

# Stained Glass Shards

by sandlapper

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## Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 14

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Thanks to everyone who reads and to my beautiful beta, peskipiksi! This is JKR's playground, I just stopped by to swing a while...

*King Arthur was dead. The sword, Excalibur, was broken and back in the keeping of the Lady of the Lake, its scabbard having long been lost and returned to the fey people. The Round Table was destroyed, and darkness once again crept across the land. A group of five handmaidens and one knight, sworn to the service of the Lady of the Lake, held in their safekeeping another of the magical weapons Nimue had trusted to Arthur and his advisor, the Wizard Merlin. As wars wrought havoc across the lands of Britain and the Old Ways were pushed further and further into legend, these five priestesses hid the dagger, Carnwennan, slayer of the Very Black Witch, against the day that it would be needed again. Nimue charged her ladies and knight to do what was necessary to protect the dagger across the ages from those unworthy to wield it.*

*Fleeing the Battle of Camlann and the fall of Camelot, the Guardians used both magical and mundane methods to travel the length of the British Isles. They searched for two years before finding a place as far removed from Camelot as possible that would shelter the dagger in their keeping. Using the strongest magic they possessed, the five Keepers created a new home and hid it away. Over time, the eldest of the ladies joined with the Knight and a son was born. Each first born son of this line, marked by a dagger tattoo, stood as Knight of Carnwennan from that moment forward. Magic led the other ladies to bloodlines that would strengthen their progeny and the protections of the dagger, and the eldest daughter of these four lines would always, when she came of age, be summoned to the The Vale of the Carn. It was a jewel hidden in the farthest reaches of Scotland, tucked away from mudane eyes by thick forests and craggy mountains. Only those that had the blood of The Five could find and enter the vale.*

*It had been several generations now, since the last full gathering of the daughters of The Five and their Knight. Only in the direst of times was the Carn to be called. Only three times since it was hidden, had the dagger been summoned and used. Over the years, legends faded out of mind and into the mist. The Old Ways were no longer practiced the way they were intended, the call was being ignored. For years, those with the blood turned away from their purpose, and eventually there were none left who could even remember stories of the Five or the Vale or Carnwennan. Even when the Dark Lordling, Grindelwald rose, the call was not recognized and the Vale lay undisturbed and untouched. Now, darkness was again crawling over the earth, both in the mundane and magical worlds. This time, the evil was imbued with ancient, dark magic, an new incarnation of that originally destroyed by King Arthur and Carnwennan, and one strong enough to disturb the slumber of the Nimue.*

*Nimue, the Lady of the Lake and Guardian of the weapons of King Arthur, crossed the mists from the Isle of Avalon and called to the spirits of The Five and their Knight. In turn, the restlessness reached out through the bloodlines and reached the Daughters of the Elements. It was time; they were being summoned. Carnwennan was needed*

once more.

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Light flooded through the double stained glass window that dominated the far left corner of the Headmaster's office. Even though it was the depths of winter and heavy snow fell from a leaden sky, charmed sunlight fell in a jeweled pool around the young woman ensconced in the small window seat. She sat at an angle, head bowed, face hidden by a fall of dark, curly hair. A long cloak covered the rest of her small figure, hiding all but the strongest of the tremors that wracked her body. Even in the warmth of Hogwarts, she couldn't escape the cold. Behind her and to the side stood an imposing figure in black, the puddle of prisms of light doing nothing to relieve the austerity of his severe countenance. The only intimation that the two were even real was the occasional touch of the man's hand to his companion's shoulder and the resultant nods as he spoke softly into her ear.

The Headmaster's office soon became a hive of activity as members of the Order of the Phoenix began arriving for a meeting. It was almost the end of Christmas hols, and this was the safest place for a large meeting as Kreacher the house-elf had recently disappeared, and no one was sure if he had gone to Bellatrix Black and Voldemort or if he was dead. His mutterings and dire imprecations had hinted all too often at his loyalties, so most thought he had joined his favored mistress with the Death Eaters. In all honesty, no one was too terribly distraught when he was found to be gone. However, until further notice, Number Twelve Grimmauld Place was off limits to everyone.

Slowly, the office filled and in the midst of all the greetings and conversations, the two people by the stained glass window were finally noticed. However, it wasn't until Professor McGonagall called for refreshments and the house-elves appeared that the couple garnered any real attention. They held themselves aloof from all but Winky, the elf that served them tea, and it didn't take very long for anyone to recognize the man as Severus Snape. The woman's identity was speculated on quite loudly, but not many in the room were brave enough to question the Potions master as to who his companion was, and her seat was far enough out of the way of the tangle of people that no one could get a good look anyway.

"Reckon he got himself a girl, Harry?" Ron Weasley sniggered through a mouthful of shortbread. "Can't imagine any girl wanting to keep him company without some incentive!" Ron rubbed his fingers together in a motion that suggested money.

Harry scoffed, "Not likely she's with him, even if he paid. Probably some poor girl the Death Eaters threw away."

"Nah, they don't let them go, you know that." Ron cocked his head in Snape's direction. "Probably somebody Dumbledore wants the Order to protect. Snape hasn't got family of his own that we know of, so it can't be that. Bet she'll be glad to see the end of the greasy git, though. From what I can tell, she doesn't look too excited to be here."

Harry shrugged the female off as unimportant and turned to speak to Remus Lupin who had just come through the Floo. Remus didn't know anything about the young woman either, so speculation continued during the various exchanges between Order members. No one knew anything at all about the girl, so talk soon turned to Christmas and school amongst the ladies, and Quidditch amongst the men. Chatter was soon ended when Albus Dumbledore entered the room in a flurry of shocking green robes.

"Welcome all, to Hogwarts. I hope everyone is enjoying a wonderful Christmas holiday. I am delighted that we could arrange this meeting, though. We have some news that will certainly be a joy to everyone, and we also have information that we could soon be seeing an end to this miserable war." Dumbledore nodded to Harry. "Are you ready, my boy? We have had a breakthrough and have discovered something that could end this conflict once and for all!"

The Headmaster's declaration was met with an excited buzz throughout the room. An end to the war at last! Harry returned the Headmaster's nod.

"Sir, I am as ready as I will ever be. I trust that you have found exactly what we need."

