

Velvet Song's Damsels & Dragons

by MsTree

Hermione returns to Hogwarts to teach Potions and finds something dark and mysterious in the forest. (This is a continuation of Velvet Song's original story archived here at TPP.)

Nightmares and Revelations

Chapter 1 of 17

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Chapter Fourteen...Nightmares and Revelations

"Miss Granger! Use that intelligence you're so proud of!" Professor Snape glared down at her from his greater height. "This is a delicate and precise procedure. If nothing is done in ten years, the spell becomes permanent!"

"I'm trying, Professor." Hermione squirmed on her stool behind the cauldron. She dropped her wand from her shaking hands and tried to pick up her silver knife, almost slashing her hand in the process. "I don't know what you want me to do!" she sobbed.

"I want you to think, Miss Granger," he growled in her ear, now standing behind her. "Think! There's an answer. Find it before time runs out!"

Spreading his arms, he flew away, up out of the hourglass, just as the sand started falling on her head and shoulders.

Hermione jerked out of a sound sleep, sitting upright in her bed, her heart pounding and sweat beading on her face. From her window, she heard Athair's screech from the Forbidden Forest. "Bloody dragon," she muttered, dragging the duvet over her shoulders to help ease the shivering. "Now he's disturbing my rest."

Oh, were you resting? I thought you were dreaming!

"Shut up!" she all but yelled. "I don't need my subconscious talking to me at..." She glanced at the wind-up alarm next to the bed. "Two o'clock in the bloody morning." Muttering to herself and shaking her head, she walked into the ensuite bath and looked in the mirror.

"Oh, dear," the mirror snarked. "Don't we look a fright?"

"Keep it up," Hermione said with a glare. "I can always replace you with a Muggle mirror." Quickly splashing water on her face, she reached for a towel. Then she noticed the book, *Malus Magice*, laying on the edge of the bathtub, as if it had been left there after her bath the evening before. "This is not happening to me," she whispered. "I am perfectly sane."

Are you? Is anyone perfectly sane?

"Will you shut up?" she muttered through her clenched teeth. "Oh, gods, listen to me. I'm yelling at myself."

Is there anyone else to yell at?

Hermione pulled at her hair as she exited to the bedroom. "I need a drink," she said, looking for her wand.

Make mine firewhisky.

"You'll drink what I drink and like it." She rested her forehead against the doorjamb of her bedroom. "Okay, that's it. I'm ready for the Janus Thickey Ward, talking to myself."

I thought you were talking to me.

"SHUT UP!" She closed her eyes and listened. Silence.

"Miss Granger... Hermione! Time is running out! I need an answer!"

"I don't know the answer, Professor! What was the question?" She looked down and gasped. Pyjamas? In the dungeons? "I'm sorry, Professor! I... I'm not prepared!"

"Find the answer, Miss Granger!" Snape loomed large in front of her. "That's what the books are for!"

"You keep telling me everything can't be found in books, sir!"

"Find the answer, Miss Granger! There's only ten years before the spell becomes permanent!"

"What spell? Professor?"

"Professor?" Once more, she jerked awake, this time in answer to the ring of her alarm. "Oh, gods, this is getting redundant."

Dressed, she made her way down to the Great Hall for breakfast, hiding her yawns behind the sleeve of her robes. The dreams hadn't exactly been conducive to a restful night. *Then again*, she thought to herself, *why can't I remember them more clearly?*

"Good morning, Hermione," Harry said as he and Neville settled in on either side of her at the High Table. "Rough night?"

"You have no idea," she answered, stirring three teaspoons of sugar into her coffee. Taking a sip, she grimaced and pushed the cup away. "I woke up at two from a nightmare. Harry, am I going crazy?" she whispered.

"Huh?"

"I feel like I'm going crazy. I keep hearing Professor Snape in my head. I know it's just my subconscious," she hurried to explain, "but why does it have to sound like Professor Snape?"

"Maybe because you had feelings for the man?" Harry answered, pouring cream into his bowl of porridge. "What do you think, Neville?"

"You teach Potions; he taught Potions." Neville shrugged. "Maybe his style of teaching wore off on you."

"You two are no help," Hermione snapped. "Something is not right."

"What was your nightmare," Harry asked in concern. "Maybe that'll be a clue."

Hermione wrinkled her nose in thought. "I can't remember," she admitted. "Something about running out of time and being buried in the sand from an hourglass."

"Sounds horrid," Neville said complacently. He snagged a piece of toast from the plate. "Well, I'm off. Got some transplanting to do before first hour. See you later, love." He leaned over and dropped a kiss on the top of Harry's head before leaving by the staff door.

Classes over for the day, Hermione collapsed on the sofa in her private quarters. She still had grading to do, but for now was willing to just sit and veg out. So little sleep the night before had left her feeling logy and depressed, but at least she had been alert for her students. The house-elf popping into her quarters jolted her into wakefulness.

"Professors Malfoy request Professor Granger join them for dinner," the house-elf intoned. "Will Professor Granger say yes?"

"Not tonight, thank you," she answered, too tired to lie. "I'm really very tired. Perhaps another night?"

"I tell Professors Malfoy," the diminutive creature said and, snapping its fingers, popped out of the room.

Hermione sighed and reached for a book on the coffee table. *Fatum Incantare* practically jumped into her hands. With a cry of surprise, she dropped the book and looked closer at the books on the table. *Tormentum: An In-depth Study of Torture*, *Fatum Incantare*, *Tomus Morte*. and *Malus Magice: An In-depth Study of the Dark Arts* all stared back at her.

"Okay," she cried, her face contorted with horror. "This is not happening to me. These are not the books I left here last night. What's going on?"

You need to read.

"Not these books. Never these books. I don't care who wrote them."

You need to read.

"GO TO HELL!"

I'm already there, you silly, little girl.

Later that night, she lay in bed, thrashing about in the throes of another dream. Her cries of alarm were drowned out by the thunderstorm crashing directly overhead.

"Miss Granger, time is running out!"

"I'm doing the best I can, Professor!"

"You're not reading the books!"

"What books? Which ones am I supposed to read? Why?"

"Enough questions. Time is of the essence. Read the books!"

"Professor!"

"Read, Miss Granger!"

Athair's screeching brought her upright, hand reaching for her wand. "Read what books?" she asked as her heart slowly stopped its racing. "And why? Bloody dragon! Will you shut up?" she shouted out the window at the forest. "I can't think straight. I can't think... Oh! Gods! NO!"

Flinging on her dressing gown, Hermione raced for the dungeons. Sliding to a stop in front of the quarters shared by Lucius and Narcissa, she began to pound on their door. "Malfoy!" she cried. "Open this door! Now!"

"Gods, Granger, you'll wake the entire castle."

Hermione whirled to see Draco, clad in pyjama bottoms, standing in the door opposite, Susan peering over his shoulder.

"Indeed," came a dry voice from behind her. "What is all this about?"

Whirling again, she looked up at Lucius Malfoy, standing there in a dressing gown. Grabbing his lapels, she pulled him down to her eye level. "Did you know?" she cried. "Do all of you know? Harry! What about Harry? Does he know? Minerva? Remus? Does everyone know except me?"

"Hermione," Narcissa said in a soothing tone, "what are we supposed to have known?"

"THAT ATHAIR IS REALLY SEVERUS SNAPE!"

A Meeting of Minds

Chapter 2 of 17

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Chapter Fifteen...A Meeting of Minds

Minerva looked around her office at the various professors gathered there. Remus sat near the hearth, sharing a sofa he had enlarged from a chair, with Harry and Neville. Lucius and Narcissa sat on a loveseat while Draco and Susan shared the loveseat across from his parents. Hermione huddled in an armchair, several books laying on the table in front of her. Minerva glanced at the titles as she took her seat and shuddered. "Professor Granger, would you please explain your outburst in the dungeons this morning?" she asked, turning to Hermione. "And why you have books on the Dark Arts in your possession?"

"Professor... I..." Hermione hesitated. "I don't know if I can without sounding like I'm losing my mind."

"Why don't you try, dear?"

"Perhaps, Minerva..."

She held up her hand as Lucius tried to interrupt. "You'll get your turn, Lucius. Right now, I want Hermione's version. Go ahead, dear."

"I've been having these dreams about Professor Snape and time running out and having to read books," she said in a rush of breath. "Even when I'm awake, I keep hearing his voice in my head." She paused and took a deep breath. "I thought it was my subconscious taking on Snape's characteristics until the last dream this morning."

"Why this morning?"

"Because I remembered this dream," Hermione cried. "I couldn't remember any of the others, but I did remember this one." She pushed the Dark books further away from her. "These books were written by Professor Snape under the name of Perseus Evans. For some reason, they're important to him." Holding up *Dragons of Great Britain and Ireland* and *Dragons In-depth*, she continued, "These two books explain what kind of dragon Athair is: a sub-species of the Hebridean Black, specifically a Shadow Dragon." Nibbling at her bottom lip, she looked around the room. "But all of you already know that, don't you, since Charlie Weasley spent time here studying him? I'm lecturing again, aren't I?" She grimaced, indicating the Dark books, now positioned as far from her as they could be and still be on the table. "These four books seem to have a compulsion on them to be read." She looked at Lucius, who nodded. "I think Professor Snape did that so that I would have to read them whether I wanted to or not. There must be something in them that I need to know about this curse."

Shuddering, she shrank back into the armchair. Narcissa stretched her hand out over the arm of the loveseat towards Hermione, silently showing her support. With a sigh of gratitude, the younger witch grasped her hand and held on tight.

"What makes you think the dragon is Snape?" Harry demanded. "How could you know that?"

Hermione looked over at Lucius. "You remember what you told me a few weeks ago? Something about the Dark Mark going through to the soul?" When Lucius only nodded, she continued, "At my last encounter with Athair, I noticed a scar here." She indicated the inside of her left forearm. "I forgot all about it until the dream woke me up this morning."

"You said something about time running out?" Minerva asked. "What did you mean?"

"I don't really know," Hermione said. "Something about the spell becoming permanent in ten years?" She looked at Minerva and Remus, who were both nodding as if something had occurred to them. "What?"

"A timed transfiguration spell," Minerva said. "Something like that hasn't been used in centuries. It's an extremely Dark spell, and I thought all the texts had been lost."

"It's possible, though," Remus continued. "Voldemort was nothing if not thorough in his research. But why ten years?" He glanced at Lucius. "How long have you and your family known the dragon was Severus?"

"Since he returned to Hogwarts four years ago," Lucius admitted with a sad smile. "I knew the Dark Lord would do something to punish us for turning our backs on him, but Severus was his favourite. His betrayal would have angered the Dark Lord more than ours would." He took Narcissa's free hand and carried it to his lips. "If the Dark Lord had won," he continued, still holding his wife's hand, "I would imagine he had a counter-curse ready, so that he could torment my old friend until he tired of it and then destroy him all together. I can only imagine what he would have done to us." He closed his eyes and shuddered.

Looking at Hermione, Lucius pulled three glass vials filled with swirling silver out of his robes. "These are copies of our memories...Narcissa's, Draco's, and mine...of the moment during the final battle when the Dark Lord cursed Severus. We," he said as he pointed to his wife and son, then to himself, "can only hope that they will help you to figure out exactly what curse he used and come up with the counter-curse in time to save Severus."

"That's a good idea," Harry broke in. "Maybe if we all donate our memories, the different viewpoints might give a better idea all around. What do you say, Neville?"

His lover nodded. "It might help a great deal," he said. "I would be willing. Remus?"

"Yes. Minerva?"

"Most definitely. What about you, Hermione?"

"If it would help Professor Snape, I would do just about anything," Hermione said fervently, wrapping her arms around her shoulders and shivering. "We'll have to bring in others to help, won't we?" she asked.

Minerva nodded while she conjured a tartan shawl and draped it over Hermione's shoulders. "On a need to know basis only," she admonished. "If you don't mind, Susan, I would ask Filius to return and help. While he was injured in the Final Battle, his mind and overall health remain good. And perhaps... Hagrid?"

"It'd be good to see Professor Flitwick again," Susan admitted. "He's probably forgotten more about Charms than I'll ever know."

"I was thinking of Bill Weasley," Lucius said. "He is a curse-breaker and this is a curse we're dealing with." As comprehension dawned, everyone nodded in agreement.

"I think that's enough for now," Minerva said. "We don't want the news to get out. We'd have Ministry officials swarming the grounds, trying to capture Severus again."

"Agreed," Lucius said. "If we do have to involve Hagrid, let's do it at the very end when we're ready to try and break the curse."

Minerva nodded. "That might be a good idea. Now, anything else?"

Draco held up his hand. "I'm not sure just what I can do to help," he said. "Hermione's knowledge of Arithmancy is better than mine if we need to use it for anything. Same with Ancient Runes. No offense, Mother."

"We all have our own strengths and weaknesses," Narcissa said. "Just because I teach the subject doesn't mean I know everything about it."

"Neither do I," Hermione admitted, reaching out and squeezing Narcissa's hand. "Your help would be greatly appreciated. In fact, Draco, your help would also be appreciated." She groaned, looking at the table's burden. "I'm going to *have* to read these books, aren't I?"

"I'm afraid so," Lucius said. "Severus charmed them so that you would. As I said a few weeks ago, he held a deep and abiding respect for you, even if he couldn't openly show it."

"We'll have to wait until O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s are finished and the students have left the school before we start anything serious," Minerva said. "I would suggest you start reading, Hermione. Lucius, do you have copies of these books?"

"Indeed. I've read through them, but I will do so again."

"Good. I will owl Filius today about coming for a visit after school is out. We don't need to tell him why until he gets here."

"The eighth anniversary of the Final Battle is coming up," Remus reminded them. "If this is a timed curse, it probably gets stronger every year. We don't have much time left."

No, I don't!

All Together Now

Chapter 3 of 17

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All Together Now

"Gods! I feel so dirty." Hermione set down the copy of *Fatum Incantare* she was trying to read and shuddered. "How could anyone do this stuff, much less write about it?"

Lucius looked up from the perusal of his own copy. "Sometimes it's just easier to go along with everyone else," he said. "By the time you realise what's happening, you're in so deep you don't know if you'll ever get out."

"But you did."

"Only with a great deal of struggle, and the help of a very good friend." He bookmarked his page and set the book down. "I believe we both need a bit of a rest. Would you like some tea?"

"I would prefer a bath, but, yes, tea would be nice, thank you."

Over tea and scones provided by Hogwarts' house-elves, they discussed some of what they had been reading. Lucius tried to put his years as a Death Eater in perspective for Hermione, who could only judge him by her own experiences and Scrimgeour's Ministry propaganda.

"You have to remember that the Dark Lord recruited his followers carefully," he said as he completed his explanation. "Pandering to the prejudices of powerful pure-blood families gained him many followers, who then went out and recruited others." He grimaced. "I'm not proud of myself when I look back at what I've done in his name. I suppose I could have refused, but he was very persuasive and charismatic, particularly before his first 'death', to put it bluntly."

"You mean when he tried to kill Harry as a baby?"

"Yes."

"He was an extremely handsome wizard," Narcissa said, gliding into the room. "The Dark Lord you saw was nothing like his original self. No one could have realised that his fine figure hid such a dark soul. These books and the Dark Arts themselves," she placed her hand on her husband's as she sat down, "can be very seductive if you're not careful."

"That's one of the reasons we," Lucius indicated Narcissa and himself, "insisted that you read Severus' books in our presence. Neither of us would want to see you follow in our footsteps, much less lose your soul."

Hermione shuddered at the thought. "Is that possible just from reading about them?" she asked, nervously eyeing the book she had been reading.

"You said you felt 'dirty', didn't you?" Lucius said, with a wry twist to his mouth. "Based on that comment alone, what do you think?"

"That I need something stronger than tea," she said, "but, since I need my wits about me, I'll stick to the Darjeeling."

Time, it seemed to Hermione, between the meeting in Minerva's office and the end of school, moved at a snail's pace. Minerva reported that Flitwick was more than happy to return to the school for a 'visit' and would welcome discussing Charms with Professor Bones-Malfoy. Bill Weasley was problematic. He wrote to say he was not sure if he could come for a visit, but would try since he had some holiday time coming to him.

Hermione continued to read Perseus Evans', or, as she thought of him, Severus Snape's, books under the watchful eye of the senior Malfoys, making sure she scrubbed her body thoroughly every time she was finished and wishing she could do the same with her mind.

Her students seemed more interested in the spring weather outside the classroom than the contents of their cauldrons, so she covered the windows in heavy draperies and warded them to stay closed, despite the students' best attempts to open them. With the windows covered and illumination supplied only by torches and the chandelier in the middle of the ceiling, it felt more like the old Potions classroom in the dungeons than an airy, open room on the first floor of the castle. It was the perfect atmosphere, she felt, to set her fifth and seventh year students to revising for O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s.

