a sound sleep, unsure what had caused him to awaken. He lay very quietly listening, then he heard it, a low moan, quiet words...he couldn't quite make out what was said, then what sounded almost like a sob. He slowly got up. Carefully taking his wand, he silently moved to the bedroom door; he left it open at night to have access to the heat from the wood stove.

He stood quietly for a minute. Hermione seemed to be sound asleep on the couch. He'd begun to think that he'd been dreaming when he heard the sound again; a groan, then she was talking in her sleep...her words low, but he could hear them now.

"Please, no. Please, stop... I don't know... I don't know where it came from... We just found it, that's all... Stop, please I can't stand it... No, no, no!"

He move swiftly to the back of the couch and reached down to tenderly brush a strand of hair out of her face. His finger softly traced over her cheek, and just as he was going to bend down to try to wake her gently, his wrist was locked in a vise-like grip. He was jerked forward and pulled over the back of the couch, then quickly rolled to the floor with Hermione on top of him. Her wand appeared from nowhere...it must have been hidden under her pillow...and the tip was buried in his throat.

"Severus! Oh my gods!" she exclaimed. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know it was you. Don't ever sneak up on me like that. I could have hurt you."

"You were dreaming. A nightmare, I think."

"Yes, I was dreaming," she replied. Her brow wrinkled as she tried to recall, then her face crumpled as she remembered the dream.

"I was going to wake you, but before I could, you managed to flip me over the couch onto the floor. Goes to show my 'constant vigilance' is a bit out of practice."

Seeing her distress, he reached up to caress the side of her face. "What is it? What were you dreaming about?"

"The war, that last year. We were captured by Snatchers and taken to Malfoy Manor. Draco tried to avoid identifying us. Bellatrix was there. She had the boys locked in the dungeon, but she kept me back to interrogate. I think now that Narcissa was appalled by her sister's actions, but there was nothing she could do at the time or Lucius either. I realize that now, but then...I was just so frightened. I wanted them to stop her somehow."

"Bella?" He was outraged. He had no idea that she'd been tortured by Bellatrix during the war. He'd seen what she did to prisoners and how she'd enjoyed every minute. "What did she do to you, Hermione?" he asked, needing to know and yet at the same time terrified of what he was about to hear.

She still sat atop of him where she had landed when she flipped him to the ground. He carefully set her wand aside and gathered her into his arms, holding her protectively to his chest, her head tucked under his chin. "Tell me, muirnin, what did she do?"

Hermione tensed at first, but then just seemed to melt into him. Closing her eyes, she told him. "She kept asking me questions: where had we been hiding, who had helped us, what had Dumbledore told us before he died? Every time she asked, if she didn't like my answer, she used the Cruciatus curse on me. She didn't like very many of my answers, it seemed. I was screaming, screaming, I couldn't stop. She just kept *Crucio*'ing me until I passed out, then she would cast *Rennervate* and start all over again."

Hermione trembled after voicing the memories. Severus cuddled her closer, but she kept shivering. It was cold, he realized, lying on the floor, so he rolled to the side and got up quickly, pulling her up into his arms. Glancing briefly to the couch, he considered putting her there, but then discarded that thought and carried her to his bed where he set her down and promptly crawled in with her. He wrapped them both in the warm down comforter and once again held Hermione tightly to him. He encouraged her to finish her tale.

"She was furious because we had the sword, Gryffindor's sword, and she just went mental. She started swearing and screaming, asking me where we'd got it... who we'd stolen it from. She *Crucio*'d me again and again and again. Finally, I lied to her. I told her it was a fake, not the real sword at all. That only seemed to make her more angry. I had started that night terrified I was going to die, and at the end, I prayed for death. I kept thinking of Neville's parents and how she had tortured them into insanity. I've always been prized for my intelligence; the thought of ending up like them was horrifying to me. I thought I'd be better off dead.

"Then Harry and Ron broke out of the dungeons. I learned later that Dobby had helped them; he'd taken Luna, Dean and Mr. Ollivander to safety. I was out of it by that time, but with Dobby's help the boys got us out of there with Gryffindor's sword and the goblin Griphook as well. As they Disapparated Bella threw her knife at Harry; it hit Dobby though, and killed him. He was brave and loyal to Harry; at least he died free."

Severus felt heartsick. He admitted to her, "It was my fault. I'm the one who brought the sword to Potter in The Forest of Dean. It was my doe Patronus that led him to find it there. It was because of me that Bella tortured you. You must hate me for that."

She pulled back and looked into his eyes in the dim light of the bedroom. "Honestly, Severus, *argou* mad? Of course I don't hate you, you silly man. What are you thinking? If you hadn't brought us the sword, we wouldn't have been able to destroy the Horcruxes, and Neville wouldn't have been able to summon it to kill Nagini. You saved us, Severus. You saved all of us."

Saying that, she turned over and snuggled back against him. He was unsure at first how to react, thinking perhaps he should go sleep on the couch. But Hermione calmly reached back, grabbed his arm and wrapped it firmly around her as she snuggled even closer yet and promptly fell asleep in his warm embrace.

He rested his cheek against her hair and whispered softly, "Sleep well, A chuisle."

tbc

AN: The phrases that Severus used for Hermione are both Irish terms of endearment. In my imagination there is an old Irish grandma in his background (please let there have been someone to offer that lost little boy some love) where he picked up these terms: "muirnín" means sweetheart, "A chuisle" literally means my pulse, but can be used as my love or my darling. A couple of similar phrases that will be included in future chapters: "A chuisle mo chroi" means the pulse of my heart (again, a term of endearment similar to my love, my darling, etc.) , and "a ghrá mo chroi" means the love of my heart.

Ten

Chapter 10 of 12

It's seven years after the end of the war and Voldemort's fall; the wizarding world is in shambles. Hermione uses Arithmancy to figure out that a new triad needs to be formed to restore balance to the wizarding world.

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter. I make no money here.

AN: This story was written for the 2010 ss/hg_exchange as a gift for lady_karelia. Many thanks to my wonderful betas, dreamy_dragon73 and Clairvoyant.

She awoke alone the next morning and couldn't help but reflect on what had occurred. The night before might have been a turning point in their relationship.

Still, she couldn't stop arguing with the voices in her head. *The man I knew at Hogwarts, Severus the teacher, was harsh and hard, unyielding. He could be brutal; with just a look or a few words, he could eviscerate a person.* Then the other voiced piped up. *But Severus the Order member, the spy, he was brave and daring, going willingly into danger again and again. That Severus was worthy of trust and admiration. And the Severus I've gotten to know these last few days was all together different: pleasant, and dare I say, nice... even friendly at times. He's so far removed from the war and the hardships of living under Voldemort's thumb. And last night, he was so tender and comforting and gentle. I never would have believed that of him.* But the other voice came back with a vengeance to argue. *Yet, how can I just forget that he was so cruel to me that first night? The things he said were so hurtful, so very much like the Snape I knew years ago at Hogwarts. How can I be sure? How can I trust him? And isn't that the most essential thing for the triad? What should I do? I'm afraid.*

Unsure of herself and unable to resolve the argument with the voices in her head, she decided to go and talk to Little Anne and seek her advice. Just as she was getting ready to go into town, a knock came at her door. Surprised, she opened the door to find Little Anne standing there.

"Little Anne, what a coincidence, I was just coming to see you. What brings you out here today?" said Hermione with a smile, pleased to see the little Indian woman.

"I had a feeling you needed someone to talk to, so I came to see you," she replied as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"Well, you're right," said Hermione, "I'm so glad you're here. Sit down, and I'll make some tea."

"Tell me what troubles you, eniwik nigig."

"It's Severus. I have to make a decision, a choice. There is something that needs to be done, and Severus, Lucius and I are the only ones who can do it. But for us to join together in this... umm... project, there needs to be complete trust between us. If there isn't, it just won't work. I want to trust him, but I'm not sure if I can. I'm afraid, Little Anne."

"You do not think migizi is trustworthy?"