"Hear, hear!" Arthur Weasley offered. "It is past time to avenge those we've lost."

The room quieted a bit as the Order members thought about friends and family that they had lost over the past few years. The most recent ones, of course, were the freshest wounds that still had the power to cause tears.

Harry started to speak again, but the Headmaster forestalled him. "We must hear from Severus. I am afraid he has gathered his information quite dearly, and we are now without our most trusted ally in Voldemort's camp." Albus motioned for the dark man to join them. "Severus..."

Potions master Severus Snape made an impression no matter where he was or who he was with. Even those who had known him for years were still awed by his movements and his voice. He strode surely towards the group and addressed Dumbledore, handing him a scroll with a green wax seal on the side.

"Before we begin, I must verify to everyone that we have been discovered, Headmaster. I knew that Bella was getting close, and it was her group that tracked us to the lodge in the Vale. Despite the precautions I took, they realized it was I who was passing information. With Lucius' help, I was able to cover my duplicity so that the Dark Lord still doesn't believe Bella, but she wouldn't hesitate to kill me or my family. Hermione and Alexander are no longer safe. I..."

His next statement was drowned out by shouts from Ron and Harry, who threw themselves towards the woman now sitting alone staring out of the window. Before they could even approach the window seat to see for themselves that their friend was truly alive, Snape had moved between them and their quarry. Both boys protested loudly, backed by the other Order members, but the Potions master was adamant that they stay away. Harry and Ron were so busy trying to force themselves to the window seat area that they never realized that the commotion caused was making the woman cringe back into the cushioned seat.

Harry was single minded as he tried to get to Hermione. All he could focus on was the girl he had thought dead. "Let me by, Snape!" he yelled, putting his shoulder down and pushing into the taller man. "It's Hermione!"

"Potter, control yourself," Snape hissed. "Do not upset her. STAY BACK!"

Severus looked sharply towards the Headmaster. "I thought you were going to let them know about Hermione before the meeting. If I had known you hadn't, I would have left her with Poppy."

Dumbledore merely shook his head and answered, "I didn't have the opportunity, but I think you have done a fine job of telling the news yourself."

Other Order members led by Molly Weasley pushed forward behind Harry. "Severus, you must let us see to her, the poor dear." Molly got by Severus as he was trying to hold off Harry and Ron. She reached Hermione and stooped to gather her up in a bone-crushing hug. A small, keening cry and struggle was the reaction that she got, and Molly quickly backed away, glancing fearfully at Snape and the Headmaster.

"What has happened to her, Albus?" Molly began to cry softly. Arthur pulled her away, and the others followed suit, leaving only Harry and Ron still trying to get to Hermione.

"Everyone, please, all will be divulged. For now, just know that Hermione has been through quite an ordeal since the attack on her family a year and a half ago. She will need time to readjust to all of us. Please, give her that time," the Headmaster soothed.

Nearly everyone accepted that statement and let the situation go, still curious, but trusting that the Headmaster was in control, even if they still didn't fully trust the Severus Snape.

Remus was the first to address the situation calmly. "What has happened to her, Albus?"

Before either he or Snape could answer Ron began yelling and waving his wand. "What is wrong with 'Mione? What have you done to her, you bastard?"

Dumbledore stepped in, grasping Ron by the arm, "Mr. Weasley, Severus has done nothing wrong and things will be explained shortly, but we have a meeting to attend to first. I am afraid that Severus' tale is going to be time consuming and we MUST be prepared for the final confrontation. I also require your respect towards the professor. Mind your language."

Both Harry and Ron backed away reluctantly, and the Order meeting began again, even though most of the room's occupants were more interested in the story surrounding Snape and Hermione. The pseudo-peace remained while the meeting wound down, until a small house-elf popped into view in front of Snape.

"Posey is so sorry, Potions master, but Little Master is being hungry, he is."

Severus sighed audibly. "It's fine, Posey, I will see to my son."

He gracefully bent and took the green swathed bundle that lay squirming in the small elf's arms. When he had the bundle secure, Posey Disappeared, and Severus turned towards Hermione, intending to give her charge of the baby. There was stunned silence as the Order members registered what they had seen. Seconds later the room erupted again.

"You bastard! What did you do to 'Mione?"

"Headmaster, explain!"

"What is the meaning of this, Severus?"

"Albus?"

Above the din, the sound of a baby's cry was heard. Harry jumped forward, wand out. Even with his arms full of his son, Snape whirled on Harry, wand visible from beneath the baby's blanket.

"What have you done, Snape?" Harry snarled.

Harry made another sudden movement towards the Professor. However, before he could reach Snape, a body had moved between Harry and his target. Gone was the quiet figure of earlier. Harry was taken aback by the sheer anger and fear that exuded from Hermione as she positioned herself between Harry and Severus.

"Stay away from my family!" Her voice was rough and low, almost strained, as if rarely used. Instinctively, everyone moved forward the better to hear the exchange.

Harry inhaled sharply at Hermione's demand. "Your family? They're dead, or have you forgotten about that? And what about me? I thought we were family, too." The snarl was back on Harry's face, and he didn't notice the pain on Hermione's. "Get out of my way, 'Mione."

"I am going to kill you." This was directed at Severus. "What have you done to her?" Harry roared again.

Without letting Snape or Hermione respond, Remus Lupin stepped forward to restrain Harry. No one, not even Severus could have anticipated the reaction Hermione would have to this. She went from defiant to hysterical in seconds. She backed suddenly into Snape, trying to get away from the danger that she perceived, and the fight went out of her quickly, leaving her weak. Taking advantage of this turn of events, Harry quickly moved forward, Remus close behind. A swirl of black robes enveloped Hermione and Snape had himself ready to take the brunt of any attack or movement against her or the baby.

"ALBUS!" Snape thundered. "She has had enough. Get Lupin and Potter away from us. NOW!" Snape didn't turn to acknowledge the Headmaster, but bellowed again, this time for Posey the house-elf. As soon as she appeared, he thrust the baby towards her and sent her to the window seat. "No one touches my son but his mother or myself," he ordered the elf. With his burden gone and in capable hands, Snape was able to tend to Hermione.

The Headmaster immediately went into action also. "Agreed, Severus." He looked around at the people filling his office. "Harry, Remus, sit down. Everyone else, hold your questions for now."