Finally, the day Hermione had been waiting for arrived, and the students departed. By the time all the students had been seen onto the Hogwarts Express, she was ready to start chewing her nails. Between reading the Dark Arts books and shepherding her students towards their final exams, she felt like she had run a marathon, backwards and in high heels. Exhaustion was fast taking its toll.

Draco spoke for all the other teachers at the table that night as she walked into the Great Hall for supper. "Damn, Granger, you look awful!" he blurted out.

"Real tactful, Malfoy!"

"Like you weren't thinking the same thing, Potter!"

Hermione smiled her thanks to Neville, who stood up and held her chair for her. "Merlin, you two obviously think we're back in school," she scolded.

"Hate to point this out," Neville said dryly, "but we are."

"And acting like first years," Minerva said, walking up to the table with Lucius and Narcissa. "Thank you, Neville," she continued as the male teachers stood and he held her chair for her. After Lucius had assisted his wife into her chair and the men had retaken their seats, she announced, "Filius Flitwick will be joining us tomorrow for a visit, as will Mr Bill Weasley."

"Bill's coming?" Hermione asked. "That's wonderful! Is his wife coming, too?"

"Unfortunately, Nymphadora has to work," Minerva responded, "although she has arranged for leave next week and will join us then. Now, we have to decide just what we are going to do for Severus."

Those teachers who had not been present at the meeting a few weeks back looked puzzled. Whispers and comments passed back and forth between them only to be voiced aloud by a bewildered Arthur. "Minerva, why do we need to do something for Severus? The man is dead." He swallowed nervously. "Not to say I'm not delighted that Bill and Tonks will be visiting, but why? What's going on?"

Minerva looked out over the table. "I will require a wand oath from each of you that this will go no further." When every one had sworn on their wands, she continued, "We have discovered that Severus Snape did not die in the Final Battle as so many of us thought, myself included. We," she said, indicating those who had attended the meeting in her office, "have known for several weeks now that he is alive, although living under a horrific curse."

"E's the wee dragon, ain't 'e?" Hagrid said, choking back a sob. "At's why 'e's alwa's makin' sure of the school, 'n't it?"

"Yes, Hagrid," Minerva said. "Athair is Severus Snape." She looked at her staff with concern. "I am going to ask those of you who were there at the time to donate copies of your memories about the curse Tom Riddle used. I have a Pensieve that we can use so we can possibly decipher his words and actions. In this way, we hope to be able to

come up with a counter-curse and bring Severus home."

"We don't have much leeway," Remus said, taking over the explanation. "It's what's called a 'timed' curse. If we don't find the answer soon, his condition will become permanent." He held up a hand to forestall any questions. "Filius is coming because of his understanding of Charms. We can only hope he might recognise something the rest of us might miss. Bill Weasley, of course, is a curse-breaker. Hermione—"

"—has been reading those bloody Dark Arts books Snape left me until she is tired of them," the witch in question said irritably. "Although I may have found something pertinent," she continued in a low voice, "but I would rather discuss it with Lucius and Narcissa before I make it public."

"No more questions just now," Minerva said. "We will continue this discussion in more detail when Filius and Mr Weasley arrive. Now, let's eat."

Good girl, Snape's voice rumbled in Hermione's ear. *I knew I could count on you*

Missing Pages

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Missing Pages

"...And that's why I needed to talk to you first, before we met with everyone this morning," Hermione said, caressing the book *Malus Magice*, which sat on her lap. When she realised what she was doing, she hastily put it down on the desk and backed away. "Gods, I hate these books."

Lucius stroked Hermione's copy of *Malus Magice* while he looked over at Narcissa. "I think we're going to need my great-great-great-grandfather's book," he said with a sigh. "Do you wish to go to the Manor or shall I?"

"I'll go," Narcissa replied. "I can think of one or two other books that might be useful as well."

Lucius smiled. "You do that, then," he said. "Hermione and I will gather the others so we can start making plans." He stood and picked up the book while Narcissa took a handful of Floo powder from the jar on the mantel.

"Malfoy Manor," she said, disappearing into the green flames.

Lucius waited until the flames had died down before offering his arm to Hermione. "Come," he said, "we have much to discuss with the rest of the staff." He looked at her stricken face and smiled sadly. "My dear, do not worry. Hogwarts has some of the finest minds of the Wizarding world on staff."

And then there's Hagrid.

Hermione sniffed back her tears with an abrupt laugh and picked up the rest of Severus' books. Taking Lucius' arm, she walked to the door. "Even Hagrid can help, Professor," she said, rolling her eyes at Lucius. He shook his head in silent amusement and escorted her to Minerva's office.

Once everyone had gathered in the staff room, Minerva having judged it to be a better venue than her office for a meeting, she knocked on the tabletop to gain their attention. "Judging by the number of Dark Arts books on the table, we might have some viable answers?" she asked.

Hermione grimaced. "Probably more questions," she said. "I really don't know." She touched her copy of *Malice Magice* and gave it a look of disgust. "There's a passage in this book about transfiguration curses." She shuddered, but continued gamely. "It states that a curse used to transfigure a person into another type of being will destroy the human body altogether. It's possible that even if we are able to find a counter-curse, Severus won't have a body to use. I'm also thinking it was probably extremely painful to undergo such a transformation."

Extremely painful doesn't begin to describe it, Miss Granger.

"Quiet, Severus."

I did not give you permission to use my name.

"You're in my head. That gives me permission." Hermione looked around the table at all the staring faces. "What?"

"How long has Severus been talking to you?" Lucius asked with a bemused smile.

"Since the first day of class, I would imagine," she said with a nervous laugh. "I thought it was my subconscious at first, channelling his voice. Why? Doesn't he talk to you?"

"No."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry, Hermione," Narcissa said. "You and Severus apparently have a special connection. He did, after all, leave all his possessions to you."

"But... but... he's not dead," Hermione stammered, her eyes wide. "Is his will even valid?"

"In the eyes of the Ministry, yes," Lucius said, beaming with mischief. "Of course, if we find a counter-curse, you can always give it back to him."

That would be satisfactory.

"Lucius, what are those books you have in front of you?" Minerva asked, clearing her throat. "They look rather ancient."

"This one was written by my great-great-great-grandfather, Abraxas Malfoy the Fifteenth," he said, holding up a copy of *Curses Ancient and Moderne*. "It was privately printed, and there are very few copies still around, but I believe the Dark Lord may have found the Dragon curse in here or perhaps one he could have easily modified."

Filius squeaked in alarm. "That book is over two hundred and fifty years old," he said. "I've only heard of it, it's so rare."

"I have to agree with Professor Flitwick," Bill said, a look of longing on his face. "There's a copy at Gringotts, but it's kept in a secured, air-tight glass vault. You have to have a lot of influence with the goblins just to look at it through the glass. No one's ever been allowed to take it out to read."

Lucius leafed through the pages while listening to the comments. Suddenly he froze. Looking up, he frowned at Draco. "There's a page missing."

"Missing?" Hermione gasped. "Is it...?"

"I don't know. Draco?"

"If that's the book I think it is, Father," Draco said nervously, "then the Dark Lord tore the page out. I saw him do it when I was up in the gallery looking for another book. Luckily, he didn't see me."

"In other words, you hid," Harry said disparagingly

"I'm not stupid, Potter. If he *had* seen me, I would have been nothing but a smear on the wall." He turned back to his frowning parents. "Aunt Bella showed him the book. I heard her tell him there were some very inventive curses in it."

"Without knowing what was on those two pages, we can't decide if this book contained the curse or not," Minerva said. "Narcissa, what else do you have there?"

"Abraxas the Fifteenth's journal," she said, holding up a small, leather-bound book, "which he kept while writing *Curses Ancient and Moderne*, and a copy of a later book written by his son, Abraxas the Sixteenth, that details some of the curses he himself found while making the Grand Tour as a youth." She held up a book entitled *Curses From Faraway Lands: My Account of a Journey in Search of the Dark Arts*. "Again, it was privately printed, and there aren't many copies left." She shrugged. "I thought the two of them might help."

"Hermione?" Arthur said suddenly. "You said Severus left all his possessions to you? Would that have included his library?"

She nodded. "It's at his manor."

"You think a copy of the Malfoy book might be there, Arthur?" Filius asked, his eyes lighting up with excitement. "Have you seen anything like it while you were there, Miss Granger?"

"I was only there the one time," Hermione admitted. "I didn't even look for the library."

"You?" Harry choked back a laugh. "You were in a house with a library, and you didn't even look?"

"I'm sorry, okay? I wasn't exactly in the mood at the time." She glared at her best friend.

"That will be enough, the two of you," Minerva admonished. "Hermione, is there a chance you might have a copy, dear?"

Tell her I have a copy.

"Severus says he has a copy," Hermione repeated softly. When she finished, everyone started talking at once.

"Cool, I'll help you look," Harry said with excitement.

"I'll come, too." Neville looked at Harry with trepidation.

"If Potty goes, so do I," Draco sneered.

"Not without me, you don't," Susan snapped, gripping her husband's arm.

"This could be a wonderful opportunity," Filius mused, thinking of the undoubtedly rare books to be found.

"I'd welcome a chance to read that book," Bill said in an aside to Lucius.

"I wish the wee dragon'd talk ta me," Hagrid sniffled.

SILENCE! Hermione winced as Severus' voice reverberated in her head, echoed by the roar of the dragon from outside *I am not hosting a house party.*

She couldn't help herself. "Last I heard, your house belonged to me," she teased, sticking her tongue out at Harry.

"Careful, Hermione," Minerva warned her with a laugh. "The motto of Hogwarts may be 'Never tickle a sleeping dragon', but I would say never tease an angry one, as well."

For you are crunchy and taste good with tomato sauce.

"Oh, hush, you," Hermione said with a smile. "I'll ask Marigold to find it for me and bring it here. How's that?"

Satisfactory.

And the Plot Thickens

Chapter 5 of 17

Hermione returns to Hogwarts to teach Potions and finds something dark and mysterious in the forest. (This is a continuation of Velvet Song's original story archived here at TPP.)

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And the Plot Thickens

"Thank you, Marigold," Hermione said as she took Severus' copy of *Curses Ancient and Moderne* from the house-elf. "I really appreciate you doing this for us."

"Miss Hermione asks so Marigold is happy," the little creature replied, her face beaming. "This help Master Severus?"

"Wait," Lucius said suddenly, making a grab for the house-elf. "You *knew* your master was still alive?"

"Is house-elf magic," Marigold said, easily evading his hand. "Master say Marigold helps Miss Hermione." She shrugged. "I helps Miss Hermione. Master is pleased. I go now?" She looked at Hermione for permission.

"Yes, Marigold, thank you," Hermione said with a nod. Marigold snapped her fingers and popped out of the staff room, apparently to reappear at Marbh-clach. Holding the book out to Lucius, she said, "You know better what we're looking for. You read this. I don't want to."

He took the book and reverently stroked the pristine cover. "He had this in his library and I never knew," he said. "If the Dark Lord had known..." His voice trailed off.

"Would he have destroyed this copy if he had?" Remus asked.

"It's quite possible," Lucius said, opening the book to the proper page. He groaned.

"What is it, Lucius?" Minerva asked petulantly. "Is the page missing from this one as well?"

"No, it's here," he said. "For all the good it will do us. Listen:"

Maledictum Draconis... *Not much is known of this ancient curse save rumours and innuendo. It is said to have come to us from the ancient Babylonians via the Pharaoh-Wizards of Egypt. From there, it is rumoured to have made its way to ancient Greece and Rome, although no record has ever been found to substantiate this.*

The curse itself is said to be able to change a living object, be it human or animal, into a dragon indigenous to the country in which the curse is cast, regardless of the language the wizard uses to cast the spell.

There is no known complete record of the words used to cast this curse, although it is rumoured that the Library at Alexandria contained several scrolls with partial details. Such is the power of this curse that it is rumoured no one person has ever seen it in its entirety and lived.

He turned the page over and looked at the other side. "That's all it says. This next one is the description of a curse to make someone old and infirm." He sighed heavily. "Abraxas Malfoy the Fifteenth has a lot to make up for."

"No known complete record?" Filius squeaked. "Then, did Tom make up this spell on his own? How insidious!"

"Maybe he did and maybe he didn't," Arthur said cryptically. Everyone looked at him as he scratched his chin, trying to remember something. "There was a burglary at the British Wizarding Library about ten years ago. Several books and scrolls went missing. Some of them were supposed to have come from Alexandria itself."

"I remember that," Lucius said, nodding in confirmation. "Although neither Severus nor I were involved, it was definitely the Dark Lord's work. However, that leaves us with a much larger problem."

"Yes," Narcissa said, seeing what her husband meant. "We don't know who, do we?"

"Who, what?" Harry asked, looking from one Malfoy to the other. "What's the problem? Can't we just go and look at Riddle's books and papers?"

"The problem, my dear boy," Lucius drawled, "is that we don't know where they are."

"That's not possible," Remus argued. "Weren't they found in his hideout after he died?"

"His *hideout*, as you so quaintly put it, was Malfoy Manor, for the most part." Lucius pursed his lips. "That shack outside Little Hangleton purported to be the Riddle House wasn't a fit habitation for man or beast. The Dark Lord preferred the better things in life, as do most of us, I would imagine."

"So, where would he have kept his papers and such?" Hermione asked. "At Malfoy Manor?"

"Definitely not," Narcissa answered crossly. "He wouldn't trust one of us to come across something and use it against him."

He kept a secret vault in Gringotts.

"Gringotts?" Hermione repeated Severus' comment. "How do you know that?"

I saw the key. He used it to get me some rare potions equipment he had stored there. When I was finished, he replaced all of it immediately.

She quickly relayed his comments to the rest of the room. "Since he's dead, wouldn't the goblins have emptied the vault, Bill?"

"Not if someone else was granted the key," he said. "It's like a will of sorts. The key is passed on to someone with the intent that the person given the key to a vault becomes the legal owner of the contents, whatever they might be. Since we don't know who the vault actually belonged to, we can only make a guess as to who now has the key."

"My guess would be an unmarked Death Eater," Lucius snarled. "Someone who would not have been suspected when the Dark Lord died. If this person owned the vault in question at the time of the Dark Lord's defeat, he or she would now have the key and the knowledge of what exactly is in there."

"I thought all the Death Eaters were rounded up after the Final Battle," Harry said. "Didn't you help with that?"

"I gave the Ministry the names of the Death Eaters I knew about," Lucius said, slumping back in his seat. "I'm sure the Dark Lord kept some in reserve that only he knew."

Yes. He would have done exactly that.

Hermione grimaced, but asked the obvious question anyway. "Do you know of any Death Eaters that Lucius wouldn't?"

No.

She relayed that information to the others, her frustration showing on her face.

"So, it's over then?" Neville asked hesitantly. "Can't we do anything to help Professor Snape?"

"No, we've only just started. We need to find the owner of the vault," Minerva replied into the sudden silence. "Mr. Weasley, is there any way you can find out which vault Tom used and who the current owner is?"

"I might be able to," Bill said. "It all depends on the goodwill of the goblin I speak to at the time."

"Do your best, son," Arthur said encouragingly. "Maybe you could use the knowledge that some of the contents are stolen goods and need to be returned?"

"That's never concerned them before," Remus said with a rueful laugh, "Although it might, if you mention the gratitude of the British Wizarding Library when the books and scrolls are returned." He looked at Bill hopefully. "They do have an account there, don't they?"

"Minerva, you said something about Pensieve memories yesterday evening," Filius said suddenly before Bill could answer. "What do you need from us?"

"Your memories of the Final Battle when Tom threw that curse," she answered. "Since we were all in different positions on the battlefield, we all had a different perspective. Someone will have seen something that the others missed. Perhaps together, we can discover the exact wording of the curse Tom used and his wand movements."

"Who will be looking at these memories, Minerva?" Aurora Sinistra asked. "Do you have any ideas about that?"

"Actually, Aurora, I do," the older woman answered. "With the help of Susan and Hermione, we have charmed a Pensieve to act as a...what did you call it, dear...*dee-vee-dee* player?" Hermione nodded. "That means the memory will be projected onto an empty wall so we can all see what's happening in it," Minerva continued. "In such a manner, I hope that one of us might see something that someone else may miss. Is that satisfactory?"

"Quite," Filius answered for all of the teachers on receiving a nod from the others. "I, for one, would like to see this charm you ladies created when all this is over. It sounds most intriguing."

Minerva smiled. "I'm sure we can accommodate you. Can't we, ladies?" Susan and Hermione looked at each other and grinned.