"It isn't that exactly. I have known him a long time; he was my teacher. He was very harsh, very strict, but I respected him then. I trusted him. Then something happened, and everyone believed that he had betrayed his friends; it seemed that way at least. But actually, he was working... undercover, I suppose is a good way to describe it. So, in the end, even though he had been forced to do awful things, it was his actions that turned everything around. When I learned what he'd done, the sacrifices he'd made, I admired him greatly."

"Nigig, I already know about the grey-beard and the snake-man."

"Oh... well... okay then. When I came here with Lucius, looking for Severus, I was excited to meet him again after nearly seven years. I thought he'd died, you see. So, when we got here and found him, I was looking forward to getting to know him as an adult. But we got off to very bad start, which you were unfortunate enough to witness, I'm afraid. Anyway, I know I said some things I shouldn't have, but I was tired and cranky and embarrassed because he'd seen me naked in the bathtub. It was not my brightest hour."

"But the things he said to me angered and hurt me. I felt like that little schoolgirl again, and he was still just as harsh and cruel as he'd been back then. I had thought since we were older we would relate on a different level, and suddenly I felt like a little first year back at school. And he said I was a nag and inadequate and basically that no man would ever want me, or at least that's what it felt like he was saying. And if that's what he really felt... if he still feels that way, how can I put my trust in him, Little Anne? How can I know for sure what to do?"

Little Anne took Hermione's hand in hers and looked into her eyes. "You must talk to him, nigig. I cannot tell you how he feels; only he can do that. But is it not possible that just as you were tired and cranky and embarrassed he was as well? He had been up all night with the boys, boiling the sap. He was tired, and knowing the boys, probably a bit hungover, and he walked in on you and was shocked. You were probably the last person he expected to find here. So, maybe just like you, he said things he shouldn't have. But before you judge him based on those words, words said in anger, talk to him. It is the only way to find out."

Hermione threw her arms around the old woman and hugged her tightly. "Thank you, Little Anne, for listening to me whine and for such good advice. I will talk to him, I promise."

~

Severus stayed out all day. He didn't even return for lunch. This worried Hermione. Was he regretting his actions of the night before? Would he return to the cabin and revert to being cool and distant towards her?

She tried to act normally...or as normal as possible...while it felt like the butterflies in her stomach were trying to escape. She worked on some of her theoretical Arithmancy projections to keep herself occupied throughout the afternoon. Then she made dinner alone.

When Severus arrived, he seemed subdued, and although he didn't ignore her, neither did he seem to want to engage her in conversation. This led Hermione to worry further that he was regretting their interlude. After eating, she decided to address the issue head on.

Taking a deep breath, Hermione forged ahead. "Are you sorry that you showed me comfort and kindness last night?"

"No, of course not," he replied, looking up. He seemed surprised. "Is that what you think? I was afraid you might have thought my actions too forward."

"No, Severus. I very much appreciated your support. For a long time I've had only Harry to share my fears and nightmares with. Sometimes I feel very alone."

He frowned slightly. "I know the feeling."

"I'm sure if anyone could understand, it would be you. You have been alone for so very long, Severus."

Hermione decided now was the time to lay the cards on the table and ask what needed to be asked.

"Listen, you know why Lucius and I came here. You know all about the triad. I think we need to clear the air between us and decide just where we stand with each other."

Severus hesitated but then nodded. "Yes, I suppose you are right. It would be best to honest with each other and assess our rela... situation."

"Fine. Since this was my idea, I'll go first. Let me say, and it will probably come as no surprise to you, that the very idea of this triad was repellent to me at first. Even before I learned the true task, the very idea of having to be paired with two Slytherins seemed like an impossible working environment.

"Once I learned that it was Lucius, and you as well, it seemed like an even more unlikely proposition.

"But by the time Lucius had revealed the true purpose, the Tantric ritual, I had begun to accept him somewhat. Grudgingly at first, but then he began to grow on me. I came to realize that he wasn't the man I remembered from my youth; he'd changed and very much for the better in my eyes." Hermione paused in her explanation, tracing nervous circles on the table with her fingertips. "But the thought of you as the third member terrified me. All I could think of was how you had never really liked me at school, and I just didn't see how it could possibly work between us."

"Surely you knew that while I was your teacher, I was forced to treat you with disdain because of my supposed position amongst the Dark Lord's ranks. I had no real personal animosity towards you."

With a sigh, Hermione shook her head slightly, then shrugged. "I know it now because you have explained it to me, and I believe you. Perhaps it should have been clear to me then, but it wasn't. It felt to me that you had a very real and intense dislike towards me. And it most definitely felt personal. I always tried so hard to earn your approval, and I respected you in spite of how you treated us. I was devastated when I thought that you had betrayed Dumbledore and the Order; when I learned the truth I was very relieved. All those years, when I thought you were dead, I mourned your loss. When I learned you were still alive and designated as our third, I was simultaneously elated and panic-stricken."

Hermione's little finger brushed up against his on the table, and when he looked up, she caught his gaze, staring into his eyes for a moment. She wished she knew what he was thinking, but she was no Legilimens.

"When we arrived here, that first night, things didn't go well. That's my fault as much as anyone's. But when I awoke in the tub, and you were standing there, staring at me, well... I just freaked out, I suppose. I was tired and crabby and totally embarrassed, and I may have overreacted."

At his admonishing look, she quickly corrected. "All right, I definitely overreacted." She swallowed hard and continued, her voice dropping so low he had to lean in closer to hear her words. "But the words you said... they hurt me, Severus, very much. And even though things are better between us now, I can't forget what was said that night. If we decide to proceed with the triad, it seems to me that the need for trust is a top priority, especially with a Tantric ritual involved. But how can I trust myself with a man who deep down still thinks I am a nagging harpy, that I am inadequate and undesirable? That's all I'll ever be able to think of."

Severus looked stunned upon hearing her revelations. He said nothing for several seconds, and Hermione took his silence badly. With a muffled sob, she stood to dash into the bedroom. He grabbed her wrist before she could make her escape. "Hermione, please don't go. Let me explain. Or at least try to."

She stood by his side, hesitating for several moments, unwilling to risk further embarrassment, but finally she sat back down. He didn't release his grasp on her wrist, but scooted his chair closer facing her. "I am sorry for the things I said that night. Truly. Much like you, I was tired and shocked at finding a strange woman in my bathtub and then embarrassed that I'd been caught ogling you. I didn't realize it was you at first, you know, your face was turned to the side and partially covered by your hair. I was shocked when I realized it was you."

Severus leaned forward, resting one elbow on the table, but never releasing his grip on her as if afraid she might bolt. His thumb traced back and forth across the tender skin at the base of her wrist, and with his other hand, he tipped her chin up so he could look into her eyes.

"I have no idea what possessed me to say the things I said. They just spewed forth from my mouth with no conscious thought. I told Lucius later that, in my mind, seeing you there opened up a connection with Dumbledore and Potter and Hogwarts, and therefore, by association, with all those horrible years under Voldemort's thumb. Six years ago, I walked away from all of that and never looked back. I became very good at not remembering, and seeing you brought it all back. That made me angry.

"But in all honesty, I think it was more than just that. I was angry because I'd been admiring you, yearning for you in all your naked glory right there in my bathtub. When I realized it was *you*, Hermione Granger, in that instant I knew I could never have you because you were Weasley's. Or so I thought. Then when you verbally attacked me, suddenly I wanted nothing more than to put you in your place and to hurt you before you had the chance to hurt me. So, I said anything and everything that sprang to my mind. I was angry, and I *wanted* to hurt you, to cut you with my words. I'd had years of experience at it.

"Afterward, I just didn't know how to make it up to you or relate to you. You seemed to get along so well with Lucius...there was such an easy camaraderie between the two of you. I just felt awkward and out of place. I didn't know how to go about approaching you. After Lucius left us by ourselves, I had to try to get along with you on my own. It's not easy for me; I'm not a people person. Believe me when I say this, Hermione, I am truly sorry now for every hurt I've ever caused you."

She'd been blinking madly, trying to fight back tears, not wanting him to see her cry. But she lost the battle. As one lone tear trickled down her cheek, he brushed it away with his thumb and brought the other hand up to cradle her face, then he kissed her gently. "How could you possibly believe any of that drive! I spouted? No man, wizard or Muggle, could look at you and find you undesirable."