Harry began to protest along with Ron and Molly, but Dumbledore had decreed the matter closed. "SILENCE!" he shouted. "We will explain things as soon as Hermione and Alexander are seen to." Dumbledore turned to Harry. "I am ashamed of you. She is supposed to be your friend."

Harry had the sense to look chagrined. "Sorry, Headmaster."

"I am not the one who deserves your apologies." Dumbledore looked around the room again. "We will be patient until Severus is free to answer questions. Remus, perhaps you will Floo-Call Poppy and ask her to come here. Tell her Hermione has had a shock."

Remus nodded and glanced sadly towards Hermione. "I didn't intend her any harm. I just wanted to keep Harry from doing something he would regret. Do you know why she reacted like that, Albus?"

"Don't worry, Remus, it is not you that scared her. We will explain everything as long as everyone promises to control themselves."

Remus agreed, then turned to go to the fireplace. As he Floo'd Poppy, he heard the others agree to the Headmaster's terms, even though there were many protests. As for himself, he was willing to agree to most anything just to find out why his presence had disturbed someone he thought of almost as a daughter.

While the Headmaster continued with Order business, Severus knelt before the window seat where Hermione sat trying to control her breathing. "Are you alright, my love?"

Hermione nodded as her anxiety attack began to ease. "I'm so sorry, Severus." She whispered tearfully. "Professor Lupin is in the room, isn't he?"

"Yes, my dear. I should have thought to let you know that he would be attending. But I never dreamed you would react as you did."

"No, it isn't your fault. I need to regain control of myself. It's been almost two years. I am of no use to you or Alexander if I can't."

Severus touched Hermione's cheek. She looked up into his face even though she couldn't see him. "We will sort this out, Hermione, the anxiety attacks, the curse, your friends. It will all work out."

She nodded. "I have every faith that you will fix things."

Severus flashed a rare smile, then settled Hermione back into the cushions using a simple spell to transfigure them into something more plush and comfortable. He beckoned Posey and quietly took the baby from her. "Thank you, Posey. We will call you if we need you."

The elf nodded and Disappeared once again. When she was gone, Severus settled the whimpering Alexander into his mother's arms. "I believe the little monster is hungry again." Severus said. "Bottomless, that one."

Hermione laughed softly. "I think you're right."

She looked down shyly, "will you help me to settle him? I still haven't gotten the hang of getting him to latch on correctly." Rosy color stained her cheeks and tears welled up in her eyes. "I can't even take care of my own son, Severus. What if I never regain my sight?"

Severus began unbuttoning her robes. "Poppy told you it could take several tries to get it right. You and Alex will get the hang of this. He isn't even forty-eight hours old yet, my dear."

He adjusted the baby in Hermione's arms so that he was nestled against her bared breast. Severus' long fingers gently guided the hungry child to her now leaking nipple. She started as Alexander began to suckle, then settled into the plush cushions allowing him to nurse greedily. Severus watched mother and child until he heard his name being called. Madam Pomfrey had come into the office and wanted to see to her patients. Severus conjured a soft, woven shawl to drape over Hermione and Alexander so that her modesty would be protected. He didn't like the idea of anyone seeing his child feed from his wife. Once he was assured that both were comfortable and covered and in Poppy's capable charge, Snape stalked back to where the Headmaster was holding court.

He sneered at anyone who dared look him in the eye, then turned to address Dumbledore. "You know how I feel about discussing my private life, Albus, but for Hermione's sake as well as Alexander's, I will answer questions." His eyes flashed over the group, "within boundaries, of course... "

Albus nodded. "I am sure that Hermione's friends just want to assure themselves that she is OK, Severus. They don't really want to know details of your private affairs."

This was said while the Headmaster looked pointedly at Harry and Molly in particular.

"I was going to insist that we finish our Order meeting first, but I think that nothing would be accomplished if I did. Considering what Severus has to tell you is tied into being able to end this war, we will start with Hermione's story. These past two years have been hard on everyone, and seeing her alive has been traumatic in itself." Dumbledore addressed the Order, "You may ask your questions, but please be reasonable... "

The Headmaster gestured Snape to a chair and then opened the floor to anyone who had questions. In the beginning, it was chaos until Snape took matters into his own hands and bellowed for everyone to shut up. "I will tell you what I can, and you will be silent or I will not say another word on the topics of my wife or my son."

Harry looked quite rebellious at that, but Remus managed to keep him from offending the Potions master anymore than he had already as Severus began to speak.

## Chapter Two

### *Chapter 2 of 14*

Hermione Granger disappeared from her home and is presumed dead. Nearly two years later, she returns to Hogwarts, guardian of a secret that could end the war with Voldemort once and for all.

Thanks to everyone who reads and to my beautiful beta, peskipiksi! This is JKR's playground; I just stopped by to swing a while...

Hermione Granger, on her final summer holiday from Hogwarts, had finally closed her book and was settling into bed, when she heard the quiet shuffle of feet outside her bedroom door. Knowing her parents had been asleep for hours, she quickly realized that nothing good could be in the hallway.

Swiftly slipping out of bed, she snatched up her wand and cast a Silencing Spell on herself. She vaguely thought about what a disaster it could be if the spell didn't actually work. It was a side project she had been working on in hopes of giving the Order an advantage over the Death Eaters during raids and confrontations. This particular spell of her own creation allowed you to be extremely precise in what was silenced, rather than causing a bubble of unnatural quietness that could be detected by someone paying close attention to their surroundings.

Hermione cast a normal Silencing Charm on her door as well, so that she could ease it open and hopefully make a run for the stairs. She couldn't Apparate out of her room because she felt what she assumed were Anti-Apparition Jinxes as soon as they were cast. Now, all she could do was wait and hope that she could get to a place to call the Order. Or she at least wanted to get to the stairs to create a distraction and draw whoever was in the house away from her parents.

Soon enough, muffled voices and a scream came from the Grangers' bedroom, and Hermione determined to make her move. She slowly pulled her door open, and seeing no one in the hallway, she sneaked to the open door of her parents' room, the stairs lying just beyond. Taking a moment to gather information to pass on to the Order, Hermione made a quick count of the men she could see, and was surprised to only count three Death Eaters.