"I'm sure we can, Minerva," Susan said for both of them. "It would be our pleasure to teach Professor Flitwick."

"Oh, my," he squeaked.

Indeed, a most palatable task.

Hermione giggled.

A/N: Master Andrixos, a Latin Scholar and member of the Society of Creative Anachronism, who resides in the Kingdom of Calontir, supplied the title "Maledictum Draconis" for the curse. It literally means "Dragon's Curse".

Of Pensieves and House-elves

Chapter 6 of 17

Hermione returns to Hogwarts to teach Potions and finds something dark and mysterious in the forest. (This is a continuation of Velvet Song's original story archived here at TPP.)

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Of Pensieves and House-elves

"What language is that?" Hermione asked, watching her memories of the Final Battle with the charmed Pensieve. "I've never heard it before. Has anyone else?"

"It could be ancient Egyptian," Bill said, wrinkling his brow. "But I've never heard it spoken, so I'm not sure. Remus?"

"Could be. Like you, I've studied the hieroglyphs, but I've never heard it spoken. How much like modern Egyptian is this we're hearing?"

"Nothing like, which is why I'm not sure," Bill said. "Anyone else have an idea?"

"Are you sure you're not presupposing the language, given what we read in my ancestor's book?" Lucius asked. "The Dark Lord was notorious for using other languages other than the one a curse might have been written in."

Just then, Hermione pricked up her ears. "I know what it is," she said suddenly. "It's a variant of Norse."

"Modern Norse?" Minerva asked, her nose twitching. "I know of a teacher at Durmstrang that speaks several dialects."

"No, Old Norse," Hermione said. "I've got several books of the Eddas, but I never thought I'd hear it spoken like that." She shuddered. "The lyric poems are so beautiful, and this is so ugly."

"We don't have the complete curse here, however," Filius said, pointing out several obvious gaps. "You didn't hear all of it over the battle. We need the memories of someone who was closer to him."

"I don't think it's actually Old Norse," Draco said slowly, moving closer to the memories being projected on the wall. "I've read the Eddas as well. This doesn't sound right for that."

"What d'ya mean?" Harry asked belligerently. "Hermione knows what she's talking about."

"No, Harry, I don't actually," Hermione admitted. "I said it sounded like old Norse, but wrong somehow." She turned to Draco. "What do you think it is?"

"I don't know. That's what worries me." He turned to his parents. "Is there some way we could maybe research this through the manor library?"

Lucius stroked his chin in thought. "I don't know, Draco. Our library has a great many old texts, but you have to remember the Dark Lord had free rein while he lived with us. He obviously felt he had the right to take whatever he wished, as I'm sure you will remember."

"We have been putting off taking inventory," Narcissa said sadly. "When this is over, we should probably do so."

Lucius nodded grimly. "I've not seen any noticeable gaps, but that doesn't mean some of our more, shall we say *exotic* books are still on the shelves. Hermione, would you ask Severus if he knows this language?"

No. Ask the house-elves.

"Ask the house-elves?" Hermione repeated, wondering if she'd heard right. "Are you sure they would know?"

If not at Hogwarts, they can ask the house-elves at the other institutions.

"Minerva, do the Hogwarts house-elves talk to house-elves at the other Wizarding schools?" Hermione turned to the Headmistress in excitement. "Severus says if our house-elves don't know, they can ask at the other schools."

Minerva looked at her in consternation. "I don't know," she admitted. "If they do, I've never heard of it. Severus says they do?"

Hermione nodded. "It sounds logical. They must get information from somewhere. Why not from the other schools?"

"Or even other great houses?" Narcissa asked. "I'd noticed that the Malfoy house-elves always seemed to know what was going on among the pure-blood families before we did."

Minerva took a breath. "Winky?" she called.

Winky popped into view, wringing her hands. "Headmistress call Winky?" she asked. "How may Winky serve?"

"I need to see all the Hogwarts house-elves," Minerva said. "Would you ask them to come here, please?"

"All house-elves, Headmistress?"

"Yes."

"Winky tell them." The little house-elf snapped her fingers and disappeared.

"Well, that was interesting," Filius said. "Will they actually..." Before he could finish his thought, the staff room filled with house-elves, all of them wearing tea towels with the Hogwarts crest. "Oh," he squeaked, moving into a corner of the room with the other teachers to make more room.

Lucius moved to the front of the group, standing next to Minerva. "Do any of you recognize the language being spoken by the Dark Lord?" Lucius asked, waving his hand to restart the images the group had been viewing. "Severus said one of you might."

"Headmaster Snape say this?" Winky asked, obviously having been elected spokes-elf. She turned to the other house-elves, and they spoke quietly among themselves. Every once in a while, one of them would raise his or her head, look at the Pensieve video, and rejoin the conversation with the other house-elves.

Hermione and Susan looked at each other, trying not to giggle. When Hermione turned to look at Draco, he winked and she lost it. Once she started to giggle, Susan soon followed, causing Filius to chuckle. Soon, most of the teachers were giggling, chuckling, or chortling with the exception of Lucius and Minerva. She smiled indulgently at her staff and turned back to the huddle of house-elves just as Winky popped up in front of them.

"Penti knows," she said. "Him say it Gothic." She pulled a tiny house-elf out of the huddle, and he nodded exuberantly even as he bobbed up and down in a continuous bow.

"Gothic, it be," he said in an even squeakier voice than Winky's. "Penti's old master speaking it."

"Where would we find him?" Lucius asked abruptly. "We need to speak with him. What?" He turned to Minerva, who had touched his arm in order to get his attention.

"Hogwarts' house-elves...at least the ones not born at Hogwarts...generally come here when their masters die and there is no other family member to take them in," she explained. She then turned to the house-elf and gently asked, "How long have you been at Hogwarts, Penti?"

"Penti serve three headmasters, one headmistress. I come Hogwarts and Headmaster Black here is," the little house-elf said, puffing up with importance. "Him say Penti stay at Hogwarts and serve."

"That's... that's..." Harry stuttered.

"Almost eighty years ago, if not more," Minerva said serenely. "About middle-aged for a house-elf, I believe." She turned to Lucius. "So we would not be able to talk to Penti's old master, but we now know what language we're looking for." Turning to the house-elves, she thanked them for their help, and dismissed them back to their usual duties.

"Aren't Gothics those Muggle teens who dress all in black and pierce their tongues?" Neville asked. "Harry and I saw some of them in London last Christmas."

"I don't think it's the same thing, Neville," Harry said. "They spoke modern English."

"*Goth* is a life-style," Hermione explained. "I don't know where this Gothic language would have been spoken unless it comes from the Visigoths."

"A *Germanic* language?" Draco asked. "That would make sense. It's close enough to old Norse, but different enough to be confusing to someone who knows how to read Norse."

"It's older than old Norse," Hermione said, correcting him absentmindedly. "Where would we find someone who could translate it without giving away Severus' situation?"

Phelps. At the British Wizarding Library.

"British Wizarding Library?" Hermione looked out the window at the Forbidden Forest. "Do... I mean... did you know him?"

Good man. He'll keep the secret.

Hermione sighed. "I guess someone will have to go to London, then."

Indeed.

To London We Will Go

Chapter 7 of 17

Hermione returns to Hogwarts to teach Potions and finds something dark and mysterious in the forest. (This is a continuation of Velvet Song's original story archived here at TPP.)

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To London We Will Go

"This is ridiculous," Hermione protested once again, standing in the courtyard of the British Wizarding Library. "I am perfectly capable of coming to London and talking to this Mr Phelps by myself."

"That's not the point, Hermione," Remus said with a conciliatory air. "We don't know this fellow at all, and despite what Severus told you—"

"—far too many people already know about him." Lucius interrupted. "It is expedient to have someone along as a witness in case somebody needs to be Obliviated."

"There will be no Obliviating done to anyone," Hermione insisted. "*I trust* Severus to know what he's talking about. He says Mr Phelps can be trusted and I will *act* accordingly."

Excellent. Someone needs to stand up to Lucius occasionally or he'll roll right over you.

"Severus?" Hermione twisted, looking around the courtyard, which seemed empty of all but her and the two wizards who had insisted on accompanying her. "Where are you?"

Here. The black dragon darkened into view for a few seconds, then disappeared into the shadows once more. *Phelps may need more convincing than you are capable of. I can help.*

"Hmmp," she said, clearly miffed. "He'll think I've gone insane if I suddenly start talking to myself."

Lucius laughed. "Hence the benefits of a good Obliviate," he said. "Of course, if I had known we would have other company..." His words trailed off suggestively.

"Let's get this over with," Remus growled. "The moon will be full in a few days, and I would prefer to be back at Hogwarts before it is." He started forward, only to stagger as the invisible dragon shoved him.

Tell him the Forbidden Forest is not his personal playground.

"I'll do no such thing," Hermione protested hotly. "He has as much right there as you do."

TELL HIM!

"Okay! Don't yell." Hermione turned to Remus. "Severus says the Forbidden Forest isn't your personal playground," she said. "What have you been ~~doing~~ *doing* in there, Remus?"

He grinned. "Playing hide and seek with a dragon, apparently." Sobering, Remus continued, "Even with the Wolfsbane you've been brewing for me, the Forbidden Forest is the safest place for the nights when the moon is full. Sometimes I don't remember what happens, but apparently he does." He pointed to the deepest shadows, then tapped the side of his nose. "And, yes, I know where he is. I can smell him even when I can't see him."

Oh, for Merlin's sake.

Hermione had to laugh at the disgruntled tone of the voice in her head. "Frustrated because you can't hide from everyone?" she asked.

No. Go talk to Phelps. That was decidedly petulant.

"We're going." She smiled indulgently and turned to the brass-bound oaken doors of the library. "Gentlemen, I believe we have a translator to find."

Lucius reached out and grasped the handle of one door, pulling it open while Remus copied his actions on the other side. "After you, my dear," he said, bowing her through and into the foyer.

Hermione walked through the open doors and froze, almost causing Lucius and Remus to walk into her. It was her first visit to the august institution, and she gazed in wonder at the seven-story foyer with its skylight of stained glass filtering the afternoon sunlight. A wide set of stairs directly in front of her led from the ground floor to the first floor, and galleries split off from there in every direction. The foyer walls were covered with portraits of great witches and wizards, some of whom nodded a greeting at the three visitors.

A rotund wizard poked his head out of an almost invisible door to their left. "May I help you?" he asked superciliously, as if they were beneath his notice.

"We were looking for a Mr Phelps," Hermione said. "He was recommended to us as a translator of Gothic."

The wizard sniffed. "Upstart language. You'll find Phelps on the sixth floor in the Germanic stacks." He turned back to his office as Lucius spoke.

"If you consider Gothic to be an upstart language," he drawled, "then might I inquire as to what languages you consider worthy of your time?"

"Babylonian," the wizard answered, turning back with a sneer. "It is the very beginning of our language, customs and traditions. Phelps is that way." He gave a wave that encompassed the stairs and subsequent galleries on the upper floors. "We close at five. Don't shilly-shally." He turned back into his office, shutting the door with a quiet slam.

ASS!

"Indeed," Hermione agreed.

Seven flights of stairs later, the trio found themselves facing a bewildering maze of corridors and galleries. "Which way?" Remus asked, looking around in confusion. "They really do need to put up signs in order to direct people to the proper galleries."

"If we did that, then anyone could find us," a middle-aged wizard said, popping out of a side corridor. He held up his hands as three wands suddenly pointed at his face. "No need for hostilities," he said with a chuckle. "I offer my apologies for startling you, but I couldn't resist. Who or what are you looking for? Perhaps I could help?"

Hermione slipped her wand back into its sheath beneath her sleeve, and indicated to her companions that they should do the same. "I'm sorry about that," she said apologetically. "We haven't seen anyone about since that wizard greeted us at the door."

"Short? Heavy-set?" the strange wizard asked. At her nod of agreement, he chuckled again. "Dobbs. Thinks the wizarding world should still be speaking Babylonian. How may I help you?"

"We were sent here by a friend," Lucius said cautiously. "He told us that a wizard named Phelps could help us. Do you know where he is?"

The wizard bowed. "Thaddeus Phelps, at your service. I'm surprised anyone would even know my name, much less make a recommendation. Come. My office is this way." He bowed them through an archway and into a room whose shelves seem to stretch to infinity. Books rustled and strained toward him, like small dogs wanting to be scratched. "Now, now, my pretties," he intoned, stroking random bindings absentmindedly as the small group passed. "I've business to discuss with these fine people just now, but I'll be back. Oh yes, I'll be back."

Hermione could only gaze in awe at all the books as Phelps led them through the stacks to a small office in the back of the room. She wanted, almost more than anything, to sort through and see what knowledge was hidden between the covers of each one. She started as Lucius cleared his throat, bringing her attention to the fact that she had fallen behind and they were waiting for her to join them in Phelps' office. Blushing, she scrambled to catch up, Severus' deep chuckle resounding in her ears.

A Debt Called In

Chapter 8 of 17

Hermione returns to Hogwarts to teach Potions and finds something dark and mysterious in the forest. (This is a continuation of Velvet Song's original story archived here at TPP.)

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A Debt Called In

"Now then, what's this all about?" Phelps asked as he sat down behind his desk. He waved a hand absentmindedly. "Er, please, have a seat."

Hermione looked around the office. Every available flat surface was covered with parchments and books, even the chairs. By removing several stacks of books, they managed to uncover a sofa large enough for the three of them to sit on.

"We were told you knew Severus Snape," Remus said, squeezing in between Lucius and Hermione on the sofa. "Did you?"

"Severus?" Phelps looked up from a parchment and frowned. "Good man. Shame about his death."

"How did you meet?" Lucius asked. "If it wouldn't betray any confidences, of course."

Phelps waved his long fingers airily. "No confidences to betray. He brewed a potion for me."

Tell him he still owes me a bottle of Ogden's Old Hundred Year Reserve.

"I'm not going to tell him that," Hermione protested under her breath.

"Come again?" Phelps looked at her curiously. "Did you say something?"

"Uh..." Hermione blushed. "Not exactly."

You want him to believe. Tell him.

"No!" she barked.

"Hermione," Remus said, his hand squeezing hers in warning. "What's going on?"

She looked up at the window behind Phelps and blinked. Severus floated there, his wings fanning idly as he watched the wizards. "Er..." She hesitated. "He says..."

Remus and Lucius looked in the same direction. "Oh," Lucius said, understanding. "Well, yes, I see."

Phelps looked at them apprehensively. "Is there a problem?" He turned to look out the window just as Severus faded from view. Blinking, he turned back to the room. "Perhaps you should go..."

"Severus says you still owe him a bottle of Ogden's Old Hundred Year Reserve," Hermione said in a rush. She gulped in a breath and held it.

"How did you know that?" Phelps sputtered. "Severus and I never discussed that with anyone, not even my wife."

She let out the breath she was holding. "It's true, then?" she asked. "You do owe him?"

"Miss...I'm sorry, I didn't get your names," Phelps said, blinking hard. "What do you want with me?"

Lucius smiled suavely. "I am Lucius Malfoy," he said, "Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor at Hogwarts. This is Hermione Granger, our Potions instructor, and Remus Lupin, who teaches Transfiguration."

Phelps paled at the name Malfoy, then peered at Hermione and Remus. "You're war heroes," he said. "Why would you need to speak with me?"

"As Hermione said, we need help with a translation," Lucius said. "It's a spell that we have been informed was spoken in Gothic. As none of us," he indicated himself and his companions, "speak Gothic, we were directed to you."

"By who?" Phelps asked warily.

"Severus Snape," Hermione said, her voice cracking on the syllables in her nervousness.

Phelps glared at her. "Is this some kind of joke?" he asked angrily. "Severus Snape is dead."

"He's not," Hermione retorted hotly. "He was cursed and we're trying to reverse it."

"Hermione," Remus warned, squeezing her hand hard.

She jerked her hand away and jumped to her feet. "Stop it, Remus. He needs to know."

"We will require a wand oath, you know," Lucius interjected smoothly. "Then you can tell him everything."

"A wand oath?" Phelps pulled his wand out of the top drawer of his desk. "Easily done. What am I swearing to?" He grinned in anticipation. "Is it top secret business from the Ministry?"

"Not exactly." Remus hesitated a moment in thought. "We will require your oath that you will not repeat anything you see or hear of this matter to anyone, except those people we indicate are already possessed of this same knowledge."

"I do so swear," Phelps said with a grin as the tip of his wand glowed bright yellow. "Now, that's settled, what is this all about, eh?" He slipped his wand back into the desk drawer and looked at them expectantly. "Obviously, you need me to translate some Gothic spell."