Hermione half sniffled and half snorted at his words. "Right, because what every man really wants is a nagging, bossy, swotty, little know-it-all in his bed," she responded sadly.

Severus stood up and pulled her into his arms. "This man does," he replied before lowering his lips to hers. He brushed over them lightly at first, then again more firmly, his lips tracing the shape of her mouth, then he gently nipped at her bottom lip. As her lips parted for him, he deepened the kiss, his tongue slipping in to dance with hers, to delve over and over into her mouth as he leaned into her body, feeling her curves pressed against him.

She responded in kind, her palms slid slowly up his chest. One hand threaded through his hair, holding him closer, and the other caressed the side of his neck, her fingers

gliding up over his cheek. He pulled back to look down into her eyes, and her fingers traced over his lips.

"Severus?" she whispered. He captured her finger in his mouth, sucking it in and scraping his teeth lightly over the pad, rubbing his tongue up and down it. This caused her to gasp and shudder in his arms.

"What are we doing?" she asked after another earth-moving kiss. She sounded like someone who'd been thoroughly Confused.

He scooped her up and carried her to the bedroom, then gently lowered her feet to the floor next to the bed. His hands caressed up and down her arms and snaked around her waist to glide down over the cheeks of her arse. He pulled her body in tightly against his, so he could he grind his erection against her.

In that deep, sexy, black velvet voice of his, he told her in no uncertain terms exactly what he planned to do. "First, I'm going to undress you...ever so slowly. I'm going to enjoy removing each and every thing you have on. Then I intend to worship you. I plan to touch you, learn your body. Where are you most sensitive, a chuisse mo chroí? Here?" he asked as he traced behind her ear and down her neck. "Or here?" His fingers dipped between her breasts, then traveled lightly across the tips, which tightened instantly into hard little peaks. "Or here?" His fingers slid lower down her stomach, stopping just short of the vee of her thighs. She moaned softly, her body jerking towards those seeking fingers. But he stopped there.

"After that, I plan to kiss and taste and lick and nibble and suck on every single inch of your sweet, delectable body until you're begging me to fuck you. And I will. I'll fuck you until you scream. And when we're done with that, I'm going to do it all over again. And maybe even again after that," he concluded with a growl as he nuzzled her neck.

Hermione didn't say anything for a minute, and he was afraid perhaps he'd been too bold and frightened her off. Then with a gasp, she stuttered, "S... so... sounds good to me."

With a sly smile, Severus proceeded to meticulously carry out each and every one of his promises.

~

When her eyes opened in the hazy predawn light that filtered through the window, it was to find her head resting on Severus' shoulder and her left arm and leg wrapped around his body in a lazy sprawl.

Severus hadn't moved and still appeared to be sound asleep. This gave Hermione the opportunity to peruse his body as she hadn't been given the chance to the night before. She lightly stroked her fingertips across his chest, tracing the thin line of hair that traveled down his stomach. She paused to lightly circle his navel before moving lower. Checking to make sure he was still sleeping soundly, she lifted the sheets and slid slowly down in the bed.

Severus groaned aloud. In his dreams he felt long curly hair fall across his thighs as a hot mouth licked and teased his cock. A tight little fist encircled the base as a tongue licked up and down, up and down before teasing lightly along the slit. Her lips closed over the tip, then slid down and sucked, gently at first, then harder. He groaned again as he came awake and realized it was no dream. Her other hand slipped lower and played with his balls, squeezing them gently before rolling them between her fingers. Lifting the covers, he looked down to see only the top of her curly, brown hair.

"Oh, you wicked, wicked witch," he growled, and he could actually feel her smiling around a mouthful of his hard cock.

He let her continue for several minutes. When he felt his climax approaching, he tried to draw her up from her position between his legs. Hermione refused, mumbling, "uh uh," in denial as she worked him harder still until he ejaculated with a sharp cry. She pulled away, and giving his cock a final kiss, she slid up into his arms and rested her head on his shoulder.

"Good morning," she greeted him brightly with a self-satisfied smile on her face.

"It is indeed," he replied, leaning down to kiss her; he tasted himself on her lips. "You didn't have to do that."

"I wanted to. You wouldn't let me do anything last night. I wanted to touch you, taste you, but you wouldn't let me," she replied.

"If we had started with that last night, muirín, our evening would have ended before it began. Believe me, I would not have been able to last."

"What does that mean? Muirín? You called me that the other night too, and the other, ah khooshlah ah.. something?"

"It's Irish. 'Muirín' means sweetheart or darling, and 'a chuisse mo chroí' translates as pulse of my heart. It's an endearment. My Grandmother Snape was from originally from Ireland. I picked up a few terms from her that stick in my mind. She's the gran I told you about, the one who taught me to play cribbage."

Hermione smiled at the thought that he had used terms of endearment he'd learned from his gran. It made her feel good...closer to him somehow. She snuggled up close to him. "I suppose now that we have come to an understanding, we need to send a message to Lucius to let him know. Then we must get busy and start researching this Tantric ritual."

Severus chuckled, the sound rumbled against her ear pressed to his chest. "What?" she asked, raising her head. "You know something, don't you? What is it?"

"Lucius conveniently forgot to inform you, did he? It's probably one of the main reasons your Arithmantic formulas chose me as the third...aside from meeting the Slytherin requirement."

Sitting up abruptly and pulling the sheet to her chest, her eyes narrowed. "Lucius didn't tell me...what?"

Gods be damned, I'm tired of people keeping information from me, or only giving me half truths."

"Calm down. It's just that there will be very little research required. In all my years of travel and study, I devoted an entire year in seclusion in Tibet and another several months in India to learning many of the ancient ways. This included studying and perfecting my knowledge of Tantric methods and rituals."

Hermione thought for several minutes before speaking, then she asked, "So last night... was that Tantric sex?"

"No, that was just damn good...make that damn great sex. But Tantric? No."

"Oh, Merlin. If it gets any more intense than that, I don't know that I'll survive it," Hermione admitted, blushing when she thought of all the things they had done.

"I probably do incorporate some of the techniques of Tantra subconsciously, the touching, sensual massage, trying to be aware of what my partner is feeling. But to actually perform a Tantric ritual will require time to become comfortable with each other and learn what pleases each of our partners. There are actual rituals of preparation, breathing, meditation; it is all combined into the process. The effect will be a much heightened sense of awareness and a prolonged state of sexual tension and extremely intense orgasms, which will bring about a release of concentrated positive energy."

"Oh, sweet Circe, we really are going to kill each other, aren't we? But instead of through violence it will be death by sex."

Severus did something Hermione had never heard him do. He actually laughed. Then he proceeded to make love to her again.

~

It was a couple of hours later before they finally managed to get out of bed. Hermione had finished showering and dressing and had gone out to start breakfast while

Severus finished shaving. While he stood in front of the bathroom mirror, he heard the sharp pop of Apparition and a short scream from Hermione that was cut off abruptly. With nothing but a towel wrapped around his hips and half his face covered with shaving cream, he grabbed his wand and dashed into the great room.

Darting through the door, he crouched in a defensive stance to find...not an army of Death Eaters holding Hermione prisoner...but one blond, former Death Eater, holding Hermione tightly in his embrace.

Taking in Severus' appearance, Lucius quirked an eyebrow as he disentangled his lips from Hermione's and drawled, "Well, hello, old friend."

"Lucius, you might have warned us. I heard Hermione scream and assumed the worst," grumbled Severus.

Leaving Lucius' arms, she crossed the room to Severus and hugged him as well. "My hero," she sighed.

"Am I correct in assuming that you two have worked out your differences?" asked Lucius.

"You are," affirmed Hermione with a smile, going back into his arms to hug him again. "We were planning to contact you right after breakfast."

Severus was about to ask Lucius what had prompted his return, but before he could voice the question something in his friend's expression stopped him. Lucius gave a little shake of his head while saying, "You'd best get dressed Severus, we have something to discuss."

~

Only a few moments later, they all sat at the table. Hermione had made tea. It appeared she had not picked up on Lucius' distress as Severus had. She poured tea in each of their cups and would have set about making breakfast, but Lucius drew her to sit down between them.