Impulsively, Hermione decided to help her parents, rather than running out of the house. She couldn't stand the thoughts of them in pain or possibly dying while she ran away, not knowing how long it would take for someone to get help to her. She took a deep breath and burst into the room, startling the masked figures. Only by virtue of that surprise was she able to Stupefy all three of them. She never realised that there was one more Death Eater in the house, and that he was waiting patiently behind her parents' bedroom door.

Hermione never even heard the Stunning Spell that brought her down from behind. She never knew when the other Death Eaters were awakened or when they Portkeyed her to the Dark Lord's most recent hiding place. And she never heard the screams of her parents as they were left behind, dying.

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"Ennervate."

Hermione was jerked from the blessed darkness that had swallowed her for what seemed like days. She came to, her head pounding and nausea threatening to overcome what little wits she had about her. A sharp kick to her side, and the nausea won. She rolled over and retched miserably, all the while listening vaguely to taunts and laughter in the background.

"Well, little Mudblood, thought you were smarter than us, hmmm? I think we need to work on reminding you what and where your place is." The voice coming from the stark white mask was muffled, and Hermione couldn't place it at all. Another kick, this time to her hip, and the voice boomed at her, "GET UP!"

When she didn't move fast enough, fingers grabbed harshly at her long, curly hair and yanked until she stood in compliance, tears of pain rolling down her cheeks. Hermione was pushed and pulled down a long, dank corridor until finally they arrived at a torchlit chamber. There were masked and robed people all around the perimeter of the room, and everyone was acting as though they were at a party. The Death Eater gripping Hermione's hair dragged her unceremoniously to the far edge of the group and forced her to her knees in front of a large throne-like chair. From the depths of the shadows shrouding that seat uncoiled a tall, lithe figure. It took Hermione's racing brain several moments to clear enough to register that she was on her knees at the mercy of He Who Must Not Be Named himself.

"Voldemort." Hermione breathed the name harshly.

Before he could say anything to her, Bellatrix Lestrange flew at Hermione and slapped her hard across the face, knocking her onto her injured side. "How DARE you speak My Lord's name, filth!" screeched the woman.

"Bella, control yourself or begone from my sight." The Dark Lord moved away from his seat. "This is my prize to toy with, no one else's. You presume too much when you act without my permission."

Bella moved back trembling, but Hermione couldn't have said whether it was from bloodlust or fear of the serpentine man standing in front of her. And snakelike he was, with white scaly skin, slitted nostrils, and red pupils that were oval shaped like a poisonous snake's. Hermione was wrenched from her reverie when another movement of the man brought him into her personal space.

"Well, Mudblood, what shall I do with you? You have caused me no end of trouble with your little friends," Voldemort hissed. "You would make an admirable gift to one of my servants, or perhaps your ravaged body hanging from the gates of Hogwarts would be a better use for you."

Hermione didn't move, but her fear managed to clear away the remainder of the cloudiness from her brain, and she began to work on ways of escape, or to at least take someone out with her if she was to be a sacrifice for the Cause. Her mind briefly wandered to her parents, and she ruthlessly locked those emotions down, knowing she would be lost if she dwelled on them in that moment. The Dark Lord's voice brought her back to the present, and she tried to listen to the conversation as he decided on the course of action he preferred. As she knelt there she ran her hands through her hair and realized that one of the Portkey earrings she had created for emergencies was caught in her hair.

Before she could react and get away, Voldemort ordered her stripped and dragged to the centre of the Death Eater's circle. The Death Eater who had brought her to the throne room held her arms tightly behind her back. She stood there, still trying to figure out a way to untangle the earring and escape, or die swiftly. The Dark Lord had followed his prisoner, and as he prepared to announce her fate, he snapped a collar around her neck. He waved away the man holding her and said, "Let her go. This collar will kill her if she leaves this room. The Mudblood will be going nowhere."

"Draco Malfoy, you have failed me once too often. Perhaps this assignment will be more to your liking and to your ability." Voldemort sneered as he beckoned Draco forward. "Take the Mudblood, break her well, then kill her, and I will mark you and give you your Father's place in my circle."

At that statement, several gasps were heard around the room. The only way to gain a place in the Inner Circle was for a member to die. Voldemort grinned evilly as he looked around.

"That is my final word, Lucius; you have outlived your usefulness. I have a taste for a blood sacrifice this night, and perhaps my Potions master's stores will benefit from your generosity." The Dark Lord hissed a laugh, then declared, "Your son will make a decent follower with you out of the way."

A wave of his hand, and the Dark Lord had Lucius incapacitated and laid out on a table like a sacrifice on an altar. "After Draco is marked, his first duty to his master will be to end your life."

Lucius didn't flinch; he just gazed at his son and, not for the first time, wished he had never met Voldemort. He sighed harshly as he listened to the madman threaten Draco.

"Do it, boy, or I will kill your mother after she has been tasted by every one of my followers who wishes to indulge!"

Draco moved towards Hermione and pushed her harshly to the floor. He kicked her sharply in her bruised side, then stood over her watching her struggle for breath. And as the tears started to slide down her cheeks, he fell to his knees in front of her.

Speaking quietly, so only she could hear, Draco muttered, "I'm sorry, Granger, I wish I wasn't here. But it's my mother's life or yours and, well, I've no choice." Draco pushed her legs apart, then started unfastening his clothes, rambling all the while. "Aunt Bella made me come tonight. She threatened to kill Mother, too. I never wanted to be a part of the rape and killing. I just wanted my rightful place as a pureblood." He leaned over her and placed one hand between her breasts, his other hand moved between her thighs.

Hermione nodded slightly, made a quick decision and then whispered, "Draco Malfoy, be safe, and tell my boys I love them." Before he understood what she was doing, Hermione grabbed his wrist, thrust an earring into his hand before he could touch her intimately and whispered, "Retreat." Draco was gone in a flash, Portkeyed to some unknown place and the Death Eaters were in turmoil staring at the girl lying splayed in their midst.

Hermione waited for the Avada Kedavra curse, or even to be attacked physically, but nothing happened. Complete silence ruled the moment. She didn't move, but slowly opened her eyes to see Voldemort staring rigidly towards Lucius Malfoy. "Well, Lucius, it seems you are useful once again. I suppose that I will have to spare you... for now." With a scream of rage, he turned on Hermione, fury emanating from every pore. "Mudblood bitch, you think you have defeated me. Now you will die and I will send your body back to Potter in pieces!" Spittle flew out of Voldemort's mouth as he shouted his fury and raised his wand. "AVADA..."