Lucius leaned back into the sofa and nonchalantly extended his legs as Hermione reseated herself. "Did you really promise Severus a bottle of Ogden's Old Hundred Year Reserve?" he asked. Phelps nodded. "I'm impressed. Even the cellars of Malfoy Manor don't contain many bottles of such a rare firewhisky. Where did you get it?"

"Lucius, stay on the topic," Remus hissed. "We can talk about this after."

Tell Phelps to look out the window.

Hermione visibly started. "Mr Phelps, would you look out your window, please?"

Swiveling in his chair, Phelps did as he was asked, only to shrink back in alarm as Severus came into view once more. "That's a Shadow Dragon," he yelled, reaching for his wand.

Remus jumped up and grabbed at the arm scrabbling in the desk drawer. "It's okay," he said. "He's a friend."

"A friend?" Phelps looked at them and shook his head. "Dragons aren't friends with humans. They tend to view us as dinner."

You're too stringy.

Hermione gasped, then giggled in embarrassment. "I can't tell him that."

Why not?

"It's not nice."

"Er, Miss Granger?"

"Yes?"

"To whom are you speaking?" Phelps regarded her with an expression that plainly said he should call St. Mungo's for her.

"The dragon," Hermione answered calmly. "He says you're too stringy to eat, by the way."

Lucius dissolved into laughter while Remus smiled bemusedly. Phelps could only gape at her.

"What do you mean by that?" he gasped in anger, turning back to the window. "What do you mean, too stringy?" He shook his fist at Severus, who was taking his time to fade back into the shadows. "Where'd he go?" Phelps peered out the window into the courtyard shadows.

Ask him if the Fructuarius Potion worked.

"He wants to know if the Fructuarius Potion worked," Hermione dutifully related. She looked out the window as if she could see the dragon. "A male fertility potion? Really?"

Phelps sputtered and hemmed, his face turning red with embarrassment, as well as a little pride. "Two boys and a girl over the next five years," he eventually admitted. "My wife was, and is, well pleased with the results. Now, explain how you knew that."

"The dragon told me," she explained. "You see..."

Lucius interrupted. "The dragon is the one we at Hogwarts call Athair. But, and this is the reason we asked for your wand oath..."

"...he's really Severus Snape," Remus said, finishing the thought.

"Tom Riddle cursed him," Hermione said, going on.

"And we discovered the curse was spoken in Gothic..." Remus went on.

"So, Severus suggested we come talk to you." Lucius looked at the other wizard in expectation.

Phelps goggled at them, his head flipping back and forth between them as though he was watching a Quidditch match. "That dragon is Severus Snape?" he gasped. "Really?"

He collapsed back in his chair, one hand held over his heart, as they nodded. "Merciful gods, this is amazing! Can all of you talk to him? Could I?" He swiveled to look out the window once more.

"Er, no," Hermione said. "Apparently, I'm the only one."

Marigold can hear me.

"With the exception of his house-elf," she said hastily. Remus and Lupin stared at her. "What? He just told me that."

Phelps leaned forward on his desk and steepled his hands. "Fascinating," he said. "Where is this spell you want me to translate? I assume you have it with you."

"Um, no," Remus said. "Since none of us can understand Gothic, the original spell is still at Hogwarts."

"Then who told you it was Gothic?"

Hermione bit her lower lip. "A house-elf," she volunteered quietly.

"A *house-elf*?" Phelps repeated in astonishment. "A house-elf told you that this spell was written in Gothic." He shook his head. "I don't believe this," he muttered.

"You should," Lucius said, visibly annoyed. "And it's a spoken spell, not written. This particular house-elf served a scholar of Gothic until his old master died. I believe..."

"Wait, wait," Phelps interrupted. "A Gothic scholar? Who? When did he die?"

"We don't know who," Remus answered. "Penti didn't give us his name, but apparently he died about eighty years ago..."

"Possibly old Gragson, then," Phelps mused. "What a treasure trove that house-elf's mind must be. I really must speak with it."

"Him," Hermione corrected.

"Excuse me?"

"Penti is a him, not an it."

"Not now, Hermione," Lucius said with a chuckle. "Save your lecture on house-elf rights until we remove the curse from Severus."

She sighed heavily. "Very well, Lucius."

"Now, Mr Phelps, when can you come to Hogwarts?" Lucius asked the bemused wizard. "We have only a short time to remove the curse."

"Would tomorrow be soon enough?" Phelps asked. "I need to let my wife know where I'm going."

"That will be fine," Lucius said, forestalling the complaints of his companions. "So long as you don't tell her why, we can expect you in the morning?"

"Certainly, certainly." Phelps dug out a sheet of parchment and a quill. "I'll have to write up my questions for this house-elf of yours. No one in the Gothic community knew where he disappeared to after Gragson died."

Lucius reached out and stilled his hand. "Nothing on paper, if you please," he said. "It's far too easy for someone else to find."

Indeed.

A/N: The word *fructuarius* is Latin for "make fertile/fruitful" according to the Latin Dictionary and Grammar Guide from Notre Dame University.

Playtime for Dragons

Chapter 9 of 17

Hermione returns to Hogwarts to teach Potions and finds something dark and mysterious in the forest. (This is a continuation of Velvet Song's original story archived here at TPP.)

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Virtual hugs to Fizzabella and writermerrin for the beta of this chapter. The story is complete and will be posted as each chapter is beta'd. Thank you for the generous reviews. It's nice to know people enjoy the words I put down on paper.

Playtime for Dragons

"Hmmm, yes, play that again if you please?" Phelps looked up from his notes as the final memory began to play itself out on the wall of the staff room. "Interesting. Most interesting. Is this all of them?"

"My wife is due to arrive in a couple of days," Bill said. "We haven't got her memories yet."

"We're loath to bring anyone else in," Minerva explained. "For obvious reasons."

"Yes, yes." Phelps waved their comments away. "It's not complete, though. There are several words either missing or misremembered. The closest anyone came is memory number nine. Whose is that?"

"Mine," Hermione said. "Are you sure about the others?"

"Positive. I would guess these memories were not taken right after the battle?" He ran a hand through his already disordered hair. "Most slovenly record keeping," he murmured.

"We weren't aware—" Minerva began, drawing herself up in indignation.

"No, no, of course not." Phelps scribbled some more runes onto his parchment. "There has to be something else we can do to solve Severus' little problem."

Hermione choked back a laugh.

"What is it, dear?" Minerva said. "Are you ill?"

Hermione waved her concerns away. "No," she squeaked, her face red with suppressed laughter. "It's just that... little problem... too funny." She dissolved into giggles.

I am not amused.

"Sorry, sorry," she gasped, drawing a much needed breath into her lungs. "It's just the thought of an eleven meter tall dragon being considered *little* problem."

Harry and Draco snickered, while some of the other teachers chuckled. Meanwhile, Neville seemed lost in thought, staring out the window at the Forbidden Forest.

"I know someone whose memories we don't have," he said suddenly. "We don't have Professor Snape's. Wouldn't his be better than any of ours? They'd be first hand, after all."

Phelps furrowed his brow. "That does make sense," he said. "He was, undoubtedly, positioned the closest to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named than anyone else as the curse was aimed at him. Has anyone tried to obtain his memories?"

"Mr Phelps, until this year, nobody could communicate with the dragon," Minerva said indignantly. "Hermione is the only one Athair has even considered speaking with since his arrival four years ago."

"So, Miss Granger, would you ask for his memories? It would be a great help." Phelps looked at her expectantly.

You will have to come and take them from me. I can not, as I do not have a wand.

"Um..." Hermione nervously bit at her lower lip. "He... he says I have to come and get them. I... I guess he's willing to let us see them."

"Excellent, let us be off." Phelps leapt to his feet in excitement.

Only you.

"He only wants me to come," she said, catching Phelps' arm as he came past her. "I don't think he wants company."

"Hell, no!" Remus was on his feet by this time. "You're not going by yourself."

"Remus—"

"No!" He was almost frothing at the mouth. "That's a dragon! I don't care if it is Severus Snape! At the end of the day, it's still a dragon! You're not going alone!"

HE'S NOT COMING!

Severus' roar almost drowned out the arguing, but it was Hermione who got their attention when she simply walked out of the room. Astonishment lined the faces of everyone but Harry, who knew his sister-friend would not take kindly to being told what to do, even from Remus.

"He won't hurt her," Harry said into the sudden silence. "If he hasn't done so in almost a year, he won't do so now."

"Potter is correct," Lucius said in agreement. "Severus has feelings for the chit. He won't hurt her. Tease her? Maybe. But not hurt her."

"I still think someone needs to go with her," Remus mumbled. "It's not right."

Hermione left the castle still irritated with the attitude she'd witnessed from Remus. "What is his problem?" she grumbled to herself as she made her way towards the forest. "It's not like I haven't been in there before." Unknown to her, a single figure slipped out the doors behind her. So caught up in her indignation, she failed to realize she was being followed. However, dark eyes in the forest were watching her shadow's every move.

"S... Severus?" Hermione called nervously as she reached the clearing where she had first encountered the dragon. "Are you here?"

Here. He slipped into view, sliding down until his chin lay on his front paws, his tail wrapped around his hindquarters like a cat's tail at rest. Lying down as he was, it was easy for Hermione to reach his head. Hesitantly, she reached out and stroked her hand down his surprisingly soft muzzle. She jerked away as he rumbled deep in his stomach.

"Are... are you hungry?" she asked hesitantly.

No. That felt good.

She giggled. "You're not ticklish, are you?" she asked mischievously.

He snorted. *I have never been ticklish. It just felt good.*

"So, now what?"

My memories of the battle. You may remove them now.

Hermione pulled her wand from her sleeve and held it up to the side of Snape's head. Murmuring the proper spell, she drew a long strand of silver out of his forehead. It wrapped itself around her wand, and she quickly released it into the glass vial she'd brought with her. Corking the vial, she held it up to him. "Thank you," she whispered. "I hope this helps."

Severus snuffled at the edge of her robes. *Me, too.*

She slipped the vial into a pocket inside her robes and turned to leave the clearing. Just then, a twig snapped in the forest behind her. Quicker than she could blink, Severus had leapt over her and vanished. The gust of wind from his wings blew her to the ground.

"Ow," she said, entangled in her robes and struggling to sit up. "Not again." She looked around. "Severus?"

Snarls and yells came from the trees in front of her as she got to her feet. "Severus!" she yelled with concern and ran towards the sounds of struggle.

Reaching the trees, she found a chagrined Remus Lupin being held upside-down by his ankle. Severus remained invisible, but it was obvious he was the detainer and Remus, the detainee.

"Hermione, love—" Remus started to say, only to be shaken fiercely. "I... I'm sorry. Please, have him put me down. Please?"

She put her hands on her hips. "You followed me?" she shouted, her face a study in accusation. "After I said ~~had~~ to go alone? Really, Remus! Why should I?"

"Because I'm a friend," Remus countered, his face turning red as all his blood rushed to his brain. "I care about what happens to you." Obviously, the wrong thing to say as he was fiercely shaken again. "Please, Hermione? Get him to put me down?"

"Severus."

Hmmm?

"Playtime's over."

He's a pestilence.

"He's a friend. Please, Severus?"

For you then.

Remus suddenly dropped, twisting in the air until he managed to land on his rear rather than his head. He flinched as Severus roared above him, but didn't move until Hermione reached down and took his hand to help him to his feet.

"It's your own fault, you know," she said, not unkindly. "I told you not to come."

"I'll listen next time," Remus said sheepishly. "I promise."

Good.

Two Couplets Equal One Death Eater

Chapter 10 of 17

Hermione returns to Hogwarts to teach Potions and finds something dark and mysterious in the forest. (This is a continuation of Velvet Song's original story archived here at TPP.)

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Two Couplets Equal One Death Eater

"This is most interesting," Phelps murmured as they viewed the memories Hermione had managed to obtain. "Most interesting, indeed." He scribbled furiously on his notes. "Play it again, please. I think I've almost got it."

"Almost isn't good enough," Lucius growled impatiently. "We need to have an answer *now*."

"Lucius—"

"No, Minerva. Every minute we waste is another minute that Severus doesn't have."

"I've got it!" Phelps' shout interrupted their argument. "At least I believe I have," he said slowly, as he rearranged several runes on his paper. "Play that again, would you? One more time? I need to verify..."

He glanced up at the wall and back down to his parchments. "Hmmm, yes," he mumbled. "That makes more sense than this other one." Looking up, he grinned. "I think I'll keep my bottle of Hundred Year Reserve for this."

Not bloody likely.

Hermione giggled. "You couldn't drink it right now anyway, silly," she said, seemingly into thin air. "We don't even know if we can reverse the spell."

You can if they can't

"How sweet of you to think so."

I am not sweet.

"Of course you are."

Ask Phelps about the spell.

"He's changing the subject," Hermione said, grinning at her fellow teachers. "He wants me to ask about the spell. Do you have all of it?"

"I believe so," Phelps said, nervously straightening his parchments. "I can give you what I have, but I would really like to see Mrs Tonks-Weasley's memories as well. They might give me a better grasp of this." He looked up at the memory, which hung, movement frozen, on the wall. "Where did the man learn Gothic?" he murmured, half to himself. "There aren't that many of us in the community that anyone could have taught him without someone hearing about it." He shook his head in annoyance. "I'll read you what I have, shall I?"

"Please do," Minerva said, taking her place at the head of the table and gesturing for the others to take their seats. "Then we can decide what our next actions should be."

Phelps cleared his throat several times. "I want you to remember that this is what I have gleaned from all your memories. It's only a rough approximation—"

"Yes, yes," Lucius said, waving an impatient hand. "Get on with it, man."

Phelps cleared his throat again and looked down at his parchments.

"From man to animal,

From human to dragon;

A life most dismal,

this spell foregone.

Curse be on you

until year ten,

A man you'll be

never again."

He finished reading and looked up expectantly. "Well?" he asked. "Does that help any?"

"That's it?" Minerva sputtered. "Two couplets to turn a man into a great beast?"

"Minerva—"

She waved her hand at Hermione. "It took only two couplets to make Severus into a beast, Hermione." Sighing, she scrubbed at her face, only to look up with tears in her eyes. "A longer spell would have a better chance of being reversed. This one? I don't know..."

"We can still do something with this," Flitwick said cheerfully. "Tell me, Mr Phelps, does the reversal spell have to be spoken in Gothic as well?"

"I'm sure it would have a better chance of succeeding," Phelps said, assuring everyone at the table. "If you need my help with translating—"

"Oh, we'll need your help alright," Lucius growled. "Especially as none of us have the slightest hint of how to speak your precious Gothic language."

"Lucius, really!" Narcissa scolded her husband. "Mr Phelps, please forgive him," she apologized. "We're all just a little upset and shaken over what you've revealed."

"Think nothing of it," Phelps said, waving away her apology. "I completely understand. Headmistress, if I am to stay for awhile, might I speak with your house-elf—what was its name—Panty?"

"That's Penti!" Hermione shouted. "*His* name is Penti!"

"Yes, that's it." Phelps calmly turned back to Minerva. "May I? The knowledge he has of his former master is irreplaceable. To be able to regain that knowledge..."

Minerva sighed. "Very well, Mr Phelps," she said. "I have no objections to your speaking with Penti." She raised a finger in warning. "However, he shall not be coerced. If he chooses to answer your questions, well and good, but I *will* make it clear to him that he is under no obligation to do so. Do you understand?"

"Oh, most definitely." Phelps beamed at her. "This is so exciting."

Not for me, it isn't

* * *

"What do we do now?" Hermione paced the length of the staff room after Phelps had been shown to his guest quarters. "In order to restore Severus, do we have to come up with an original spell? And if we do, how do we know it will even work? We certainly wouldn't want to test it out on anything first."

Lucius tapped his forefinger on the tabletop. "There might be a spell somewhere in the Dark Lord's books and papers. As I said before, he was usually prepared with a counter-curse so he could torture his followers when they displeased him and reverse the spell at will."

"But we don't know where they are," Hermione protested. "And remember, the books said the spell destroys the original body. How are we to find something—"

"I know who owned the vault," Bill said, interrupting her ranting. "I don't think anyone's going to like it, though."

"Why not, son?" Arthur looked over at his eldest child. "Is the vault still in use?"

"It is," Bill said, "but not by the person we need. He gave it up and returned the key a few months after the Final Battle. First, though, he emptied the vault."

"And took another one, right?" Harry asked, leaning forward eagerly. "Who is it?"

"Rufus Scrimgeour."

"What!" Remus shouted into the shocked silence, the faces of the other teachers echoing his shock.

"He's a Death Eater?" Hermione cried.

"Can't be!" said Arthur, brows beetling in thought.

"That slimy, sanctimonious, egotistical git?" Harry was furious.