"Hermione, I haven't come because of the triad. I wish I had. It's... I... there's bad news." He stopped, swallowed hard, then closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead as though it hurt.

"Lucius, what is it?"

He looked at her with pain in his eyes. He didn't want to be the one to tell her this.

"Lucius, please. You're scaring me. Just say it, just tell me."

"The plagues, they're spreading."

She put her hand on his in concern. "Oh, Lucius, no. Is it...is it Draco?"

With eyes filled by sadness, he shook his head and slowly lifted his gaze to hers, not wanting to be the bearer of this tragedy. Turning his hand over to hold hers in his, he said, "No, it's not Draco. I'm sorry, Hermione, I'm so sorry. It's Harry's son. It's James Potter."

tbc

Eleven

Chapter 11 of 12

It's seven years after the end of the war and Voldemort's fall; the wizarding world is in shambles. Hermione uses Arithmancy to figure out that a new triad needs to be formed to restore balance to the wizarding world.

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter. I make no money here.

AN: This story was written for the 2010 ss/hg_exchange as a gift for lady_karelia. Many thanks to my wonderful betas, dreamy_dragon73 and Clairvoyant.

"Jamie?" Hermione's face drained of all color. She couldn't breathe, couldn't think. *This wasn't happening; this couldn't be happening.* She swallowed hard. "Is he... is he? Oh, gods, he's not..."

"No!" exclaimed Lucius suddenly, as if realizing what she was thinking. "No, he's alive for now. But he's very, very ill, Hermione. There are very few who have survived once the plague's been contracted. Sweetheart, I'm so sorry."

"Jamie," she whispered. Then she crossed arms on the table and laid her head down. She had to think *What to do? What to do?*

Lucius and Severus each leaned in close on either side, holding her, offering support.

Suddenly, Hermione sat straight up. "We have to go back; we have to do the ritual right now. Today... tomorrow. That could turn things around. That's what we have to do...as soon as we can."

Severus turned her to face him, his hands gently grasping her arms as he explained slowly and calmly. "Hermione, that's not possible. I explained earlier, remember? The ritual takes time, preparation. It's not just a matter of the three of us joining for sex; as enjoyable as that would be, it wouldn't achieve what we need for it to work. I believe for the best results we should try to incorporate one of the days the old ones celebrated. Ostara has already passed. Beltane is approaching, but that is too soon...there's not enough time. Even Litha, the summer solstice is too close. I think we need several months, which puts us at Mabon, the autumnal equinox."

"But that's nearly six months! No. Severus, that's too late. Jamie needs me to do something now," she said, clenching her fists in his shirt.

Suddenly, Severus sprang up from his chair with such force that the chair crashed over backwards. "The Spiralhorn Sprouts!" he nearly shouted.

"Severus, how can you worry about those stupid sprouts now!" Hermione responded angrily.

He grabbed her again and gave her a little shake. "Think, Hermione, think. You've read the research. The potion made with the sprouts is supposed to..."

"...save a person even on the very brink of death. Oh my gods, Severus! I'm sorry. You're right. I wasn't thinking clearly. That could be the solution. We need to find those sprouts. Everything is starting to thaw; it should be anytime. I'll help you look. Let's get out there right now."

Lucius pulled her back around to face him. "No, Hermione, you need to go back to England..."

"Lucius, don't you understand? We need to help Severus find those sprouts."

He sat her down in the chair and knelt before her. "Hermione, I agree Severus' potion with these sprouts may be the key. But you can't wait for that, darling, you must go back now. I'm not trying to be negative, but even... when we find them, it's still going to take time for him to brew the potion. You mustn't wait that long. Young James needs you now, love. Potter needs you now. Kingsley says he's at the end of his rope."

"Oh, Lucius. Poor Harry. He must be going mad; Jamie is everything to him; You're right, of course, I need to go back immediately. How much time, Lucius? Before the plague runs its course? How long do we have?"

"I'm not sure. Normally several weeks, I think. But... he is so very young, I don't know if he'll be able to last that long. We can only hope there's enough time. I have a Portkey ready. I'll escort you back, then I'll come back here and help Severus."

Severus stood at her side and agreed, "He's right, and I'll get Art and Little Anne. We'll have them get all 'the boys' to help, too. If those damn sprouts are out there, we'll find them, I swear."

~

When they arrived in England, Lucius immediately escorted Hermione to St. Mungo's. They were shown to a private waiting area where George, Angelina, Bill and Charlie were waiting. Just after Lucius and Hermione arrived, Harry entered, and Hermione flew into his arms, hugging him tightly.

Harry choked back a sob as he pulled Hermione close to him, squeezing his best friend so hard she could barely breathe. "I'm so glad you're home, sis. I don't know what to do, I feel so helpless. It's so hopeless. He's my little boy. I can't lose him too, I just can't." Harry confided to his oldest and dearest friend. "I'm scared, Hermione, so scared. I don't think I can survive this; to lose him now, it's more than I can bear."

Hermione held him as they cried together in their fear. Then she tried to reassure him. "Oh, Harry, I wish I'd been here for you, for both of you. We aren't going to lose him. Severus has an idea, Harry. He's on the trail of a very rare, very potent potion ingredient. It could be the solution...the miracle we need. Don't lose hope yet. You must stay strong for James. He has to fight, to hang on until Severus can find these sprouts and brew the potion."

Harry looked up at her through reddened eyes, but here was a spark of hope in them. "You found him? You found Professor Snape?"

Lucius approached and laid a hand on his shoulder. "It's true, Harry. I'm going back there now, to Ontario, to help Severus search."

The hope in Harry's eyes dimmed at the news. "So, he doesn't actually have this plant yet. It's all just chance then, isn't it?"

"Harry, it's the best chance we have," Hermione said. "This is Severus Snape we're talking about. He can 'bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death.' He is our best chance."

Hermione later went in to visit James and was able to briefly bring a smile to the little boy's face. He looked so very small in the big hospital bed, the sheets ruffled around him and a plushie dragon clutched in his arms. His face was flushed, and as she bent to brush a kiss across his brow, she could feel the heat of the fever radiating from him.

"Aunt Mymee, you're back! I missed you soooo much!"

"I've missed you too, Jamie, my love."

"I'm so hot, Aunt Mymee. I don't feel very good, an' I wanna to go home," the little boy grumbled.

"I know, sweetie. But you have to be strong. I have a friend who's working on a potion to help make you better. So, promise me you'll fight as hard as you can, Jamie. Don't give up, you mustn't ever give up, love."

"I'll try, Auntie," agreed the little boy in a weak voice.

~

All three of the Weasley brothers wanted to go back with Lucius to help with the search. After some discussion, they finally decided that since no one knew positively where the sprouts might be, it would be counter-productive to have legions of people tromping through the woods, possibly crushing the tender shoots before they even had a chance to show themselves. Lucius finally convinced all but Charlie to stay with Harry. Living on the dragon reservation, Charlie was used to harsh conditions, and his keen eyes could be an asset in searching from the air.

Before leaving, Lucius came to say his goodbyes to Hermione. They slipped away from the group for a few minutes of privacy. Finding an empty room, Lucius pulled her inside and locked the door. He then took her in his arms and just held her, offering her what comfort he could.

"Oh, Lucius, he's so small and so ill. I'm really afraid that whatever happens it may be too little, too late," she whispered.

"Don't give up hope, love. If anyone can do this, it's Severus. We will be doing all we can. Your job is to be here for Harry and the boy. Stay strong: they will need to draw from your strength."

"I'll do my best, Lucius, but right now I don't feel very strong. I feel terrified. This is something I have no control over, and it's so frustrating." Hermione pulled him over to a chair by the window pushed him to sit and climbed into his lap. "Just hold me for a bit before you have to go, will you, Lucius? Please?"

"Of course, my dear. I'd hold you all night if I could." Lucius stroked her hair and traced little circles on her back.

"So, I take it by Severus' state of disarray on my arrival that you two have worked out your differences?"