"NOOOO..." echoed over the incantation, and Narcissa Malfoy threw herself between the Dark Lord and Hermione, throwing up a useless Shield Charm as she hovered over the prone girl. "Please, My Lord, she knows where my son is!"

Time seemed to freeze. No Death Eater moved, even Lucius stared in shock as his wife stood up to the dread Dark Lord and his malevolence. "Don't kill her, please, I need her to find Draco."

"You overstep yourself, woman!" He screamed furiously. "How dare you put you and your desires above mine? You will be punished for this, make no mistake." He raised his wand again and the unthinkable happened. Once more, Lord Voldemort was interrupted.

"My Lord, if you please, I have an idea that will rid you of this filth and also bring about the downfall of another follower of Dumbledore. We can strike at the very heart of the Order." Talking fast, Fenrir Greyback stepped forward and bowed.

"Greyback? What could you possibly do that would interest me?" Voldemort sneered hatefully at the werewolf, another species he felt superior to. "Tell me why I shouldn't kill you now for interrupting the doling out of punishments."

"My Lord, we have been trying to regain a lost member of our pack... Remus Lupin." The Dark Lord's interest perked up at that statement, and Fenrir continued. "I have discovered an old spell that will bind him to me, as his sire, and force the darkness to flood his wolf form. He will not realize it while human, but around the full moon, nothing will keep the were part of him subdued, not even the Wolfsbane Potion. He will turn on anyone around him, including his family and friends." The wolf nodded towards Hermione. "That is, providing that the girl is still virgin, and stays that way 'til the ritual is done."

Voldemort flashed several spells at Hermione, then nodded. "You discovered a spell of which I know nothing?"

Fenrir shrugged. "One of the newer members of my pack was caught in Romania when we were foraging there. She had been there researching werewolves and vampires. I was lucky enough to get her before the bloodsuckers did."

The Dark Lord nodded, staring coldly at his servant. "Take the girl; the collar will no longer affect her... And take Narcissa Malfoy. She can ensure the girl stays untouched until the time is right. How long will this take?"

"It takes three months to brew the first potion. I will need someone to do that for me. Perhaps Snape can be persuaded?"

"No, I don't want him involved. He has to keep Dumbledore appeased, and if it got out that the Mudblood was alive, he would be expected to help her. Bella will brew for you. Is there anything else of which I need to be aware?"

"After the first potion is brewed, the sacrifice is prepared for three full moon cycles, then there is a second potion, but it has to be brewed on the Winter Solstice. The ritual is performed then."

Voldemort returned to his seat and waved his hands in a dismissive gesture. "Very well, you have six months and Bella's help. I expect complete success. Go now and do not fail me in this. Fail and you die; succeed, and your rewards will be great."

Greyback leered. "Many thanks, my Lord, I am sure that Madame Malfoy will follow your instructions very closely, and we will be successful." He took custody of Narcissa and Hermione, and left the room, dragging them by chains clipped to the collars that had been forced on them both.

"Death Eaters... leave me... Lucius, remain." Voldemort banished his minions with those words, then turned on his once favoured lieutenant. "No complaints, my follower? Your son is gone, most likely dead or imprisoned in Azkaban and your wife the toy of werewolves. Greyback's collar fitted her well." The Dark Lord stared into Lucius' eyes. "Perhaps you have finally shown your loyalty to me. It is about time. Now, I need you to go to Severus and let him know what has happened. I did not call him because I did not want the old man to be able to question him about the Mudblood. He needs to be debriefed on tonight's activities so that he can plan accordingly and create a plausible excuse for not knowing. Make sure you tell him the Mudblood is dead. No one can know we have her. Go!"

Lucius did not speak. He merely bowed deeply to his Lord, and then vanished leaving a chuckling Voldemort alone.

"Things could not have gone better if I had planned tonight's events." Voldemort laughed, then Disapparated, leaving behind an empty room.

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Severus Snape ended his recitation and looked at the Headmaster, gratefully accepting the cup of tea he offered. "I must check on my wife and son; you will answer any questions?"

Albus nodded. "Of course, my boy!" Snape grimaced as stood from his chair, turned on his heel and stalked off. "Does anyone have any questions so far?"

Harry nodded belligerently. "How does he know what happened that night if he wasn't there? I think he was in on it, and this is all a trick." Ron murmured in agreement.

"Think, boys; Severus knows the whole story because Hermione was there, and the parts she was not aware of, Lucius was. He and Narcissa."

Ron scoffed and there were mutterings in the group. "Like I would trust either one of them."

Remus looked at the Headmaster and spoke up. "She was held by Greyback because of me. I don't know what to say... "

Albus just shook his head and asked if there any more questions. No one else spoke up. They were waiting for the rest of the story to be told.

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While the Order members were waiting for Snape to return, he was busy making sure that Hermione and the baby had been taken care of. Alexander was fed and clean and was already deeply asleep in Poppy's arms. Hermione herself was drowsing and started when Severus touched her.

"I am sorry, love. I just wanted to let you know that the meeting is not yet finished. I can't say when story time will be finished, so I will take you to our quarters where you can get some rest." Severus moved to pick Hermione up when she began protesting.

"Please, I don't want to be alone right now. Can't I stay right here?" Tears began welling in her eyes. "I won't move from this seat and I promise to sleep. Please?"

Severus looked down at his young wife. "You don't need my permission to do anything, but yes, love, you can stay here. Let me get Poppy to tend to Alexander in her quarters and you stay here and try to rest."

Hermione nodded and kissed her son before relinquishing him to Poppy's care.

"I'll just be in the Hospital Wing if you need anything, and I will make sure that Alexander is safe," Poppy assured his parents. "Just come to my quarters when you are ready."

Poppy carried the sleeping baby to the fireplace and disappeared in a flash of green flame. When she was gone, Hermione settled deeper into the cushions Severus had conjured and drifted off into a light slumber. Severus cast a weak Silencing Charm over the makeshift bed to give her some quiet in which to rest, then he pressed a kiss to her forehead. Taking a deep breath, he left Hermione sleeping in the window seat. He took his time walking back across the room because he wasn't particularly looking forward to answering any more questions. He was looking forward least of all to telling the dark part of Hermione's story. The secret they had been keeping, the chance to end the war, wasn't going to be much easier to explain. There were just too many unbelievers now. Severus shook off his concerns and resumed his seat next to the Headmaster. "I am assuming that there are more questions? Or may I continue to astound the Order with my storytelling ability?"