"But... but... he was Minister of Magic!" Filius protested.

"Doesn't preclude him from being a Death Eater," Lucius drawled.

Minerva knocked on the table and waved everyone to silence. "Lucius is correct," she said. "Being Minister of Magic did not preclude him from following Riddle. And," she continued, frowning at Harry, "he *is* the last person any of us would suspect. After all, he fought on our side during the Final Battle."

"How can we prove he was a Death Eater?" Hermione asked. "Especially if he didn't take the Dark Mark?"

He was marked

"What?" Hermione whirled on Lucius. "Severus says he was marked."

"Yes." Lucius blinked. "I'd forgotten about that."

"About what?" Harry's face was red with anger. "I can't believe that git thought I would work with him," he muttered, shaking off Neville's soothing hand. "He's a piece of work."

"Indeed," Lucius agreed. He tapped on the table with his forefinger again to emphasize his words. "The Dark Lord did not leave his followers unmarked, regardless of what they might have thought. It's not a visible mark, however."

"How do we prove he was a Death Eater, then?" Minerva asked. "I'm sure the Ministry wouldn't accept the testimony of a dragon," she said wryly.

Indeed, they would not.

Plotting Exposure

Chapter 11 of 17

Hermione returns to Hogwarts to teach Potions and finds something dark and mysterious in the forest. (This is a continuation of Velvet Song's original story archived here at TPP.)

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Plotting Exposure

"If we are going to expose Scrimgeour as a Death Eater," Lucius said, "it is imperative we find *where* he has taken the contents of that vault." He looked over to Bill. "I am fairly certain he wouldn't have put them into his personal vault. That would be subject to Ministry confiscation after he's been exposed."

Bill nodded. "Griphook told me if anything came back on Gringotts from the information I'm about to give you, the onus would be on my head. I agreed because he was risking everything by giving it to me." He looked around the table and grimaced. "Scrimgeour has nothing of any particular value in his personal vault. I would have to conclude he has another place to keep what he took."

"I concur," Lucius said. "I also see a major problem. Scrimgeour has any number of places he could have taken his ill-gotten gains."

"His house and the Ministry," Harry snorted. "That's only two places."

"Which house, Mr Potter?"

"Huh?"

"To the best of my knowledge, Scrimgeour has a townhouse in London, his manor in Dorset, and a beach cottage in Cornwall," Lucius said, tapping the table to emphasize each point. "There is also his Ministry office, I will give you that, but..."

"He has access to almost every part of the Ministry by virtue of having been the Minister of Magic," Arthur spoke up. "Even if he doesn't hold the post any longer, there are still rooms that would allow him entrance."

Hermione shook her head. "I don't think it's the Ministry," she said, holding up her hand to stop Harry from arguing. "Think about it, Harry. He's not the Minister anymore. Why would he hide something in a room that someone anyone else could enter?"

"Hermione's right," Minerva said. "I think his office is out as well. Too many people in and out of it all day and possibly part of the night as well. Arthur, does the Ministry have any secret safes or rooms that you might know of?"

If he knows, then they're not secret.

Arthur opened and closed his mouth a few times. "To the best of my knowledge, I'd have to say no, Minerva. But then, if I knew about them, they wouldn't be a secret now, would they?"

Hermione had to laugh. "Severus just said the same thing," she hastened to explain as everyone glanced over at her. "Two minds with a single thought."

How insulting.

Hermione ignored Severus' grumbling. "Maybe it's like Poe's story, 'The Purloined Letter'," she mused. Harry and Arthur quickly caught her line of reasoning, while the other teachers looked bemused.

"That could be it," Harry crowed. "Why look for a safe or secret room when it's hiding in plain sight?"

"Yes," sighed Arthur dreamily. "I always did enjoy that particular story." He shook his head to clear it. "So we need to search all those places Lucius mentioned? That could take weeks."

"I think we need to make him reveal himself to us," Minerva said. "We could then have him turn over everything to us before we notify the Ministry."

"Why, Minerva," purred Narcissa. "You're speaking of blackmail." She beamed at the older witch. "I didn't know you had it in you."

Quickly stifled laughter rippled around the table as Minerva gave a cat-like smile. "My dear Narcissa, blackmail is such an ugly word. I prefer 'extortion'," she purred, then turned to Lucius. "You said the mark wasn't visible. How would we know for sure?"

"I think I know," Hermione said, interrupting Lucius' answer. He closed his mouth and nodded for her to continue. "You said your Mark goes soul-deep. That's how I recognized Severus." She grinned and tapped her left forearm. "So even if Scrimgeour's Mark isn't visible, there would still be a Mark on his soul, right?"

"Oh, my," Filius said. "If that's the case, a simple diagnostic spell should reveal his affiliations."

Lucius shook his head. "It's not that easy," he said. "Simple diagnostic spells are used at St. Mungo's. That would mean possible exposure every time an unmarked Death Eater had to see a Healer." He stood up and started to pace. "No, there was another method the Dark Lord used to communicate with them, but I can't recall..."

Like us, they were called by the Dark Mark itself, but separately so as to maintain their so-called cover.

"Severus says Riddle used his Dark Mark to call them," Hermione said. "Can you do that through your Mark?"

"No," Lucius growled. "I wish I could. A lot more of my so-called *friends* would be in Azkaban if that were the case." He sat down heavily and rubbed a hand across his face.

"I have an idea," Draco said, flashing a decidedly evil grin. "He was in Gryffindor, wasn't he? What if we tell him we found something of the Dark Lord's hidden here at Hogwarts? We want to turn it over to the Ministry, but would prefer to give it to someone we know hates the Dark Lord as much as we do so he can take care of it?"

"In other words, we lie," Harry said.

Draco shrugged. "Works for me."

"What sort of something?" Harry asked in a brusque manner. "Wouldn't he be suspicious?"

"Not necessarily," Lucius interjected. "It's a good idea, but I think I have a better one."

"Do tell, Lucius." Minerva leaned forward in her chair, clearly interested. "How would you go about summoning Scrimgeour to us?"

He slowly smiled. "Scrimgeour considers himself a connoisseur of fine wines and whiskies." Hermione and Remus sat up straight and listened very closely at the mention of whisky while Lucius nodded at them. "I happen to know where a bottle of Ogden's Old Hundred Year Reserve Firewhisky is located."

THAT'S MINE!

Hermione winced as Severus' roar reverberated in her head. While most of the others looked fearfully out the window at the Forbidden Forest, Lucius grinned at Remus and Hermione.

"I guess you know what he thinks of that," she said ruefully, shaking her head to clear it. "You might want to try something else."

"Whatever for, dear?" Minerva said craftily. "I happen to have two bottles of my own carefully put by for a rainy day." She glanced at Lucius. "I could certainly spare *one* for a good cause."

"That's most kind of you, Minerva," Lucius said, giving her a bow. "Filius, how soon could you come up with a charm to make his Dark Mark visible?"

"Er..." Filius hedged. "I'm not sure. With Mrs Bones-Malfoy and Miss Granger's help, a few days... maybe? Might be as long as two or three weeks?" He looked over at the two women, who smiled reassuringly. "Er, yes. Perhaps a few days." He pulled a piece of parchment towards him and summoned a quill to start writing down the elements of the necessary spell. Looking up at Lucius, he asked, "May we use you and your family to test our theories?"

"Whatever you need, Filius," Narcissa said, agreeing for her husband and son, who nodded. "Whatever you need."

I am willing, as well.

Hermione sighed. "It might just come to that." She quickly relayed his words to the rest of the group.

"Excellent." Filius rubbed his hands together. "One way or another, we will get this done. How did you plan to lure your victim here?" He looked at Lucius.

"Perhaps a dinner invitation?" Lucius mused. "A mention of how I managed to discover a rare whisky, and I thought perhaps he might like to join me and my family." He gave a malevolent look. "The man is a back-stabbing sycophant. I'm sure he would want to be in the good graces of a Malfoy if there were a chance of something for himself in it."

Quite.

Hermione just smiled.

Dinner With the Malfoys

Chapter 12 of 17

Hermione returns to Hogwarts to teach Potions and finds something dark and mysterious in the forest. (This is a continuation of Velvet Song's original story archived here at TPP.)

Dinner With the Malfoys

"I must say, Lucius... er... I may call you Lucius, may I not?" Scrimgeour delicately dabbed at his mouth with a napkin. At Lucius' nod, he smiled unctuously. "This was a fine meal. I envy you living here."

"Why is that, Rufus?" Narcissa said, reaching for the crystal bell at her left hand.

"Fine meals and house-elves at your beck and call," he answered as she rang for a house-elf. He took a sip of his wine as Winky popped into the Malfoy quarters.

"You is ringing?" she asked. "How Winky help?"

"I believe we are ready for dessert now," Narcissa said, scanning the table. Winky nodded and popped out as Susan and Draco placed their napkins on the table and stood together.

"With all due respect, Mother," Draco said. "Susan and I will pass on dessert for now. I have a book of runes that she and I want to discuss with Hermione."

"Please excuse us, Mr Scrimgeour," Susan said, dipping a slight curtsy. "We did promise, after all."

He waved them away magnanimously. "Of course," he said. "Academia is calling. I quite understand." He looked on with interest as Winky popped back in with a large trifle in her hands. "That looks delicious."

Winky grimaced as she set the dish on the table in front of Narcissa and popped out.

"I'm sure it is," Lucius said as he left the table and wandered over to his drinks cabinet. "I believe I have just the thing to wash it down with as well." He turned around with a bottle, its label hidden in his hand. "There aren't many of these left."

Scrimgeour took a sip of wine as Lucius placed the bottle on the table between their plates. He glanced at the label and started to cough. "Please, tell me that isn't what I think it is?" he managed to choke out, eyeing the bottle almost reverently. "Ogden's Old Hundred Year Reserve Firewhisky?"

"Yes." Lucius smiled. "I came across this while looking over the cellars."

"Malfoy Manor? I thought we'd... er... that is..."

"You thought you'd emptied them?" Lucius said. "You and your Aurors may have emptied the public cellars, but none of you are Malfoys. There are secrets known only to those of the family, and not accessible to anyone else."

He held up the bottle and looked at Scrimgeour through it. "However, this came from the Hogwarts cellars. I believe Minerva said something about that particular section being Severus Snape's."

"He's dead!" Scrimgeour said easily, his voice already slurring from the glasses of wine he'd drunk with his dinner. Then he frowned. "Didn't he leave everything to that Granger girl? That belongs to her then, doesn't it?"

"Hermione was most gracious in allowing me to appropriate this particular bottle," Lucius purred. "She does not drink firewhisky so had no interest in what was there."

Scrimgeour stared greedily. "Is there more in the cellar?" he asked, licking his lips in anticipation.

"Alas, no." Lucius turned back to the cabinet and picked up two glasses. "Narcissa, my love, would you care for some?"

"No, thank you, dear." She dished up their dessert and handed a bowl to Scrimgeour. "I prefer tea with my dessert."

"More for us then." Lucius set the glasses down on the table just as someone knocked at their door. "Excuse me for a moment," he said. Scrimgeour nodded, his eyes never leaving the bottle on the table.

"Minerva. Filius," Lucius said with just the right amount of surprise in his voice as he opened the door and saw who was standing there. "What brings you down here to our humble abode?"

"Filius joined me for dinner this evening," Minerva said with a casual tone. "When we were finished, he asked if he might see what changes had been made since he taught here. This is our last stop."

"I wanted to see what changes you'd made to Severus' rooms," the little man piped up. He looked around from his spot in the doorway. "You've lightened it up considerably."

"Minerva?" Narcissa joined Lucius in front of the door. "Why, hello, Professor Flitwick. We were just about to have dessert. Would the two of you care to join us?"

"If we're not intruding," Minerva said. "Rather than eating another dessert, however, I could do with some tea. If it's not too much trouble, that is?"

"Nonsense," Narcissa said, stepping aside. "I'll have the house-elf bring another cup. What about you, Professor?"

"Please, my dear, call me Filius," he said. "I haven't been a teacher in seven years. However, I have to agree with Minerva. If it's not too much trouble, I would prefer some tea."

"Two cups, then. Lucius, we are ignoring our other guest."

"Apologies, Rufus," Lucius said, returning to the table. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Not at all. Not at all," Scrimgeour said expansively. "More than welcome. After all, it's your house... er... so to speak."

Narcissa winked at Minerva as she returned to her seat and rang the crystal bell. "Two more cups, if you would, Winky," she ordered as the house-elf appeared. "The Headmistress and Professor Flitwick will be joining us for tea."

"I be bringing more tea, too," Winky said. She popped out, only to return almost immediately with two more teacups and another pot of tea. "Is everything?" she asked.

"For now," Narcissa said. "I'll ring if we need anything else." Winky curtsied and popped out.

"Well-trained little bugger," Scrimgeour commented as he watched Lucius pour two fingers of the firewhisky into a glass. "Thankee kindly," he said, accepting the glass and taking a sip.

Lucius poured the same amount into his own glass and held it up to the light. "Such a rich colour," he said. "Wouldn't you agree, Rufus?"

Scrimgeour held his glass up and peered through it, blinking drunkenly. "Yesh," he said. "Pretty colour. Ya know, Luscious... I mean... Lucius." He shook his head, trying to clear it. "I'm drunk."

"You certainly are," Lucius agreed, taking the glass away before Scrimgeour could drop it. "Perhaps some tea?"

"Don't want tea," he said pettishly. "Want some more of that firewhisky... firewhishky... you know what I mean." He reached for the bottle.

"I think you've had enough, Rufus." Lucius pulled the bottle away. "You're embarrassing yourself in front of my wife and our other guests."

"Op...apologies," Scrimgeour stammered, trying to stand up and bow. He succeeded in standing, only to have his legs go out from under him. "Oops!"

"*Mobilicorpus!*" Filius said, adding a flick with his wand. "Perhaps the couch, Lucius?"

"I think that would be the best place," Lucius said, confiscating Scrimgeour's wand as he bobbled past. "How do you feel, Rufus?"

"Quite good." Scrimgeour smiled drunkenly as Filius floated him over to the couch and released the spell. "How 'bout some more of that firewhishky, huh? Don't want it to go to waste." He swung his legs over and onto the floor and tried to sit up, only to fall back into a reclining position. "Thish ish quite comfortable," he said with a yawn.

Lucius flicked his wand. "*Aperio* Dark Mark!"

Scrimgeour screamed as a bright red light streamed out of his left sleeve. Suddenly sober, he struggled to get to his feet, only to be restrained by the Incarcerous cast by Lucius almost immediately after his last spell.

"What do you think you're doing?" he demanded, struggling to get free. "Give me back my wand, do you hear me? I'll see you in Azkaban for this!"

"You'll be joining me, then," Lucius purred, pulling the sleeve of Scrimgeour's robe up off his left forearm. "I'd say this would get you a life sentence, wouldn't you, Minerva?"

Scrimgeour stared in horror at the Dark Mark displayed prominently on the inside of his arm. "No," he whispered. "He promised."

"Don't tell me you believed everything Riddle promised you," Minerva said angrily. "Why, Rufus?"

"He promised me power," Scrimgeour snarled. "Did you think I wanted to be an Auror the rest of my life? Money and power, that's what he promised me!" He said the Mark would never be seen.

"He was wrong," Lucius said. "I knew about them. Why do you think I invited you to dinner this evening." He sneered at the helpless wizard. "I truly dislike your hypocritical ways. Pretending to hunt Death Eaters when you were one all the time!"

"I wasn't pretending!"

"That's even worse," Minerva said with a sigh as she sat down. "Suppose Riddle had won? What would you have done then?"

Scrimgeour paled. "He would have killed me," he squeaked. "Minerva, please? Have mercy on a fellow Gryffindor."

"Why, Rufus? Give me one good reason why I should."

He looked at Lucius and Narcissa, then back at Minerva. "Not here," he said, licking his lips nervously. "Not in front of Slytherins."

"We're all on the same side," Minerva said, sitting in the armchair she Transfigured from an side table. "Well, maybe you're not, but the rest of us are. Talk to me, Rufus."

"I..."

"Yes."

"I have books and papers that belonged to V... the Dark Lord."

"Why didn't you turn them in when you found them?" Filius asked. "Especially if you weren't pretending to hate Death Eaters."

"I was keeping them for him. Let me go and I'll turn them over to the Ministry right away."

"I don't know, Minerva," Lucius said, twirling Scrimgeour's wand between his fingers. "He could just as easily leave the country with them. They're probably worth a great deal."

"No! I wouldn't do that! Please, Minerva?"

"He could always bring them to us," Filius suggested. "We could make sure whatever is there was taken to the Ministry, couldn't we?"