It made Hermione smile to remember Severus rushing to her defense in nothing but a towel with shaving cream on his face, his wand at the ready. "Yes, we have," she responded with a chuckle. "We did have a bit of a tough go of it at first, but you were absolutely right. With you gone we simply had to learn how to deal with each other."

"And did you take my advice and seduce him?"

"No, not really. If anything, I think he seduced me," she answered, blushing at the memory.

"We'd had a confrontation and decided that we both needed to voice our feelings and concerns. Somehow that whole thing ended with Severus kissing me and telling me in his oh so sexy voice all the things he planned to do with me...to me...in very explicit detail. After that, I basically just melted into a giant puddle of goo, and he had his way with me. It was wonderful," Hermione concluded with a knowing smile.

"I'll just bet it was. Now, why didn't I think of doing that?"

"Once this is all resolved, and young James is cured, we will proceed with the triad then?"

The very fact that Lucius didn't say *if* James was cured, but simply assumed that Severus would find the cure, endeared him to Hermione's heart far more than a hundred red roses, ten pounds of Honeyduke's finest chocolate or anything else he could have done. "Yes, I think we are in full agreement on that point," she replied. "Once everything has settled, Severus will begin training us in the Tantric methods necessary to complete the ritual. And by the way, *why* didn't you tell me that he was already trained in Tantric magic? Withholding information again?"

"You were so positive that he wouldn't agree to join the triad. I didn't want to get your hopes up."

"Hmm... maybe so. Still, you know how much I dislike not having all of the pertinent data. Don't do it again, Lucius, or I promise you there will be hell to pay."

"Yes, dear," he said with with mock display of meekness. "Whatever you say, dear."

"Oh, you!" she replied with a teasing slap on his arm.

~

The following days took on a repetitive feel as one day followed the next with little change. Hermione spent all of her waking hours at St. Mungo's, either at Jamie's side or Harry's. She would stay there for unending hours until George or Bill or Kingsley would realize that she had been there for a ridiculously long amount of time and would drag her home to 12 Grimmauld Place. She would be ordered to sleep, but after far too short a time, she would find herself awakened by nightmares of attending Jamie's funeral and would rush back to the hospital to reassure herself that there was still time.

There were several occasions that were touch and go as the little boy's temperature spiked far too high, and he slipped into a delirium. Hermione resorted to Muggle means when magical treatment failed to lower his fever, and she would sponge him with lukewarm water, give him Muggle fever medications and force juices and fluids down him. She physically threw one Healer out of the room, and Harry had to hold her back from doing bodily harm to the woman after she had suggested that the time had come to just let the boy go in peace. It was at that point Harry and Hermione agreed to take James home to Grimmauld Place. By their own admission there was nothing more the St. Mungo's staff could offer.

On day ten came the first breakthrough when they received news from Charlie that they had actually found several clusters of what Severus believed were the Spiralhorn Sprouts. It would take at least three to four more days before they were mature enough to harvest, and then the potion still needed to be brewed.

She received regular updates from Lucius, who reported that Severus was working himself ragged. He toiled for long hours until, like Hermione, he had to be forced to rest for his own good, lest he collapse from exhaustion. She wrote back to both Lucius and Severus and tried to let them know how much their actions meant to her, but the words felt inadequate, and she wished that she could see and touch and hold both of her wizards.

Oh, Merlin, when had she started thinking of them as her wizards? she wondered. And yet, once the thought was there and had voiced itself in her brain, she was unable to erase it from her mind. Finally, she decided she rather liked the idea and decided to leave it where it was.

It was on day fourteen that Charlie returned to England. Enough of the sprouts had been located and harvested for Severus to use for his potion making. Since Charlie's potion skills were nothing more than the bare basics, he had opted to return to England to be with his family. He reported that Snape had estimated it would take several days to brew and test the potion. It gave them all a new hope, but with each day that passed James' condition continued to deteriorate. Hermione was desolate.

On day nineteen they had all come to accept that James would most likely not live out the day. The entire family was gathered around the little boy's bedside. Harry was sitting on one side of the bed, and Hermione knelt on the other; they both held one of the little boy's hands. Harry kept lightly stroking his son's cheek or hair while Hermione held Jamie's little hand in hers and kissed the back of it or stroked it against her cheek.

Suddenly there was a commotion in the hallway, and the door swung wide to admit both Lucius and Severus. The dark-haired wizard looked haggard as he stalked into the room to stand behind Hermione. She surged to her feet to throw herself at him and wrapped him in her arms. Seeing Lucius right behind him, she reached for him with a free hand to join in a three-way embrace.

Most of the Weasleys looked a bit surprised by the display, but Charlie and Harry did not seem at all concerned at all by the show of affection.

"Oh, Severus," choked Hermione. "I'm afraid it's too late; he is on his deathbed."

"Perhaps not, *muirín*," whispered Severus in her ear. He turned to Harry and spoke. "Mr. Potter... Harry. There may yet be time. However, I must tell you truthfully this potion has not been used in nearly a hundred years. The only evidence I have is purely anecdotal. I have tested it successfully on field mice and niffers, but I have no real proof of its efficacy in humans...wizards. I have no idea how your son might react to it."

"Professor Snape, at this point we have no hope left. He is dying. If we do nothing, he will die. If there is even one chance in a million, please... please give it to him."

Severus measured out the proper dose, then sat at the edge of the little boy's bed.

"Severus, what are you waiting for?" demanded Hermione.

"This is the hardest part, a *chuisle*. This is literally a 'last chance' potion. It must be administered at the very last possible moment. As horrifying as it is for the loved ones, we must wait. I'm so very sorry to put you through this."

They waited in silence except for the sniffles and subdued sobs from the aunts and uncles and the harsh labored breathing of the patient. James' lips looked blue, his skin took on a deathly greyish pallor, his breathing deteriorated to a painfully labored gasp. At what seemed like the final desperate gurgle, Severus' hand swooped in, and parting the boy's lips, he poured the potion into his mouth and gently massaged his throat. "Swallow, boy, swallow," he commanded.

He felt the boy's throat muscles contract slightly, and as the potion slid slowly down, there was an almost instantaneous response. James breathed a heavy sigh and his breathing evened. Slowly, his blue lips pinked up, and his deathly pallor brightened.

"Oh, my dear gods above," gasped Hermione. "It's working!" She reached across Jamie to clasp Harry's hand. "Harry, he's brought us our miracle!"

At that moment James's eyes blinked open. "Daddy?" His little voice was weak and scratchy, but the sound was music to their ears. The Weasley aunts and uncles who were huddled around the end of the bed embraced each other in relief. After a few minutes of quiet rejoicing, they slipped from the room, giving the little family some time.

Hermione collapsed into sobs. Lucius, who had knelt next to her, cuddled her close in support, and Severus slid off the edge of the bed on her other side to wrap his arms around her too.

"Daddy?" whispered James. "Why is Aunt Mymee crying, and who are those boys hugging her?"

Harry snorted through his own tears. "Sometimes people cry when they're happy, son. And your Aunt Mymee is very, very happy that you are going to get better now. And those two boys are good friends of hers. Mr. Snape, the dark-haired one, made the potion that helped you get better."

"Oh, she told me about him. Who's the other one... the pretty one?"

This time it was Severus who snorted. Pulling slightly away from her two wizards, Hermione answered the boy, "This is Mr. Malfoy, Jamie. He helped me search for Mr. Snape. We had to travel far away and solve lots of clues to figure out where he was."

"You had a 'venture, Auntie, just like you usta' have with my daddy and Uncle Ron."

"Why, I suppose you're right, Jamie," she replied, leaning back against her wizards with a satisfied smile. "It was a wonderful adventure, indeed."

Harry leaned in to whisper into his son's ear. "I have a feeling that before long those boys will be your two newest uncles, mate."

"Cool," he responded with a yawn as his eyes drifted shut in a peaceful sleep.

Harry bent down to kiss his son's forehead. Then, he came around the bed and clasped Severus on the shoulder. "I can never thank you enough, sir... er... Severus. Hermione's right, you have truly brought us a miracle."