The Headmaster laughed lightly. "Severus, humorous as always. Please do continue, everyone has been waiting for your return; there has not been a question from anyone." Albus gestured towards the Order members.

"I have a question for Snape," Harry ground out. "What did you do to Hermione--spell or potion? I know she refused to go out with Ron because she never wanted to be a mum."

Ron made a strangled noise in his throat, red colour suffusing his face. "Bloody hell, Harry; that was supposed to be a secret."

Harry brushed off his friend's complaints. "Well, don't you think it's strange she would tell you that, then she disappears, and when she comes back she has a baby? I think there is something wrong and I want to know what."

Severus snorted. "Of course, Potter, you should know everything. It is your right as the Chosen One." He glared at Harry. "Have you ever thought that maybe not everything is about you? Perhaps, just perhaps there are things in this world that don't concern you?"

"If it's about Hermione, it is my business." Harry seethed, shrugging off the hands holding him in his seat. He stood and took a menacing step towards Severus. "I think you drugged and raped her. I don't know why she would touch you otherwise."

Remus stood and pulled Harry back. "That is enough, Harry!" he barked. "You know nothing, so sit down, close your mouth, and open your ears. Obviously, there is more to this story than meets the eye. You forget, I know Fenrir Greyback and if he was involved, Severus is the least of your worries. Did you not see how Hermione reacted to me earlier? And to the rest of us..." He pushed a stunned Harry back into his chair, then sat back down himself. Harry didn't move; he was in shock at the reaction Remus had at his outburst. Grudgingly, he waited for Severus to continue.

"If there are no other questions, may I continue?" Severus' scathing tones painted the hush that had fallen over the group. "For your information, Potter, I never wanted a child either, for many reasons. However, things don't always work out the way we plan. Hermione and I had no choice in the matter, but we are doing what we must."

Minerva spoke up, a tad belligerently. "Severus, please tell me you have some feelings for the girl..."

Severus sighed and rolled his eyes. "I fail to see how my feelings for Hermione and Alexander are pertinent to this story, at least at this juncture. Now, if you don't mind, I would like to continue. This is difficult enough without everyone's opinions being thrown about." He tapped a long, elegant finger against his lips. "Where was I? Oh, yes, Greyback had taken Hermione and Cissy... Out of respect for my wife, I won't dwell on her captivity at first. Things will come out soon enough, and I am sure there will be questions. At this point, however, I will pick up where she was delivered into my care."

# Chapter Three

## Chapter 3 of 14

Hermione Granger disappeared from her home and is presumed dead. Nearly two years later, she returns to Hogwarts, guardian of a secret that could end the war with Voldemort once and for all.

Thanks to everyone who reads and to my beautiful beta, peskipiksi! This is JKR's playground; I just stopped by to swing a while...

The Wizarding Village of Argante was quiet. Even at its busiest, it didn't have the bustle of Hogsmeade on a Hogwarts weekend or Diagon Alley on any day. But its history stretched deep into the mists of the past and of legend. Mostly inhabited by the descendants of local gentry that ruled the three clans calling the area home, there wasn't a large population here, and very few visitors found their way to this desolate part of Scotland. The ones that did find this isolated village were generally lost, and happened to stumble upon Argante by accident. Over the years, a handful stayed on, and the locals didn't concern themselves with the strangers who came and left, as they knew the charms placed on the village at its founding would erase the memories of the village from anyone without the blood of the Ladies in their veins.

This particular night was bitterly cold, and snow had been threatening all day. Disturbingly grey clouds were shrouding the sky and spitting bits of sleet at the earth. The winds tossed the trees, dancing wildly with the branches, and no one in their right mind dared to venture out. No one except for a tall man, dark-haired and pale-skinned. He waited outside The Lady and Dagger pub, wind grabbing at the heavy woolen cloak he had wrapped around his spare form. His wait wasn't too very long, though. A quiet voice that carried well in the frigid air said, "Come," and then two figures moved out of the line of trees behind the pub. One was tall, blonde and male, the other figure, almost dainty in appearance, definitely female. The man held firmly onto his charge as she stumbled drunkenly. It was as Severus expected after receiving the missive begging for his discretion and help.

The tall, dark man opened the door to the pub as the two reached him, and they went gratefully into the warmth. The handful of regulars scattered about the room barely glanced up in acknowledgement of the trio when they entered the fire-bright pub. The smell of the fire and of whatever was for dinner, and alcohol filled the air. The barman looked at the men, and Severus merely said, "Two." The man set down the tankards he was polishing and quickly set about making up a tray.

They had taken a table in the corner by the fire, when impatience finally won out. "Severus, you must hide her; I don't have a place to or I would." Lucius Malfoy was the first to speak as they waited for the barmaid to make her way to them.

The maid interrupted the conversation only long enough to place a two goblets and two bowls of stew on the table. Lucius didn't even wait for the food to cool off before he was eating and drinking hungrily.

"Don't yer friend want somefin?" the maid asked. Severus just shook his head and busied himself with his goblet. The barmaid tried to gain their attentions by arching her back and thrusting her chest out, but neither man was interested. With a huff, she flounced off and soon forgot about the corner table.

After she was out of earshot, Severus arched an elegant brow at his old comrade's unusual lack of decorum, but he dismissed it as due to the circumstances they found themselves in.

"Obviously, Lucius, I was planning something clandestine. Why else would I have given you this location? Once you leave this place you will forget everything about it, and not even Legilimency will recover the memory."

Lucius nodded and wiped his mouth on a clean handkerchief, no napkin having been offered. "Very wise, my friend." He looked Severus in the face and took a deep breath. "I want out. I'll do whatever it takes, but I want out. I know that Dumbledore helped you, and I want the same. And, if Draco isn't in prison, I want him safe too." Lucius bowed his head tiredly. "Cissy is dead."

Severus glanced sharply at the female huddled at Lucius' side. "Dead? But I thought..."