"What do you say, Rufus?"

"Yes, yes. Release me, give me back my wand, and I'll get them and bring everything back to you."

"I don't know, Minerva," Lucius drawled. "I don't trust him. He's more likely to turn us in with some made-up story."

"No!"

"Why don't you tell us where you put these books and papers, Rufus?" Minerva asked. "We will send someone to fetch them. Once we make sure they really did belong to Riddle, we'll turn you loose. You can take your own chances with that." She nodded at his forearm, the Dark Mark still pulsing with light.

He looked around at the solemn group of witches and wizards who surrounded him and ceased his struggles, collapsing back against the couch. "Very well," he said. "They're in a box under my bed in the cottage at Cornwall. It's labeled 'beach towels'."

"Winky!" Minerva called.

"I hear, Headmistress," the little creature said, popping into the room. "You wishes me to go now?"

"Yes, dear. Oh, and Winky?"

"Yes, Headmistress?"

"Watch for any hidden traps."

Winky smirked. "Winky know what traps is there." Snapping her fingers, the house-elf disappeared.

"You tricked me!" Scrimgeour snarled. "Damn you!"

"Indeed," Lucius drawled. He pointed Scrimgeour's own wand at him. "*Obliviate!*"

Back From the Dead

Chapter 13 of 17

Hermione returns to Hogwarts to teach Potions and finds something dark and mysterious in the forest. (This is a continuation of Velvet Song's original story archived here at TPP.)

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Virtual hugs to Fizzabella and writermerrin for the beta of this chapter. The story is complete and will be posted as each chapter is beta'd. Thank you for all the lovely reviews. The stroking is much appreciated.

Back From the Dead

"Is he going to be okay?" Hermione whispered as they watched an Obliviated Scrimgeour leave the castle just after dawn, walking unsteadily towards the gates and the Apparition point.

"Perfectly," Lucius said with a grin. "At least he will, once his headache eases up. Right now, he believes he spent the night on our sitting room sofa because he and I drank that entire bottle of firewhisky." He rubbed his hands together with ill-disguised glee. "Now, where is that box?"

"I believe you are enjoying this far too much, Lucius," Minerva said with a teasing smile. "That's so unlike you."

"I really think you need to work on your sarcasm, Minerva." Narcissa looked at the Headmistress through narrowed eyes. "I would gladly give you lessons, once we have Severus back hale and hearty."

"I might take you up on that, Narcissa dear. Winky?"

"I is here, Headmistress." Winky popped in, a box larger than she was bobbing along behind her. "I has taken all bad spells away so box is safe. But..." The little house-elf laid her largish ears flat against her head. "I is also bringing something else back."

"Something else?" Lucius growled. "We sent you for the box and the box only. What else did you collect?"

"Lucius, that's enough," Minerva scolded as a cringing Winky hid behind her robes. "There's no need to shout at her."

"I wasn't shouting."

Minerva ignored him and turned to the cowering house-elf. "Winky, what else did you bring back? Is it something dangerous?"

"Not dangerous, Headmistress," the little creature wailed. "Only lonely and hungry. Winky bring back to Hogwarts and feed."

"What, Winky?" Minerva pressed on. "What did you bring back?"

"Ahem!"

The group of three witches and one wizard turned towards the doorway of the staff room. Standing there was an emaciated wizard. His age was difficult to determine as his beard and hair fell long and lank over his shoulders and down his chest, and his robes were old and needed patching. He shuffled forward into the room and took hold of the back of a chair. Weakly pulling it out from the table, he lowered himself down and sat there, watching them watch him.

"Please, don't punish your little house-elf," he finally said in a quavering voice. "She probably saved my life, and I am extremely grateful."

"Who *are* you?" Minerva asked in astonishment. "Better yet, *where* did you come from?"

"The kitchens, I believe?" He looked at Winky, who nodded vigorously. "As to who I am..."

"Good heavens! It's Coombs!" Phelps paled as he walked into the staff room and saw their newest visitor. "Good gods, man! We thought you died almost nine years ago! Had a funeral and everything!"

"Not dead," the wizard identified as Coombs said. "Kidnapped and kept locked up in the smallest room I've ever been in until this little house-elf freed me last night." He smiled gratefully at Winky.

Minerva cleared her throat and looked meaningfully at both wizards. "I take it you two know one another?"

"Coombs is a tolerable scholar of Gothic," Phelps said. "We've worked on translations together."

"Tolerable? Tolerable?" the other wizard sputtered. "Who was it that recognized the umlaut didn't belong in that translation of..."

Phelps waved the objections away. "I'll give you that one," he said with a grin. "Good gods, man. I was only teasing."

Coombs ran his hands through his waist-length hair and leaned back in his seat with a sigh. "Sorry. Hit a sore point there, old boy. Whatever are you doing here?"

"Mr Phelps is helping us with a spot of translation," Lucius purred. "Am I to understand that you were kidnapped nine years ago?"

"What year is it?"

"Two thousand and six," Hermione answered from her place by the window. She leaned back against the wall next to the window and crossed her arms over her chest. "The eighth anniversary of the Final Battle is next month."

"Since *you're* here, I would be guessing He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was defeated?"

Hermione drew herself up in outrage, but Coombs waved her down. "Sorry, didn't mean that like it sounded. The house-elf brought me here, fed me some excellent soup, and bedded me down in a corner of the kitchen. Other than her and the other house-elves, I hadn't seen a soul in some time."

"I take it Riddle kidnapped you," Minerva stated bluntly.

"Not him," Coombs said. "Some red-headed, slightly older gent. Showed me an Auror's badge and whisked me away before I could ask questions. Probably on...Riddle, did you call him?" Minerva nodded. "Probably on his orders because he was waiting for me. Wanted me to translate this spell into Gothic." He shuddered. "Horrible spell. Turns someone into a dragon. Had me translate the counter-curse, as well, among other things."

"I'm surprised he didn't kill you," Lucius said as some of the other current human inhabitants of the castle wandered into the staff room. "Unless he had other plans..." He sat down on a chair near the other wizard and stared at him. "Did the Dark Lord test those spells he had you translate?"

He'd be a fool if he didn't, and we all know the Dark Lord was no fool. A megalomaniac, yes. But not a fool.

Hermione smiled faintly at Severus' comment, but made no comments of her own.

"On *me*, no less," Coombs protested. "Then he had the kidnapper lock me up. Heard 'em say he'd check back later to see how I was doing. Told the fellow to make sure I got fed." He humphed. "About all the fellow did, too. Eight...no, nine you said...long years of it, and not very much at that. No wand and I'm useless at wandless magic, so I had to stay locked up." He licked his lips hungrily. "If there's any more breakfast being offered, I wouldn't say no."

Minerva smiled. "We certainly wouldn't turn you away," she said. "Winky?"

The house-elf pointed her finger at the hovering box and set it down on the table. "Winky tell kitchen. Breakfast in Hall?"

"I believe so," Minerva said agreeably. "Take the box with you. I'm sure it will be safer there in the kitchens until we're ready to look at it." She held up a hand to stop Hermione's protests. "Whatever is in there can wait another hour, dear. We really do need to eat first."

Hermione smiled ruefully and nodded. "I guess I can wait. I'm just eager to see if the counter-curse is part of the contents. Severus..."

"Yes, I know," Minerva said soothingly. "We're all anxious to save Severus. But we also don't want to rush into this. He's waited almost eight years, another hour isn't going to hurt. Now, shall we adjourn to the Great Hall and have breakfast?" She collected everyone with her eyes and shepherded them across the entryway and into the Great Hall while Winky levitated the box once more and popped down to the kitchens, presumably to tell the cooks to start serving the staff their breakfasts.

"Right then," Minerva said as everyone gathered in the staff room after breakfast. "We need to discuss Scrimgeour..."

"Can we help Severus first?" Hermione asked. "If Scrimgeour's been Obliviated, then he's not a threat at the moment, is he?"

"At the moment, no," Lucius agreed. "But if he goes to Cornwall and realizes the box and the prisoner are missing, he *will* realize someone knows about his secret life. We can't afford to have him run."

"There's also the very real chance he'll see the Dark Mark on his arm at some point and begin to worry," Minerva said with real disgust. "Seeing *that*ing on his arm when it wasn't there before would certainly shake him up."

"So we turn him in," Harry said matter-of-factly. "He's a Death Eater. Let the Wizengamot deal with him."

"How?" Draco asked snidely.

"Huh?"

"*How* do we turn him in? There'll be questions asked about how we knew he was a Death Eater." Draco looked over at his parents. "I, for one, do not want to go through the questioning we went through seven years ago."

"Sorry," Harry apologized. "I didn't think of that. What about Coombs?"

"What about me?" The wizard in question stepped through the doorway just in front of Phelps. He stopped short and stared at Harry. "You're Harry Potter."

Harry nodded. "Yes, sir."

"What did you want from me?"

"Harry was thinking maybe you could help us identify your kidnapper," Draco said, deftly stepping in. "We think we know who it is, but aren't sure."

Coombs pulled out a chair and sat down. "I heard He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named call him Rufus once," he said. "The man himself never talked to me. He had what little food I was given delivered by a house-elf who was too frightened to do more than pop in and drop the bowl of food once a day, then pop out again."

"But you did see him, right?" Harry was persistent. "You could identify him?"

"There is a problem with that," Phelps said quietly. "Coombs was supposedly killed. We had a memorial service for him and everything. What will people say?"

"We tell the Wizengamot the truth," Lucius said. The chatter in the room went silent. "What?"

"The *truth*?" Minerva asked. "Or your version of the truth?"

"Oh, *our* version, definitely."

"Which is?"

"Er... let me think on that."

Outside in the forest, Severus roared, the sound rich with laughter.

Hermione just smiled.

Curses, Spoiled Again

Chapter 14 of 17

Hermione returns to Hogwarts to teach Potions and finds something dark and mysterious in the forest. (This is a continuation of Velvet Song's original story archived here at TPP.)

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Thanks to Fizzabella and writermerrin for the beta of this chapter.

Curses, Spoiled Again

"Thought of *your* version of the truth yet, Lucius?" Minerva's smile was smug as they sorted through the books, parchments and scrolls that had been reduced and packed into the box, along with potions equipment and other items from Scrimgeour's former vault at Gringott's. Once enlarged to their former sizes, the contents covered the long table in the middle of the staff room.

"Father, this is one of ours," Draco suddenly exclaimed, holding up a book. "Look, the bookplate's still intact. What gall!"

"Are there any more?" Narcissa asked, pawing through the stacks. "Bella probably had a hand in their acquisition," she said in accusation. "Here's another one." She held up a smaller book and looked at the title. "*Journeys of Discovery*," she read out loud. "This is one of the books I was looking for earlier."

Minerva looked at the stacks of books and parchments in front of them. "We'll sort them out," she said. "Put your books and such over there by the hearth." She indicated a study table sitting against the wall. "Anything that has a bookplate or any way of identifying the owner, put over by the door." She pointed at another table. "Mr Phelps, if you see something that belongs to your library, speak up so we can set it to one side. Those are to be returned to your institution forthwith. Anything else that has an identifying mark or bookplate will be returned to its proper owner if possible."

"What about what we can't identify, Minerva?" Hermione asked, stroking the rare volume she held in her hands. "This doesn't have any marks at all."

"Has it anything to do with the Dark Arts, dear?" Minerva asked gravely, trying to see the title.

"I don't think so," Hermione answered. "Narcissa, would you know?"

"*The Proper Place of Witches?*" Narcissa read the title and wrinkled her nose. "I remember that book. My mother made me read it before I married Lucius. She thought it would remind me that my husband *owned* me once our vows were said." She smiled at her husband. "I don't think it worked out as she thought it would."

Lucius grinned. "If anyone owns anyone else, my love, you definitely own me." He reached out and took her hand, dropping a kiss on it before letting go. "Do you want that book, Hermione?"

Hermione frowned. "Definitely not. But what would Voldemort have been doing with it?"

"He believed greatly in the moral superiority of wizards over witches among his other beliefs," Lucius said dryly. "He was probably using it to help form his doctrines for when he won the war."

"Well, we know how that turned out," Harry said with a snort as he picked up a piece of parchment. "This is a weird language. Hermione, do you know what it is? Looks a little like runes, maybe?" He held out the parchment for her to look at.

She frowned over the marks on the parchment. "They do look like runes, don't they, Draco?" She passed the parchment over her shoulder, where he stood trying to read them as well.

Taking the parchment, Draco looked closer. "Some of these could almost be Old Norse, but they're formed a bit differently," he ventured. "Mr Phelps, could you look this over, please?"

Phelps looked up from the books and scrolls he was collecting to return to the British Wizarding Library. "What's that?" he asked. "Runes?"

"Or letters," Hermione said. "We're not certain what it means."

"Indeed. Indeed. Why don't I take a look?" He took the parchment and laid it in a clear spot on the table, then pulled out his reading spectacles and placed them on his nose. "Hmmm. Yes. Of course." He removed his spectacles, holding them in his hand, as he looked towards Minerva. "Headmistress, I believe these young people have found your counter-curse."

"Are you sure?" Hermione yelled, making a grab for the parchment.

Draco beat her to it by seconds, picking up the sheet and trying to read the contents. He grimaced at the garbled sounds he made, then handed it back to Phelps. "What does it say?" he demanded.

"Draco, manners!" his mother scolded.

"My apologies, sir," he responded. "What does it say, please?"

"Quite all right," Phelps said and proceeded to read the spell in its original Gothic.

"In *English*, if you please, Mr Phelps," Minerva chided him. "Please remember that, with the exception of your friend, Mr Coombs, none of us speak or understand Gothic."

"Of course, of course," he agreed readily. "Old habit, don't ya know. This is just a rough translation, certainly not word for word."

"From dragon to man,

be ye large or small.

This I command,

That you be all.

One time for year,

Until year ten.

Speak this fair,

Be man again."

"*'Speak this fair?'*" Harry repeated. "What does that mean?"

"I'm more interested in the first part of that verse," Bill mused. "Would you agree with me, Filius?"

"Oh, most definitely," the little wizard said. "That could pose a problem."

"Why?" Harry demanded. "If this is the counter-curse, then all we need to do is learn how to say it." He looked around at the other teachers, then glanced at a frowning Hermione. "What? What did I say?"

"Professor Flitwick—" Susan started to say.

"Dear me, yes," Filius said, giving into his old habit of lecturing. "It's all very well and good to say 'learn the words and swish the wand', but it isn't that easy."

"If I understand that last verse correctly," Bill explained, "someone is going to have to repeat the spell eight times—"

"Eight times!" Hermione gasped. "That's—"

"—once for each year Severus has been a dragon," Bill concluded. "Wouldn't you say, Filius?"

"Oh, yes. Indeed." Filius closed his eyes and shook his head. "If there was pain in the first Transfiguration, imagine how much pain there would be times eight."

It would be worth it.

"Severus, you could be driven insane!" Hermione gasped. "Nothing's worth that!"

My life is.

"What's he saying, Hermione?" Lucius asked. "If I were to guess, I'd say he thinks the pain is worth being human again?"

Hermione nodded numbly. She turned to the window facing the Forbidden Forest and, chewing on her lower lip, stared outward, seeing nothing.

"As for your question, Mr Potter," Filius said. '*Speak this fair* is an old way of saying you must speak the spell properly for it to work. Say one word wrong and the entire spell is negated."

Harry winced. "That leaves me out, then," he said, half joking. "Languages were never my best subject." He grinned in a half-hearted attempt to lighten the mood. "I'll just stay back and watch."

"I'll do it," Hermione suddenly said, turning back to the room. "I'm the one he left all his possessions to. I'm the one he talks to. I'm the one—"

"—who's too close to the problem," Lucius broke in. "You're liable to stop in the middle if you think he's in too much pain. As his best friend, I believe I should do it."

"That won't be necessary, Lucius," Minerva said. "I can handle it just as well as you can."

"And you have the same problem as Hermione," Remus pointed out. "You're too close to him. I think—"

Severus' roar shook the castle's windows. ***I think I am the one to decide!***

Hermione winced as his shout reverberated in her head. "Not so loud," she complained. "I'm the only one who can hear you, and that hurt."

My apologies.

"So, Lucius," Minerva said with a smirk, changing the subject. "Have you figured out which version of the truth we will give to the Wizengamot yet?"

Before the Wizengamot

Chapter 15 of 17

Hermione returns to Hogwarts to teach Potions and finds something dark and mysterious in the forest. (This is a continuation of Velvet Song's original story archived here at TPP.)

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Before the Wizengamot

"That's the plan, Coombs," Lucius said, pacing the floor in the quarters assigned to their unexpected guest. "If you agree, Filius would perform a memory modification charm on you, and we would insert the required memories."