~

Hermione awoke the next morning in her own bed, which she had enlarged to accommodate two extra man-sized bodies. Severus was still sound asleep next to her; he had been totally exhausted. According to Lucius, Severus had not slept for more than ten to fifteen minutes at any given time for the past five days.

Realizing her other wizard had left the bed for a trip to the loo, Hermione slipped out as well. Intercepting Lucius on his way back to the bed, she led him instead to a comfy chair across the room.

With a wicked smile on her face, she dropped gracefully to her knees between his legs. She ran her fingers up and down his legs, teasingly sliding under the edges of the silk boxers he'd slept in, drawing ever closer to his groin.

"What are you up to, witch?"

Untying his dressing gown, she slowly pushed back the silk and slipped her fingers around the top of his boxers, sliding them down. "Lift up," she commanded, and as he complied she slid them down his legs and off completely, her fingers gliding over the firm muscles appreciatively.

"Ummmm..." she hummed as his cock sprang to life, and he widened his legs to give her better access. One of her hands delved lower to caress and play with his sack as the other closed around the base of his cock with a loose grip to stroke up and down, causing him to groan out loud.

"Shhhhh..." she admonished. "I don't want to wake up Severus. He drove himself to exhaustion; he needs his rest. But I've wanted to do this for so long, Lucius, fantasized about it. I can't wait any longer." Saying that, her tongue flicked out to travel up and down his cock again and again until she dropped to nuzzle his balls. She took first one then the other into her warm mouth to suck it and roll her tongue around it. His fingers tightened on the arms of the chair as he tried to contain his moans of pleasure. Hermione rose up on her knees and engulfed him in her mouth, sliding down his shaft as far as she could and back up, sucking as she went, giving a little swirl around the tip with her tongue.

She widened her knees and brought one hand down to touch herself as she continued to suck and bob up and down on Lucius' cock. As he approached the point of no return, he wrapped his fingers through her hair and pulled her off him with a soft pop. Hermione whined and tried to get her mouth back around him. "Stop, love. Please, I want you. I want to come inside this first time. Come to me, take me inside."

Finally understanding his words, she rose to her feet and climbed onto his lap. Pulling up her nightgown, she straddled his legs and with a sigh of pleasure, settled herself on his hard cock. "Oh, my sweet Merlin, Lucius, you feel so good. I've wanted this for so long, dreamed of being with you, with both my wizards." Hermione moaned. "I never would have imagined myself like this."

Lucius gathered her gown up to her waist and pulled it up as she lifted her arms, so he could peel it up over her head and toss it aside. Then he caressed her breasts as he kissed her, slowly at first, then deeper. He nuzzled down her neck, across her collarbones and down further to lick and suckle her nipples into tight tender buds. They rocked together for several minutes, the tension building until they were thrusting against each other with abandon, each reaching for that elusive peak. They soon reached the pinnacle and tumbled over with a loud shout of completion from Lucius and a long keening cry from Hermione.

"Well, that was a most entertaining display to awake to," drawled Severus from the bed.

With a giggle, Hermione looked over her shoulder to see Severus, uncovered and completely nude. He was lying on his left side, his head propped up on his left hand, his right hip bent up, foot planted on the bed as he leisurely stroked his engorged penis.

"We were trying to be quiet about it; we didn't want to wake you," she said as she crossed the room to slide onto the bed next to him. She kissed the side of his neck and replaced his fingers on his cock with her own.

"Really? And you think that was being quiet?" he asked with a smirk on his face.

"We got carried away," she explained with a blush as Lucius climbed in behind her and brushed her hair to the side so he could nibble on her shoulder. One hand reached around her to tweak one of Severus' nipples before sliding down to fondle Hermione's breast.

Just then there was a knock on the door. "Er... Hermione? Are you... er... all right in there?" Harry's voice asked quietly from the other side. "The others wanted me to check."

"Oh, fuck. We didn't use any Silencing Charms!" she whispered before collapsing in nervous giggles. "Uhhh... yes, Harry... ummm... that is... uh..."

Lucius finally took mercy on her and called out to Harry. "Hermione is fine, Harry. We will endeavor to be more quiet or to make better use of privacy spells from here on out."

"Yes," added Severus helpfully. "And don't expect to see any of us for the next day or possibly two. I am quite certain we will not be leaving the comfort of our bed anytime soon. We are all so very exhausted, you know."

"Right... exhausted," they heard Harry mutter. "Listen, just to be on the safe side, I'm casting my own silencing spell on this whole wing. Enjoy, you three, see you in a day or two."

Hermione slapped her hand over her eyes. "Oh, my gods!" she exclaimed in embarrassment.

A short while later there was no embarrassment at all involved in her cries of fulfillment.

tbc

Twelve

Chapter 12 of 12

It's seven years after the end of the war and Voldemort's fall; the wizarding world is in shambles. Hermione uses Arithmancy to figure out that a new triad needs to be formed to restore balance to the wizarding world.

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter. I make no money here.

AN: This story was written for the 2010 ss/hg_exchange as a gift for lady_karelia. Many thanks to my wonderful betas, dreamy_dragon73 and Clairvoyant.

Once James had recovered from his illness, Hermione left 12 Grimmauld Place. The three made a quick trip back to Ontario because Hermione wanted to say goodbye to Little Anne and Art. She needed to thank them for all their help, especially for helping to find the Spiralhorn Sprouts to cure Jamie. Severus made arrangements to rent the cabin every year for the spring thaw to harvest more sprouts and visit their friends. After returning to England, Hermione, Severus and Lucius had all settled together in Malfoy Manor.

They had some discussions about how they saw the whole triad functioning. Neither Lucius or Severus had been openly sexually active with men before...in spite of all the rumors of debauched Death Eater revels. And yet, perhaps as a result of the triad, they each felt something of an attraction there now, which Lucius used as an excuse as to why he'd been teasing and flirting with Severus for weeks. Hermione pointed out that while they could function quite well with her as the head point of the triad and the two men sharing her affections between them, it would be a much stronger threesome if all partners were equal in all ways, including sex. And she admitted that for some reason she found the idea of the two of them together rather sexy. They decided to work on it.

The three then spent the next five months working on perfecting their Tantric techniques in preparation for the planned ritual. Mabon was quickly approaching, and they felt themselves well prepared for the task.

To say they had an easy time of adjustment to each other would be untrue. They still had their moments of anger and frustration. Clashes of personalities and temperaments were a common occurrence. It was usually Severus and Hermione's tempers at odds with each other with Lucius as the mediator. But there were times when the history of the two friends caused Hermione to feel separate and isolated from the men. Then again, the same could be said for Severus when Hermione and Lucius spent hours on end wrapped up in advanced Arithmantic calculations that utterly bored him. But they were all learning. Learning from each other how to cope with their differences and their passionate natures.

~

Hermione was working on her Arithmantic formulas and had discovered a problem with the data regarding the triad. An anomaly. She was uncertain how to deal with it.

With the advent of Severus' 'last-chance' potion, the plagues that had been affecting the wizarding world seemed to be coming under control. The other problems that had been attributed to the abundance of negative energy seemed to be slowly resolving themselves, as well.

They had been very diligent in their practice sessions, and Severus had a theory. He felt that although they had not formally performed the ritual, the powerful release of energy created by all of their enthusiastic preparation sessions was having a positive effect on the wizarding world.

The thing that had Hermione worried was that her projections showed if things continued in the same fashion there wouldn't actually be any need to for them to form the triad at all. All of the problems would be on a steady path to self-repair without them having to do anything. It might take longer without the ritual than with it, but the wizarding world was no longer in such desperate straits as to make it absolutely necessary.

She would be free to live her life without being tied to two irascible Slytherins. Six months ago she would have been elated to have this news. But now the very thought left her feeling cold and alone. She *wanted* to be tied to her Slytherins, but would they want to be tied to her? For one brief moment, she considered keeping the information to herself, just shoving all of her calculations in the waste bin and pretending she knew nothing about them, just going ahead with the ritual as planned. Once completed, the binding would be irreversible.

But then, she thought about how she hated it when people didn't give her all of the pertinent information to make an informed decision. She knew that she had to tell Lucius and Severus the truth, even if it meant that she might lose them. It was only fair to give them the choice. She was miserable because deep down she feared what their choice might be.