"This isn't my Cissy, Severus." He laughed mirthlessly. "I have rescued your Miss Granger, and now we need to keep her safe. You remember last summer, the special revel you weren't summoned for? I came to you that night to tell you that we had taken Miss Granger, and she was dead? She was being used as part of a ritual to bind Remus Lupin to Greyback... they finally captured Lupin. One more step and the ritual would have been finished. Please, you have to hide her -- even from Dumbledore. She'll be safer if her friends still think she is dead. Most of the Death Eaters already do. Greyback and Bella think she escaped, but no one else cares one way or the other. Even the Dark Lord told the two of them she couldn't have possibly escaped. They swore they would find her and finish the ritual at the Summer Solstice. Bella's pleas were the only reason Greyback is still alive. He managed to convince that madman Summer Solstice would be even better for the ritual." Lucius frowned and handed Severus a flask. "I was able to get Cissy's memories before she died... in my arms. I hope they help."

Accepting the etched silver container, Severus nodded in thanks and placed it into a protected pocket of his frock coat. Sighing, Severus took a deep drink of the mulled wine the barmaid had left on their table. The alcohol went down smoothly, and he reached for the bowl of stew accompanying it, knowing that he needed to keep his wits about it. Thoughts were rolling furiously through his head. Spy, teacher, Potions master, minion, slave, knight; all these words pounded in his brain, screaming at him, and now they included a new word... keeper. One more title, one more role, surely he could juggle another without breaking.

"You say they took Lupin? When?"

Lucius shrugged. "Several nights ago. They were only waiting for the Winter Solstice next week to brew the final potion and complete the ritual." Lucius thought for a moment, then continued. "I was there, with Bella. We were gathering everything for the potion she was to brew, when they brought Lupin to Greyback. He tortured him with a silver knife for a while, then threw him in a cell. No one saw him after that except the girl that took food to him."

"I hope that Greyback still keeps his prisoners in the dark."

Lucius looked strangely at Severus. "Why?"

"It should be very interesting when they go to the cell to check on the wolf."

Severus swore at the problems he could foresee. "Damn Dumbledore. If they find out about the Polyjuiced Lupin, it will be my hide that pays for it."

"Polyjuice? Are you certain?"

"Of course I'm certain. One of Mad-Eye Moody's greatest ideas. They got another werewolf to act as Lupin whenever he needed to go out. He has been in hiding ever since Greyback almost caught him in Hogsmeade in..."

"In July, at precisely the time Miss Granger was offered the Dark Lord's hospitality."

"Just so... this may be a problem we can't get past. Damn them!"

"Perhaps not. I think I have a solution... and a scapegoat. You let me take care of the Polyjuiced werewolf problem. Now, what are we going to do about the sacrifice?"

"I have an idea, but eventually I will need your help."

Lucius agreed quickly. "Severus, this girl saved my son from taking the mark and, at the same time, she saved my life. The Dark Lord sold my Cissy to Greyback, and for months she has been at his mercy. She died protecting Miss Granger from Bella. I was able to subdue that crazy bitch, and I put a Memory charm on her, but not before stage one of the ritual was complete. If Greyback gets his claws back into Miss Granger, he will gain control of a key member in Dumbledore's camp."

Severus stared thoughtfully at Hermione, still completely bundled up in the cloak and hood Lucius had wrapped around her when he took her from Greyback's camp. She was slumped down in her seat, obviously drugged. But no matter, he only had one choice, and he hoped it was the right one, because it was too late and too cold to try to come up with a better plan.

"Lucius, when you leave here, this place will no longer exist for you. You will remember everything else, so I strongly suggest that you find a Pensieve or work on your Occlumency. Wait a while, and continue with the public claim that Cissy is out of the country. Perhaps even say that she is ill. No one would think twice about your consulting me on potions. That can be our cover." Severus grimaced a bit and finished. "I'm sorry for your loss. She was a good woman."

"Thank you, my friend. I can't believe she is gone. When the Dark Lord sent her with those werewolves, I knew I wouldn't get her back whole, but I didn't want her dead. Miss Granger gave up her only avenue of escape to save Draco, so I need to know where I went wrong! And I owe her a life debt."

"The Dark Lord used us all, Lucius. And now we are reaping the rewards of serving his lunacy." Severus had long since finished his stew as they talked and now tossed down the last of his wine. He stood and threw a handful of coins and a bottle cap on the table. "I'll see you soon. I will make arrangements for Miss Granger, but I dare not change too many habits, not quickly anyway. That is where you'll come in. Be safe, Lucius; the Portkey will take you to my home at Spinner's End. You can Floo to the Manor from there."

He wrapped an arm around Hermione and pulled her to her feet. She didn't protest, and, when he steered her towards the door, she shuffled her feet in compliance. Severus didn't have to turn around to know that Lucius was gone, and he glanced down at his companion, knowing that as long as the night had already been, it wasn't over yet, not by a long shot.

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The forest was deep and dark, and heavy with the scent of damp soil and evergreens. Even in the morning light, the darkness held sway over the landscape. Rugged mountain peaks rose all around, creating a place of starkly beautiful isolation. Hermione didn't know where, precisely, they were, or how; she just knew that she was being carried, and it was cold, and snow had made its way to the forest floor and onto her and her companion. The snowfall melted from their body heat and soaked the heavy cloak that enveloped her, causing her to shiver uncontrollably. She was so tired and cold and frightened. The cloak was secured around her, so she couldn't get free even if she'd had the energy to try. All she could do was whimper feebly and hope that death got her before the werewolves did.

After what seemed like hours of travel, the shadows melted away, and she found herself surrounded by a bright light that made her eyes ache. She closed them against the pain, crying silently, and drifted off to the gentle rumble of an incantation. She never heard the whispers drifting around them of, "the Lady; the Lady is home to the Vale."

Heavy boots clunked across a wooden bridge crossing a swiftly moving stream. This was the Test of the Blood and Severus determinedly made his way across the bridge, hoping against hope that his instincts had been correct. The water rushed furiously over a small waterfall and into a large pond filled with fish and waterfowl of all sorts. The blood wards danced across their skin and recognized both the Knight and his burden as heirs of the Five. The magic shivered happily and parted to allow Severus across the stream. Unmolested, they entered the Vale of the Carn. Hermione, roused from the sleep that had been forced upon her earlier, tried to focus on her surroundings. Before she could, there was a slight murmur from above and once again, sleep stole over her, and she knew no more.