"Is it necessary to erase everything?" Coombs asked nervously. Neatly barbered and shaved by Winky, he wore a dressing gown while the house-elf went to find him some other, much neater, robes. "I mean, won't the Wizengamot take my word for anything?"

"Not with the political climate so volatile right now," Minerva told him. "The new Minister of Magic has vowed to find any remaining Death Eaters and send them to Azkaban. You disappeared and were declared dead nine years ago. They'll want to use Veritaserum to make sure of your claims."

"They think I'm a Death Eater?" he gasped, his head swinging back and forth between them. "*You can't* be serious!"

"It's quite possible," Lucius said. "That's why Filius would have to perform a memory modification charm before we inserted the memories you need in order to withstand questioning. But only if you're agreeable."

Coombs looked down at the floor for a moment. "If I do this, I won't remember any of the last day, will I?"

"You'll remember the important parts," Minerva said soothingly. "The arrival here, being fed, barbered and shaved, the new clothes. You just won't remember how exactly you escaped or who helped you. Those memories will be part of the story we'll give you."

"Well, if you must do so, go ahead," he said with a resigned sigh. "Let's get this over with so I can get on with my life."

"I thought you would see it our way. Filius, if you would, please?"

"You expect us to believe this tarradiddle?" the Chief Warlock asked. "Where is your proof? He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had you abducted so you could translate curses for him? Where are these curses now? Well, answer me, man!"

"Well, sir..." Coombs started to say.

"We destroyed them," Minerva said smoothly. "Such things are abominations and should not even be allowed to exist." She indicated the box Winky levitated in front of her. "What's in here are the books and scrolls that have no proof of ownership. Everything else the Dark Lord stole was returned to its rightful owners."

"You had no right to do that!" a portly wizard sputtered from the second row. "That's property that should be confiscated by the Ministry!"

"Confiscated and then sold to benefit the Ministry," Minerva said with a snort. "What's the difference? The so-called legality of the thefts?"

"You forget yourself, Headmistress," the Chief Wizard advised.

"No, I don't, Egbert Summersby," Minerva replied. "Some of what we returned was stolen from the British Wizarding Library. It belongs there by right. Now, we have brought an accusation of abduction by force in front of the Wizengamot. Are you or are you not going to investigate?"

The Chief Wizard hemmed and hawed for a moment, then bent to his right and listened to the dark-haired witch seated next to him, who whispered in his ear. "Very well," he said in capitulation. "We will examine the witness. Prepare the Veritaserum. Mr Coombs, is it?" Coombs nodded. "Take your seat, please."

Lucius guided Coombs to the seat in the middle of the courtroom, his shaky legs somewhat problematic at the moment. "Relax," he murmured. "You're entitled to representation and witnesses even with the use of Veritaserum."

Coombs nodded and sat down. Immediately, chains whipped around and anchored his hands, arms and feet.

"Your Honor!" Minerva protested. "That is not necessary for an innocent man!"

"We decide who is innocent and who is not, Headmistress," the portly wizard said vehemently. "Not..."

"The chains are not necessary, Wilkins," the Chief Wizard interrupted. "He will not be leaving before we have completed our examination. Release him." Immediately the chains dropped away and Coombs breathed a sigh of relief. "Administer the Veritaserum, if you please."

Once the Veritaserum was administered and Coombs shown to be under its influence, the questioning began.

"What is your name?"

"Gilbert Sylvester Coombs."

"What is your occupation?"

"I am...I was...a Gothic scholar at the British Wizarding Library."

"Where have you been the past nine years?"

"I don't know."

"Why do you not know?"

"I was kept in a warded room unless I was needed for translations or experimentation."

"How did you get there?"

"An Auror took me there." Murmurs of disbelief rose from the gallery.

"Silence, please," the Chief Wizard warned. "How do you know it was an Auror?"

"He showed me his badge."

"How do you know you were there for nine years?"

"My friend, Phelps, told me."

"How did you get to Hogwarts?"

"Phelps came and got me after I escaped."

"How did he know you escaped?"

"I sent him an owl from Sullivan Alley in Penzance."

"How did you get to Penzance?"

"I walked."

"How did you escape?"

"The wards failed for a moment, and I got out of the room. Then I left the house."

"Did you take the box from the house?"

"Yes."

"Why did you take the box?"

"I saw what the box contained and knew it didn't belong there."

"Why did you take it to Hogwarts?"

"Phelps was working on translations there."

"I have no further questions," the Chief Wizard said. "Administer the antidote, if you please."

"One moment," the portly wizard said. "I have a question."

"Very well. Ask your question."

"Could you identify the so-called Auror who abducted you?"

"Yes."

"Look around. Is he here in this room?"

Coombs stood up on shaky legs and started to scan the room by turning in a small circle. Just as his gaze reached the door of the chamber, it opened and Scrimgeour walked in. He looked up from the papers in his hand with a look of surprise when Coombs pointed and said, "That's him! He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named called him Rufus!"

Pandemonium broke out in the galleries as the Aurors on duty in the chamber surrounded the former Minister of Magic. Even the pounding of the Chief Wizard's gavel did nothing to mitigate the noise at first. Finally, when the noise died away, Scrimgeour was hustled to the chair and forced down into its seat. The chains immediately made an appearance and trapped him there.

"Rufus Scrimgeour," the Chief Wizard said. "You are accused of being a Death Eater and abducting this man nine years ago on orders from He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

How do you plead?"

"He's obviously insane," Scrimgeour shouted with a sneer. "I've never been a Death Eater."

"Then you won't mind questioning under Veritaserum?" Lucius drawled. "After all, fair is fair."

"Malfoy," Scrimgeour growled. "What are *you* doing here?"

"Helping the Headmistress see justice is done for Coombs," he answered. "He deserves that, don't you think?"

"Give me the damn Veritaserum," Scrimgeour demanded. "I'll *prove* I'm not a Death Eater."

Three drops later, the questioning began anew.

"What is your name?"

"Rufus Scrimgeour."

"Were you an Auror nine years ago?"

"Yes, and a good one."

"Just answer the questions, please," the Chief Wizard said. "No editorializing. Continue your questions, Wilkins."

"What was your major assignment at that time?"

"To hunt down Death Eaters."

"Your Honor," Lucius interrupted, his foot tapping with impatience. "May I question the witness?"

"In due time, Mr. Malfoy," the Chief Wizard said. "We are not finished yet. Continue your questioning, Wilkins, if you please."

"Did you have orders to abduct Mr Coombs."

"Not particularly."

"Can you explain that?"

"Any Gothic scholar would have done." Scrimgeour blinked in horror.

"Why did you abduct him?"

He squirmed, fighting the Veritaserum, but answered anyway. "The Dark Lord told me to."

As protests rose from the gallery, the Chief Wizard once more used his gavel to restore order. "Mr Scrimgeour *are* you a Death Eater?" he asked.

"I was."

"I will have order here," the Chief Wizard shouted again, pounding his gavel as the noise level rose once more. "Quiet or I will clear the chamber!" Once the noise level subsided, he continued, "Mr Malfoy, you had some questions?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"Then go ahead and ask them."

"Scrimgeour, why did you take the Dark Lord's possessions."

"Some of the books were priceless, and his curses, if I could translate them, would mean more power for me."

"So, you were a Death Eater because you wanted power and money?"

"That's what I was promised."

"No more questions, Your Honor." Lucius bowed to the Chief Wizard and backed away from the chair holding Scrimgeour prisoner.

"Administer the antidote, if you please," the Chief Wizard ordered. "We will deliberate while it takes effect."

Several minutes later, Scrimgeour sat in the chair, still chained, and hung his head as the Chief Wizard read the verdict. "The Wizengamot finds Rufus Scrimgeour guilty of being a Death Eater and serving He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, while using his position as an Auror to abduct and injure innocent people, to wit, a Mr Gilbert Sylvester Coombs. He is hereby sentenced to having his wand snapped and being sent to Azkaban for life without the possibility of parole. This court is adjourned." He banged his gavel down on the desk. "Aurors, remove the prisoner to Azkaban."

Three of the bulkiest Aurors moved in as the chair released its chains. As they shackled the former Minister and led him from the chamber, he looked at Lucius and Minerva. "I will remember this," he vowed. "You've not heard the last of me. I know how to save your friend."

"Fortunately, so do we," Minerva answered. "I'm afraid you're just a little too late."

"No," he howled as the Aurors dragged him away. "I'm the Minister of Magic!"

"*Was* the Minister of Magic," Lucius said. "Let's go home, Minerva. I think we're done here."

She looked across the room where Coombs was talking to the Chief Wizard and smiled. "I quite agree."

A Gothic Curse

Chapter 16 of 17

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I want to apologize for the length of time between updates. It's been a strange summer. 'Nuff said.

Thanks to Fizzabella and writermerrin for the beta of this chapter. I really appreciate all the reviews so far. Thank you.

A Gothic Curse

"I still think I should be the one to cast the counter-curse," Hermione argued as the discussion heated up. "Severus trusted me to help him."

"Gryffindors are too sentimental to use this type of curse," Lucius said. "You would stop in the middle of it if you thought you were hurting him."

"We will be hurting him!" She was on her feet now, leaning towards him with her hands planted firmly on the table. "That's the point of the entire exercise. Riddle created it to generate the most pain possible in the longest amount of time. It sounds worse than the Cruciatus."

"Which is why I believe you would stop in the middle and leave Severus hanging. Once you begin the spell, you cannot stop in the middle and have someone else take over. The person who starts casting *must* finish it."

"If I might make a suggestion?" Arthur said diffidently. Everyone, including the two combatants, turned to look at him. "Perhaps Hermione might ask Severus who he prefers. He might have a different opinion."

"An excellent suggestion," Minerva said with a soothing manner. "Hermione?"

"I don't have to ask him," Hermione snorted. "He's probably been eavesdropping all along. Haven't you, Severus?"

I have.

"Do you have a preference?"

William.

"William?" Hermione looked perplexed. "Who's William?"

Bill Weasley raised his hand shakily. "I think he means me."

Yes.

"It makes perfect sense," Remus said. "Bill's a curse-breaker."

"He's a Gryffindor," Lucius pointed out. "My original argument still stands. It should be a Slytherin casting the counter-curse."

The windows in the staff room shook with the force of the dragon's roar of displeasure. Minerva glanced at the window facing the Forbidden Forest and gasped. As the others looked out the window, a giant shadow stared in at them. Slowly, the dragon once known as Athair came into view, blocking out the sunlight and leaving the room in twilight. He glared at the group gathered around the table and roared again, shaking the walls this time as well as the windows. A stack of books on the table near the door slid over, and some fell onto the floor.

"I believe that answers your objections, Lucius," Hermione said with a smirk. "How soon could you be ready, Bill?"

"Depends on how long it takes to learn the spell," he answered. "Mr Phelps?"

"We could start this afternoon," Phelps told them. "If you're a quick study, probably... tomorrow? After all, you only have to learn eight lines."

"Good enough for me. Headmistress?"

Minerva tore her eyes away from the dragon that darkened the room. "Yes, William, I think that would do fine. Hermione, could you ask him to...? No, that's quite all right. I will." She strode to the window and set her hands on her hips. "Severus Snape, you stop this right now, do you hear? I will not tolerate tantrums from a senior member of this staff."

If a dragon could show emotion, Hermione could have sworn this one wore a smirk as he faded slowly from view. As the room lightened once more, his voice in her mind sighed happily,

Tomorrow.

* * *

"Where do we need to do this?" Bill asked the next day when everyone met in the staff room. "I think I'm as ready as I'll ever be. Don't you think so, Phelps?"

"Indeed. Indeed. You're an extremely fast study. Must come of all that curse-breaking." Phelps was practically bouncing on his toes, he was so excited. "Can't believe I'll actually witness this. It's groundbreaking."

It's curse-breaking.

Hermione snorted at Severus' dry comment, then repeated it to everyone else, most of whom chuckled, slightly easing the tension.

"We need to be in a clear area outside," Bill continued, "but I prefer an area that's not in the open. Any suggestions?"

"What about the Quidditch pitch?" Harry suggested.

"Harry!" Hermione scolded. "Not..."

"No," Draco interrupted. "It's perfect. Outside but enclosed as specified and it has the advantage of the elevated seating so we're out of the way."

"It might work," Minerva hedged. "At least we know it's big enough. What does Severus say, dear?"

I will meet you there.

"He says he'll meet us there," she relayed. "Are you sure about this, Bill?"

"As sure as I am about anything," Bill answered. "I swear to you, Hermione, I want this over with as much as Professor Snape does."

Hermione nodded even as she thought to Severus, *There's going to be a lot of pain...even more than when you were transformed...and no guarantee the spell will even work.*

I will manage, and it will work.

"If he's going to meet us at the Quidditch pitch, we need to leave now," Lucius pointed out. "The sooner we do this, the sooner Severus comes home."

As the teachers climbed into their viewing box, Bill and Phelps walked out onto the field of the Quidditch pitch. At the other end, near the opposition scoring hoops, dark shadows gave way to the larger Shadow Dragon. He moved forward as they did, the three of them meeting in the center of the field.

"Are you truly ready for this?" Bill asked cautiously. "Once I start, I can't stop until I've gone through the spell eight times."

Severus nodded his head several times, then looked at Hermione, seated with the other teachers high in the stands.

"He says to get it done already," she called down to the two wizards.

"All right," Phelps said. "The best distance for this would probably be eleven meters. If I recall correctly from the Pensieve memories, that's how far you were from He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named when he cast the curse. I believe if we each move back about five and a half meters, that should do it." Severus nodded and started backward while Bill and Phelps did the same.

When Phelps figured they were far enough apart, he called, "Stop!" Turning to Bill, he simply said, "When you are ready."

"Severus?" Bill called. "Are you ready?"

The dragon gave a soft snort and nodded. "Stop stalling," Hermione relayed, her hands twisting in one of the blankets they had brought with them. "Get on with it."

Bill raised his wand, repeating the wand movements he learned overnight, and chanted:

"Faúr fôn dius a waír,

wisan áuknan aípþáu smals.

Tah dem im ana-biudan

jáins waírþan áin-£arjiz-uh.

Áins sinþs raíhtis jêr

pandê at-aþn taíhun.

Qíþan sah ga-raíhts;

wisan waír aftra."

Severus roared in pain as Hermione echoed him with a scream. Bill started to hesitate until Minerva, hugging the younger witch protectively, shouted, "Again!"

"Faúr fôn dius a waír,

wisan áuknan aípþáu smals.

Tah dem im ana-biudan

jáins waírþan áin-£arjiz-uh.

Áins sinþs raíhtis jêr

pandê at-aþn taíhun.

Qíþan sah ga-raíhts;

wisan waír aftra."

Thick black and purple smoke began to crawl up the dragon's body as he roared out his pain once more. Hermione screamed in empathy, writhing in Minerva's arms. "Lucius, come help me," the Headmistress hissed. "Grab one of those blankets and wrap it around her."

"I don't get it." Harry looked on in confusion. "Why is the spell affecting Hermione?" He looked out at the field where Bill continued shouting the counter-curse.

"Faúr fôn dius a waír,

wisan áuknan aipþáu smals.

Tah dem im ana-biudan

jáins waírþan áin-£arjiz-uh.

Áins sinþs raíhtis jêr

þandê at-aþn taihun.

Qip̃an sah ga-raihts;

wisan waír aftra."

Hermione screamed and tried to pull away from the witch and wizard holding her down. "They're telepathically linked, Potter," Lucius sneered. "She's feeling everything he is."

"Faúr fôn dius a waír,

wisan áuknan aipþáu smals.

Tah dem im ana-biudan

jáins waírþan áin-£arjiz-uh.

Áins sinþs raíhtis jêr

þandê at-aþn taihun.

Qip̃an sah ga-raihts;

wisan waír aftra."

The black and purple smoke grew thicker, almost obliterating the form of the dragon. His head tilted to the sky, he roared out his pain and tried to move towards the bleachers, but the smoke acted like thick chains. He couldn't move.

"Faúr fôn dius a waír,

wisan áuknan aipþáu smals.

Tah dem im ana-biudan

jáins waírþan áin-£arjiz-uh.

Áins sinþs raíhtis jêr

þandê at-aþn taihun.

Qip̃an sah ga-raihts;

wisan waír aftra."

"The puir wee dragon." Hagrid sniffled into his handkerchief. "E wants ta be 'ere wit' 'ermione. I'll 'elp 'im." He started for the stairs.

"Hagrid, no!" Harry shouted as he, Draco and Neville held the half-giant back. "That'll just make it worse!"

"Faúr fôn dius a waír,

wisan áuknan aipþáu smals.