~

Hermione approached Lucius' study and found him at his desk going over some documents from his many business ventures.

"Hermione, what's wrong? You look upset, love," he asked.

"I've found some information that's a little unsettling, Lucius. I'd like to discuss it with both you and Severus."

"Very well, let's meet in the library in..." he checked the time. "Oh... shall we say an hour?" At her nod of approval he added, "I'll fetch Severus from his lab and meet you there then."

~

Once Hermione left his study, Lucius immediately popped into Severus' lab.

"We have trouble brewing, I'm afraid," Lucius informed his friend grimly.

"You always overreact. What seems to be the problem?" Severus asked while keeping count of the clockwise stirs to the potion in his cauldron.

"I think Hermione has realized the truth. She just came to my study. She wants to talk to both of us. She looked worried."

"It's probably about something else entirely," suggested Severus.

"I don't think so; she had her hands full of Arithmantic calculations. I think she's been running the numbers and has come to the realization that the triad is no longer a real

necessity."

"Damn it! I was hoping she wouldn't figure it out until after the binding was enacted," Severus said. He'd stopped stirring and had ruined his batch of potion. "Oh, fuck!" he exclaimed, throwing the stirring rod in the sink and banishing the contents of the now ruined potion.

"We really must do something, Lucius, or we're going to lose her. She wanted no part of this whole triad in the first place, and now she has an out. Maybe we could Oblivate her memory of the recent data, and by the time she figures it out again, it would be too late, and she would already be bound to us."

"That seems fairly extreme, don't you think, Severus? If I didn't know you as well as I do, I'd think you were actually serious. Perhaps we should try being honest with her."

"Now *there's* a novel approach," Severus sneered, his voice thick with sarcasm, "but not very Slytherin of you, though, is it? I swear you're becoming rather Hufflepuffish in your old age."

"Don't let Kingsley hear you denigrate his house, or he'll find a way to hex you."

"Hmm... Kingsley. Now there's an idea. He's a good friend. Maybe we could convince him to convince Hermione that he still needs the triad. She would probably do it if he asked her to."

"Maybe she would do it if we asked her Severus, if we told her the truth."

Severus sniffed. "The truth? Is that the best you can come up with."

"It worked years ago with Cissy. She refused my suit in the beginning because I hadn't told her that I loved her. Witches often need to hear the words, Severus. Hermione may believe that we only want her for the triad, the power, the influence, the mind blowing sex. We've never told her the truth...that we both love her madly."

Severus slumped on his lab stool. "That might work for you, Lucius. You two have a great deal in common. But she and I... well, we don't."

"Oh, I think you do, Severus. You just don't see it."

Severus straightened his shoulders, pulled himself up to his full height, flicked some imaginary dust from his robes and checked his wand as if he were going into battle. "All right, we'll try it your way. I never thought I'd see the day Lucius-Bloody-Malfoy relied on truthfulness to get him what he wanted. But I swear by Beelzebub's bollocks, if this doesn't work... the option of Obliviation is back on the table."

Lucius simply shook his head. Severus had never let anyone, and especially not Hermione, see this side of him: the vulnerable, rather frightened side. He had quickly become comfortable having the three of them together. Lucius knew that Severus loved Hermione too, just as much as he did. But getting him to admit it to her, as well as to himself, was another thing entirely. The idea of baring his emotions, of leaving that delicate underbelly exposed to attack was still a bit beyond his emotional means.

Lucius sighed heavily. The things one must do for love.

~

Hermione had worked herself up into quite a state by the time her two wizards met her in the library. She had gone from one extreme to the other. First, she thought she would just tell them that they had their freedom and needn't be tied to her any longer; then she would return to her original plan to just chuck all the evidence and say nothing at all. But in the end, she was simply too honest to try to trick them.

Unable to bring herself to explain, she simply handed the calculations to Lucius. "Here, look at these figures."

Lucius looked them over carefully. "Hmmm... yes... well, I see." Glancing up at Hermione out of the corner of his eye, he saw she was drawn as taut as a bowstring. Her stance was stiff, her hands clenched in fists so tight her knuckles were white, her lips drawn into a thin flat line as she bit them nearly off. "Sweetheart..." he began but was interrupted by Severus.

"What is it all about, Lucius?" he asked, feigning ignorance. "Care to explain it to me?"

"It seems that Hermione's calculations indicate that the need to form the triad is for all intents and purposes now a moot point. The wizarding world is recovering entirely on its own."

"Indeed?" said Severus slowly. "So, what is it you propose we do now, Hermione? Simply pretend none of this ever happened? Just walk away? Start over?" Saying the words sounded harsh, and as he turned to look at her, she looked as if she were about to shatter.

"I... I sup... suppose that now... we can do whatever we like." She swallowed, eyes staring straight down at the carpet. "You are both free to walk away, start over, if... if that is what you want."

Lucius made as if to speak, but Severus held up his hand to stop him. Lucius was right. She needed the words, she needed to hear the truth. It was now or never. If he didn't want to lose this witch, he had to tell her how he felt.

Severus stepped toward her and lifted her chin with his fingertip to see her eyes welling up with tears she'd been trying to hide. He spoke softly, "Ah... but what ~~we~~ don't want to walk away, a ghrá mo chroí. What if everything we want, all three of us, is right here in this room?"

He wrapped her in his arms and whispered, "I love you, muirín."

Lucius stepped in to join their embrace. "And I love you too, Hermione. And believe it or not, I love this damn bastard as well. I've lost too much in my life to risk losing the ones I love simply because I couldn't bring myself to tell them how I feel. We both want to complete the ritual to bind the three of us together forever. Those bloody calculations be damned!"

A sob escaped as Hermione clutched both her wizards to her tightly. "I love you both. I was... I was so afraid that I was going to lose you, so afraid that if given the choice, you would leave me. I wanted to throw all those calculations into the fire...without saying anything, but I had to be fair to you."

"Severus wanted to Oblivate any memory you had of making the calculations," revealed Lucius with a chuckle.

"Don't bring that up now, you arse," admonished Severus guiltily. "It was not my brightest idea ever, but I thought we were about to lose the love of our life."

~

Several days later, the trio prepared to complete the final binding ritual. Beginning with an hour of meditation at dawn, followed by a three-way sensual massage to heighten their awareness, then they shared a ceremonial bath together. They had each chosen a new rune to represent the coming together of the triad. These were tattooed in the center of their chests.

Lucius' was Thurisaz, which meant reactive force, instinctual will, vital eroticism, regenerative catalyst, tendency toward change, catharsis, purging, cleansing fire, and male sexuality.

Severus' was Ehwaz, which meant movement and change for the better, gradual development, steady progress, harmony, teamwork, trust, loyalty, and an ideal marriage

or partnership.

Hermione's was Dagaz, which meant breakthrough, awakening, awareness, time to plan or embark upon an enterprise, the power of change, transformation, hope, happiness, the ideal, security and certainty, growth and release, and balance point, the place where opposites meet.

They had spent the ensuing hours building the Tantric energy to unheard of levels, bringing each other to the very brink of orgasm over and over again, then carefully backing off. They took care to work in frequent breaks between their bouts of sexual activity to feed each other tidbits of food, pieces of fruit, and sips of water to keep up their strength and to re-hydrate their bodies. Hermione recalled her statement to Severus after their first encounter about 'death by sex,' and she was beginning to wonder if it weren't actually possible.

They had just finished an intense session in which Hermione and Lucius had worked Severus up into a frenzy with hands, fingers, mouths, lips, tongues and teeth and had then soothed him afterward. They were all nearing the end of their endurance. The three had previously decided how they wanted to complete the ritual: double penetration with Hermione positioned between her two wizards. They'd been preparing Hermione, as she'd never had anal sex before. She was losing her last bit of virginity and Severus thought that incorporating this into their ritual would intensify its strength.

They started the final portion of the ritual with fifteen minutes of meditation, lying together with Hermione in the middle with one hand over Severus' heart and the other over Lucius'. Both men placed their hands together over hers. They worked on centering themselves...mentally, emotionally...and concentrated on deep cleansing breathing.