Tah dem im ana-biudan

jáins waírþan áin-£arjiz-uh.

Áins sinþs raíhtis jêr

þandê at-aþn taihun.

Qip̃an sah ga-raihts;

wisan waír aftra."

The thick smoke completely covered the dragon's body by now. Inside the black and purple cloud, the spectators could see what looked like miniature lightning strikes. Hermione, now unconscious, moaned in empathetic pain and twisted in the blanket Minerva and Lucius had wrapped around her.

"Faúr fôn dius a waír,

wisan áuknan aipþáu smals.

Tah dem im ana-biudan

jáins waírþan áin-£arjiz-uh.

Áins sinþs raíhtis jêr

þandê at-aþn taihun.

Qip̃an sah ga-raihts;

wisan waír aftra."

Slowly, the thick cloud began to shrink in on itself, condensing to the size and shape of a human figure. The roars of the dragon trailed off into human screams and moans.

"This is extremely nerve racking," Filius said, staring at the field of the Quidditch pitch in fascination. "But," he continued, "I believe it's almost over."

"I certainly hope so," Narcissa whispered. She glanced over at the still unconscious Hermione. "For both their sakes."

"Faúr fôn dius a waír,

wisan áuknan aiþþáu smals.

Tah dem im ana-biudan

jáins waírþan áin-£arjiz-uh.

Áins sinþs raíhtis jêr

þandê at-aþn taihun.

Qíþan sah ga-raíhts;

wisan waír aftra."

The black and purple smoke finally dissipated, leaving behind the unconscious nude body of Severus Snape. As Bill collapsed, his magic spent, Phelps shouted up to the bleachers. "Leave the boy to me! Someone needs to look after Severus!"

Lucius picked Hermione up in his arms as Minerva shouted down, "Take him to the Infirmary, Thaddeus. We've got Hermione." She turned to Hagrid, still being held back by the three younger wizards. "Hagrid, you, Harry and Draco take blankets to cover Severus and use a stretcher to take him to the Infirmary as well. Poppy's waiting for him. I don't believe she's expecting *three* patients, however."

"We did it, Hermione; no...*you* did it," Lucius whispered to the unconscious witch in his arms as he strode towards the castle. "We've got him back. Thank you."

A/N: The counter-curse was translated into Gothic using the appropriate section of the Freelang Dictionary. I do not guarantee the accuracy of the translation, however. The Freelang Dictionary program itself is available at [http:// www.freelang.net](http://www.freelang.net) (remove the extra space). This is not a recommendation of the program, but a mere pointing of the way for anyone who wishes to go deeper.

The End ... Or Is It?

Chapter 17 of 17

Hermione returns to Hogwarts to teach Potions and finds something dark and mysterious in the forest. (This is a continuation of Velvet Song's original story archived here at TPP.)

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Virtual hugs to Fizzabella and WriterMerrin for the beta of this chapter. The story is now complete and will be posted as each chapter is beta'd. Thank you for all the lovely reviews.

The End ... Or Is It?

Hermione woke to find herself in the hospital wing, an all too familiar place during her six years as a student. She started to sit up, only to have the Headmistress push her back down onto the bed. "Severus?" Hermione asked, or rather croaked, her throat dry as dust.

Minerva picked up a glass of water from the bedside table and held the straw to Hermione's lips so she could take a few sips. Once she set the glass back down, Minerva beamed at her Potions instructor. "Severus is alive and mostly well," she reassured the younger witch.

"Mostly?" Hermione coughed to clear her throat.

"Even Skele-Gro takes time to repair most of the bones in a body," Poppy said, popping her head around the privacy screen. "However, he's human again, praise the gods. Bill Weasley is up and about as well."

"What happened to Bill?" Hermione had to ask. "All I remember is him starting to cast the counter-curse. Is he okay?" She started to sit up again.

"Professor Granger," Poppy scolded, joining Minerva at her bedside to hold her down. "If you don't stay in this bed on your own, I will have to restrain you."

Hermione relaxed back down to the mattress. "What happened to Bill?"

"Apparently, casting the counter-curse eight times drained his energy," Poppy explained. "After a good night's rest, he's fine. You, on the other hand, have been unconscious for the last two days."

"Two days!"

"Yes, two days. Now lie back and let me check you over." Poppy held her wand over Hermione's head and starting casting diagnostic spells. As she moved the wand down over the younger witch's body, she made note of the different auras the spells produced. Once the check-up was completed, she smiled at Hermione. "Everything checks out fine," Poppy reassured her. She summoned a vial from her office. "I need you to drink this, however."

"Dreamless Sleep?" Hermione recognized the potion straight away. "I can't take that. I need to get to Severus." She started to sit up once more.

"Severus is going nowhere, Professor Granger," Poppy scolded her. "And neither are you. Now, I will give you two choices. Either you drink this on your own or I spell it into you. Which do you prefer?"

With a sigh, Hermione reached for the vial and drank the potion down.

"Good girl," Poppy cooed as Hermione's head fell back against the pillow and she drifted to sleep.

When Hermione awoke again, she found Narcissa sitting at her bedside, holding her hand in a light grip.

"Good morning," Narcissa said, smiling brightly. "Are you thirsty? Minerva said you were when you woke up last night."

Hermione nodded, her mouth and throat too dry to talk, so Narcissa conjured a glass of water and held the younger witch's head as she took some sips. "Better?"

"Yes. Thank you," Hermione croaked. "How is Severus?"

"Still unconscious," Narcissa informed her, "but Poppy says he is healing quickly." She gave the younger witch an awkward hug. "I am so proud of you."

"It wasn't just me," Hermione protested. "Everyone..."

"You were the one Severus trusted to get the job done," Narcissa insisted. "If you hadn't come back when you did, we might have lost him forever." The older witch swallowed hard and delicately touched a handkerchief to the corners of her eyes. "Now," she said briskly, "are you hungry?"

Hermione blushed as her stomach rumbled and Narcissa laughed. "Never mind. I'll go ask Poppy what you're allowed." As she slipped out between the screens and into the main room, Hermione heard her softly greet someone.

Pink hair preceding her, Tonks stuck her head around the screens. "Wotcher, 'Mione," Tonks said cheerily. "I hear it's your fault my Bill spent a day in bed."

"Tonks," Hermione said, struggling to sit up, "I am so sorry."

"For what?" Tonks grinned cheekily. "I've been after him to take a break and relax. You managed it for me." She smiled lightly at the other witch. "The Headmistress called me and Kingsley in and told us what's going on. She figured we would be the best to help out when the time comes."

"The *best*?" Hermione looked confused. "For what?"

"When word gets out about the professor being alive, it might get dicey."

"He's a hero!" Hermione shouted, swinging her legs over the side of the bed.

Tonks shushed her and forced her back into the bed. "It's as much as my head is worth to let you up," she whispered, glancing at the screens. "Don't get me in trouble, please?"

Hermione allowed herself to be helped back into bed, and Tonks pushed pillows behind her shoulders so she could sit up. "There ya go," she said loud enough for anyone on the other side of the screens to hear. "All comfy cozy."

"Now, let me tell you the latest gossip from the Ministry." Tonks grinned cheekily. "Did ya know Scrimgeour's been arrested as a Death Eater?"

"He has? I wasn't at the hearing..."

"Yeah, walked into the hearing for that Coombs fella with a load of arrest warrants just as Beckley...you don't know him...asked if the fella could identify his kidnapper. It was real dramatic. Coombs points at Scrimgeour and says, real dramatic like..." She deepened her voice. "That's him! Right there! The Wizengamot had ol' Rufus trussed up and on Veritaserum before he could move." Tonks smiled nastily at the memory. "He admitted everything. Even had the Dark Mark on his forearm. Now he's in Azkaban with the other Death Eaters, and it couldn't have happened to a nicer wizard."

"Nymphadora dear, don't wear Hermione out, please." Narcissa parted the screens and levitated a tray of food over to the bed. "I'm sure what you have to say can wait until Poppy releases her."

Tonks made a face at her aunt behind the other witch's back, then assumed an innocent look when Narcissa looked back at her. "Why don't you go and see what your husband is up to," Narcissa said. "He and Thaddeus have been talking very seriously with Filius. I'm sure they're discussing that dreadful curse."

"I thought it was going to be destroyed after Bill used it," Hermione gasped. "Minerva said so."

"And it was," Narcissa reassured her as she placed the tray across Hermione's lap. "They're really talking about how it felt to cast such a spell so many times in a row." She winked at Hermione as her niece hurriedly left the Infirmary in search of an errant husband. "Poppy says you can have soft food this morning and, if you do all right with this, something a little more substantial for your dinner."

On the tray was a plate of scrambled eggs, a slice of toast with marmalade, and a glass of pumpkin juice. Hermione smiled. "This looks wonderful," she said. "I really doubt I could eat much more."

Narcissa sat in the visitor's chair as Hermione started to eat. After taking a sip of pumpkin juice to wash down her bite of eggs, Hermione asked, "What's going to happen when the Ministry finds out Severus is alive? They won't send him to Azkaban, will they?"

Narcissa patted her hand. "Of course not. Severus is a hero of the war. Once we tell them the full story, he'll be treated as one."

"I hope so." Hermione grimaced. "Narcissa, I can't feel him anymore."

"What do you mean, Hermione?"

"When Severus was a dragon, even when he wasn't talking to me, I could feel him in the back of my mind, you know?" Narcissa nodded. "Now, I can't feel anything of him anymore. What if..."

"Don't borrow trouble," Narcissa said with concern. "Eat your breakfast, dear. Time enough to worry when Severus wakes up."

Hermione sighed and did as she was told.

Severus came awake suddenly and almost groaned from the pain. Only his training as a spy kept him still, his eyes still closed. He reached out with his other senses and realized he was in a bed, someone seated next to him.

"Welcome back," Lucius said cheerfully. "I know you're awake, old friend."

"What happened?" Severus croaked, then tried to clear his throat. Lucius let a few drops of water land on Severus' lips and he licked them clean.

"Don't try to talk just yet," his old friend said. "Just listen." Severus nodded. "Bill Weasley was successful in using the counter-curse. However, almost every bone in your body was broken during your transformation back to human. We had a devil of a time trying to set them. Somehow, Poppy managed to spell Skele-Gro into your system, and you've been recovering ever since."

"How long?" Gods, that voice didn't sound like his.

"You've been here almost four days. No, don't try to move." Lucius held him down. "I'll send for Poppy." He sent his Patronus, a white peacock, through the screens that surrounded the bed. "Hermione's fine, by the way."

"Hurt her."

"Yes. That was rather unexpected."

"Gone."

"Who's gone?"

"Hermione."

"No, she's in a bed on the other side of the room."

"No." Severus shook his head and hissed at the pain. "Gone from head."

"Hmmm. She told Narcissa you were gone from her head as well. Ah, Poppy. Our friend is awake."

"Good evening, Severus," Poppy said cheerfully. "Welcome back. Now, let's see what's what. Shall we?" She cast the same diagnostic spells as she had on Hermione. "Hmmm. Not bad. Not bad at all." Pointing her wand at the curtains, she summoned a potion. "Another dose of Skele-Gro and you should be right as rain." She held his head and helped him swallow the potion, then laughed as he made a face. "I know," she said in sympathy. "If it helps, that's the same reaction I get from the Quidditch players."

"Doesn't help," he croaked. "Water?"

"Of course. *Accio* glass." She caught the glass easily and set it down on the bedside table. *Aguaamenti*. Just a sip, now," she cautioned, holding the now filled glass to his mouth. "We don't want you getting sick. You can always have more later."

He rolled the water around his mouth. Already, his tongue and throat felt less swollen. "Thank you." He cleared his throat noisily.

"You're very welcome, Severus. It's good to have you back." Poppy bustled about, setting the glass down again and straightening the bedcovers. "I'll see to getting you some broth," she said, grinning as he made a face. "Sorry, dear, but you haven't eaten in almost four days. Broth first, solid food later." She made her way out through the curtains, and the two wizards heard her tell someone, "Five minutes. He's only just awakened."

Minerva poked her head through the curtains. "May I come in?" she asked.

Lucius quickly vacated his chair and offered it to her. "I'll just check on Hermione," he said. "You enjoy your visit, Minerva."

She sat down and promptly burst into tears. Hurriedly drying her eyes with an embroidered handkerchief, she sniffed and smiled at him. "I'm sorry," she apologized. "It's just... I thought we'd lost you forever after the Final Battle."

"Understood," Severus croaked. "Water? Please?"

"I heard Poppy say you could have a sip," she said, holding the glass for him. "Not too much now." She put the glass back on the table. "Feeling better?"

Severus nodded. "Thank you."

"For the water?"

"For believing."

"It was hard not to, given the evidence I was presented with. Now, we just have to deal with the Ministry."

"Bunch of..."

"Severus!" Minerva placed her hand on his mouth, effectively silencing whatever he was about to say. "I brought Kingsley and Tonks in on this because I knew we'd need someone who's neutral to help explain. You don't mind, do you?"

Severus shook his head and grimaced. "Good man."

"What of Tonks?"

"Clumsy."

"But an excellent Auror."

"Yes."

* * *

"Severus?" Hermione poked her head around the privacy screen.

He looked up from the potions journal he was eagerly reading and gave her a slight smile. "Are you alright?" he asked nervously.

"Shouldn't I be asking you that question?" she replied with a smile of her own. "I'm fine, by the way. Poppy's letting me go this afternoon."

Severus made a scoffing noise. "Damn woman won't let me go yet. She's been force-feeding me Skele-Gro." He grimaced. "That stuff is just nasty."

Hermione giggled. "Maybe that should be an assignment for my NEWT-level students. 'Improve the flavour of Skele-Gro'." She grinned at him in comradely fashion. "Or

maybe you might want to do it? I believe I have a decent enough potions lab."

He let his head fall back against the pillows, suddenly exhausted. 'Maybe Poppy is right,' he thought. 'I do seem to tire easily.' Out loud, he replied to Hermione's question. "Perhaps we could discuss the execution of such a plan after I am freed from this prison?"

"Oh, of course, Severus. I'll talk to you later, then."

Severus sighed and closed his eyes, listening to Hermione's movements as she left the room. Opening his eyes, he placed the periodical on the bedside table, only then noticing that she had left his wand there as well.

* * *

Several days later, after Poppy deemed Severus healed enough to be allowed out of bed, the Wizengamot held a special session at Hogwarts in deference to his condition and situation. While none of the witches and warlocks could grasp his spending eight years as a dragon, the Pensieve evidence of everyone involved...with a few *minor* adjustments pertaining to Coombs...was admittedly compelling. In short, Severus was released with no stain on his character and presented his Order of Merlin, First Class, which had been awarded to him posthumously, or so the Ministry had thought.

Afterwards, he sought out Hermione, finding her sitting at her desk in the first floor classroom. "Not much like the dungeons," he said, looking around the room. "Not as safe, either."

"Maybe not," she said, not meeting his eye, "but I like it."

"Then that's all that matters right now." He walked up to the desk and bent over, trying to see her face. "What's wrong?"

Hermione looked up, her face stricken. "Are you going to want your job back?"

"Gods, no!" Severus all but shouted as he reared back. "Go back to teaching dunderheads and fools? I'm not that stupid." He looked at her as a single tear streaked down her cheek. "You enjoy teaching, don't you?"

Hermione nodded, twisting her hands together nervously. "I feel like I can make a difference here. I didn't feel that way at the Ministry."

He pulled her hands apart and smiled slightly as her fingers...subconsciously perhaps...interlaced with his. "I miss hearing you in my mind," he said, squeezing her fingers slightly. "It's seems so quiet in there now." He chuckled at the thought.

"Me, too," she admitted, gazing up at him. "What will you do now?" She started to chew on her lower lip...a nervous habit he remembered from her days in his classroom...and it made him smirk in remembrance.

"Now? I get my life back together somehow and continue on." He paused and took a deep breath. "I know you now own everything I ever had, but..."

"I hear Pansy Parkinson's actually a rather decent solicitor." Hermione interrupted with a smirk. "We could see if she'd be willing to do the paperwork to give you back your life."

Severus looked down at their linked hands, then back up to her face. "Hermione, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

The End?

Author's Note the Last: I want to thank Velvet Song once again for allowing me to adopt this wonderful story rather than simply abandoning it. She and I have been in communication over the summer, and with her kind permission, I am starting to work on a sequel. As my habit is to not start posting chapters until a story is finished, this might take a while. However, I do promise that the story will eventually be completed.

Also, much thanks to the incomparable WriterMerrin, who took over as my beta when Velvet Song could no longer do so. She has kept me on the straight and narrow when my commas threatened to take over, even with her job as an Admin of TPP. Thanks, sweetie.

MsTree