They started slowly, lightly stroking over each other's bodies, hands and fingers caressing, rubbing, touching. Then lips, tongues, teeth were added, lightly scraping, drawing moans and gasps. Lucius slid down to kiss the soles of her feet, lick around her ankles and, one by one, suck on her toes. While at the same time, Severus nibbled and nipped at her earlobes, flicking the tip of his tongue into her ear before sucking his way down her neck to lick lightly over her collarbone. Hermione groaned and threaded her fingers through Severus' hair, trying to pull him closer for a kiss.

"Oh, no, my dear, I think at this point we need to make you the focus of all our attentions, without having you distracting us." Upon saying this, silken ribbons wrapped themselves around her wrists and secured her hands to the bedposts.

"Oh, very good idea," agreed Lucius as similar ribbons secured her ankles, spreading her legs wide for his enjoyment.

Hermione could have very easily escaped the bonds had she wanted to. The ribbons were delicate and mostly symbolic in nature. But of course, she was quite happy just where she was.

Severus worked his way down her upper torso as Lucius worked his way up her thighs. Severus nuzzled her breasts, touching and stroking over them and using his mouth to lick and kiss and nibble his way all around them. Finally, he closed in to concentrate all his attention on her nipples. Severus closed his lips over her right peak, suckling and flicking it over and over with his tongue, then he bit it gently before soothing it with his tongue. He then began, ever so lightly, to scrape his teeth over the tip as he suckled and pulled away. He repeated this action, driving Hermione wild. As he was busy with his mouth on the right side, he pinched and pulled and twisted on the left side with his fingers before soothing with gentle strokes. Then, when she could stand it no more, he switched sides until she arched her back, pushing her chest towards his hungry mouth, moaning and begging, "Severus, oh, Severus. Please, please..."

Meanwhile, Lucius had worked his way up to her core, sliding his hands over her legs and following with his lips. When he reached the apex of her thighs, he used both thumbs and separated her labia to expose her pink petals, wet and slick. Leaning in, he breathed in her perfume. He licked, slowly at first, from bottom to top, over and over, taking his time to savor the taste. Watching Severus play with her breasts, he waited and when he saw him suckle on her nipples, he closed his lips over her tight little clit and sucked it at the same time while Hermione was moaning and making these breathy little groaning noises. He slipped one finger down to pump in and out of her, then spread her moisture back farther. He used a magical lubricating spell and pressed the tip of one finger against the tight rosette of her arse. Taking his time, he slowly penetrated her with first one finger, then two, going slowly and taking care to prepare her thoroughly.

Hermione was so close, and yet she knew she mustn't come. She had to wait for them all to come together. She babbled incoherently, "Oh, stop, stop, stop... please, stop... I'm going to come... I c- can't... Oh gods, gods, gods!" She was nearly sobbing.

Both men immediately eased back and gave her a chance to calm down before they began to lightly stroke their hands over her torso. Severus banished the silken ribbons, then guided Hermione over to the side and instructed Lucius to lie down in the middle of the big bed. Once he was settled, Severus placed a pillow under Lucius' hips. He assisted Hermione to raise herself to her knees; her body was shaking, and she had trouble controlling her motions. She positioned herself over Lucius, then lowered herself onto his hard, ready cock. Hermione shuddered and gritted her teeth, releasing a low groan.

"All right, love?" asked Lucius softly, he appeared to be having a bit of trouble controlling himself as well.

She nodded, but shuddered again. "Oh, my sweet gods, I'm not going to last long; that's for sure," she whispered.

Lucius placed his hands on her hips to steady her, and Severus leaned down to reassure her. "You're doing wonderfully, muirín. Let's all take some cleansing breaths to calm ourselves. Together now...breathe in deeply and out...long slow exhale. And again..." they repeated the exercise several times then Severus asked, "All right now?"

Hermione nodded. "But I'm telling you, I'm not going to last, I'm so close even now."

Lucius chuckled. "Sweetheart, none of us is going to last long at this point, believe me."

Severus instructed, "All right, when we come together we'll all say the words of the binding, then just let nature and magic take their course. No more holding back at that point." He used the lubrication spell on both Hermione and on his cock, and he positioned the tip ready to enter her from behind. As Hermione held herself over Lucius, he helped support her, holding her hips steady as he separated the cheeks of her glorious arse to aid Severus. Hermione tensed while pushing back against Severus, which caused Lucius to gasp as she tightened around him as well.

"All right, a chuisle, bear down just a bit now... that's it, love." Severus was now gritting his teeth and trying to control himself; she was so damn tight around him despite the months of preparing her for this very moment. "You feel so fucking good, Hermione."

Once Severus was fully inside, they all three chanted the binding vow. "I, Hermione Jane Granger, do willingly bind myself to you, Severus Tobias Snape and to you, Lucius Abraxas Malfoy, heart, mind, body and soul from this day forward. The triad is formed. So mote it be."

"I, Lucius Abraxas Malfoy, do willingly bind myself to you, Hermione Jane Granger and to you, Severus Tobias Snape, heart, mind, body and soul from this day forward. The triad is formed. So mote it be."

"I, Severus Tobias Snape, do willingly bind myself to you, Lucius Abraxas Malfoy and to you, Hermione Jane Granger, heart, mind, body and soul from this day forward. The triad is formed. So mote it be."

Upon completing the vows, they began to move in each other's embrace, establishing a slow, steady rhythm. As Lucius thrust in Severus would slide out, their cocks gliding against each other with just the tiniest bit of Hermione's body separating them. There was little she could do while sandwiched between her two wizards except feel the fullness of both of them penetrating her most sensitive places, sliding, rubbing, stretching her wide. She soon could feel the little tingles of energy caressing her skin, across her nipples, between her legs. The tension built, stronger and stronger. She was close, so very close...

"Oh, fuck... oh, my gods, I'm so close... please, somebody.... touch me, help me..." Hermione pleaded.

Severus' fingers slipped down to circle her clit; at the same time Lucius lowered his lips to her neck and sucked hard. Her entire nervous system spasmed as if there were a current running through her.

"Oh, fuck... Ohmygodsohmygodsohmygods!... Oh, fuck! I'm coming! Come... now, now, NOW!"

And they did. They all three exploded simultaneously in a maelstrom of ecstasy so great that they all screamed out together. Lucius later claimed they had levitated off the bed by at least a foot. Hermione saw many little starbursts of light and energy exploding in the air around them like a miniature fireworks display. And Severus said he felt a force like a strong wind twisting through the room and wrapping around their bodies to enfold them in its embrace.

All three felt the strength and majesty of the core magic swirling around them and through them, binding them together: hearts, minds, bodies and souls forever.

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Much later, as they lay together in exhausted bliss, Hermione (ever the analytical little swot) theorized. "You know, in the beginning there were a great many reasons for this triad. And we all speculated as to why we were chosen. We three out of many."

Lucius nodded in agreement. "Yes, I wondered, why? Why us? Because of our houses, our personality traits, our backgrounds, our skills, our training, our strong points?"

"I think none of those were the right reasons." Severus smiled the smile of a wizard who was completely and utterly satiated. "I think that the magic chose the three of us because we were simply meant to be together; because the ability was deep down inside of each of us; the potential was already there for us to care for one another deeply and truly and forever."

Hermione smiled a satisfied little smile. "And therein lies the truth, my darlings. There is one real reason for the triad. The best reason, the only reason. That reason is love."

fin

AN: I want to repeat and multiply by a thousand my gratitude to my wonderful betas dreamy_dragon73 and Clairvoyant. Without their generous help this story would not be possible. Thank you, thank you, thank you!!!

And as promised, I said I would post lady_karelia's original prompts at the end.

The main premise was from the first prompt:

After Voldemort's fall, the wizarding world is in shambles. Hermione uses Arithmancy to figure out what could be done to restore normalcy and is surprised when everything points to a new trio needing to be formed, only this time with two Slytherins, namely Snape and Lucius Malfoy.

And I used just the first line from prompt # 3:

Snape disappears after the war, and Lucius and Hermione form a tentative friendship while trying to find him.

Happy endings for all, please.