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The first thing Hermione noticed when she finally awoke was the bed. Rather than the harsh cell she had been subjected to for an indeterminate amount of time, she was lying in what could only be described as utter decadence. The mattress was plush, yet firm enough to give support, and the cotton flannel linens were soft against her bare skin. She was warmer than she had been for months, and the realization that she was naked under the covers didn't disturb her; she had not had anything resembling clothes for longer than she could remember. However, the knowledge that she was cocooned in comfort terrified her. She tried to sit up and found that she couldn't move. She could feel her body, but she was so exhausted, she just couldn't make it respond to her wishes. The darkness was beginning to overwhelm her senses, and she cried out in fear. At least, she tried to cry out, and that is when the pain hit and panic flared.

She was enveloped in strong arms and the warm smell of herbs before she was drawn into a sitting position. One arm held her steady while pillows were piled behind her, and then she was allowed to lie back. For a moment, she didn't react. The only sign of the terror that filled her mind, was the harsh intake of breath that caused her throat to burn like she had swallowed acid. Hands reached quickly for hers and squeezed them reassuringly.

"Hush now, Miss Granger, hush. You must be careful of your vocal cords. They have been severely damaged. Here, drink this. It will help sooth the pain until I can brew something more specific to the damage." A cool vial was pressed to her lips and she hesitated briefly before swallowing obediently. The deep voice whispered soothingly over the blind terror of being helpless and drugged again, and reigned it in enough that it was no longer all encompassing. The voice whispered to her again, and Hermione relaxed as it's familiarity washed over her. She tried to speak, but only a rough, grating sound issued from her damaged throat. This attempt to talk was paid for by horrible pain and the tears that now burned tracks down her cheeks as they flowed unchecked from her eyes.

"Stubborn girl. You must let the elixir work." The voiced huffed, but not maliciously. "Do not try to speak. Just listen for once. Do you recognize my voice, Miss Granger?"

Hermione tensed and nodded, the hands holding hers tightened briefly, and the voice continued.

"Do you remember anything that has happened to you in the recent past? Anything at all?"

Hermione nodded once more, and she heard a quiet sigh issue from the direction of the voice. Then he spoke again. "As you are in no position to tell me anything, may I have permission to use Legilimency on you to see what has happened? I can neither brew the necessary potions, nor heal you with charms if I don't have this information."

Another nod and a deep breath were the only answers she could give.

"I shall endeavor to be as quick and as painless as possible. Please understand that I have no intention of hurting you physically or mentally." That being said, there was no warning, and suddenly the past six months were flooding Hermione's mind. It wasn't quite as bad as she thought it might be, as there was some detachment from the memories. It was almost like watching a film about someone else, rather than being a story of her own life. Hermione relaxed into the pillows she was reclining on and allowed the invasion of her mind. She felt a presence and reached out tentatively towards it.

"Professor Snape, can you hear me? Can we speak this way? Or am I just talking to myself?"

She heard a slight snort in the back of her mind, then a quiet voice teased the edges of her thoughts. "Technically, no, Miss Granger, we are not speaking. Legilimens deal strictly with images and memories. However, in my line of work it has become necessary that I be able to speak to certain people in situations that are not conducive to verbalization. I created a charm that is built onto the Legilimens incantation to allow mind speech. Certain bonds also allow for telepathic communication."

Hermione was speechless for a moment before she spoke again. "Sir, I must thank you for saving me..."

"It was not I, Miss Granger, but that is a story for later. For now, cease your chattering, and let me sort through these memories. I'm afraid we have a long road ahead of us."

Hermione was instantly contrite, and worried. "I'm sorry. Please, can you help me?"



"I shall do my best; now rest while I search for what I need."

Hermione relaxed and again allowed memories to flood her mind. She watched them dispassionately as Professor Snape sorted through her recent past. When the flow of memories was arranged into a more organized stream, the Professor eased out of Hermione's mind.

"Nod your head if it is permissible for me to remove these memories into a Pensieve. I would prefer to view them there, so that I might study in detail any potions or curses that were forced onto you. I would rather not have you relive these things over and over if I can prevent it."

Hermione nodded again, and Professor Snape released her hands after another brief squeeze. "I know you want to talk, Miss Granger, but at the moment, I just need you to hold these memories at the forefront of your mind. I'll remove them to the Pensieve, and then I must get to work."

Snape smirked a little at the downhearted look on Hermione's face. "If you are good, I'll return after supper, and if you will allow the potion I gave you earlier to work, you should be able to use your voice."

With that, Hermione brightened a bit, and Snape removed the memories efficiently, filling the Pensieve sitting on the table by the bed. He then told her to sit up so he could take away some of the pillows she was propped on, and then she lay back down. Tucking the blankets lightly around her, he spoke softly. "I know removing that many memories at once is both disconcerting and exhausting. However, the benefit to you right now is that they can't plague your rest. Sleep now; when you wake I'll come back. There is a charm on the room to alert me if you need anything. You aren't alone anymore."

Hermione listened as her Professor left the room and closed the door. "How odd," she thought. He was still her stiffly formal professor, but the cruelty she had come to expect wasn't there; not at all. With this in mind, Hermione drifted easily off into the first untormented sleep she'd had in weeks. Little did she know that things would only get worse before it would get better.

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Severus came out of the Pensieve and barely made it to the waste paper basket. In all his years as a Death Eater, he had seen and done some horrible things, but the werewolves managed to outdo everything in his experience. Severus groaned, and wiped the cold sweat off his face as he sprawled against his desk. He could only think that there was no way Hermione would ever recover from the things to which she had been exposed.

Narcissa was dead, protecting Hermione. Lucius was now in place to spy for the Light and he, himself, was walking an even tighter rope than ever before. Severus straightened up and took a deep breath. He had to put all that away. Hermione was counting on him to heal her and to somehow keep her safe from the Dark Lord, and Greyback. And he had to keep her hidden from Dumbledore so that he could keep the house of cards he and Lucius were constructing from collapsing.

A tingle in the back of his mind alerted Severus that Hermione was rousing from her nap, so he got up off the floor, straightened his clothes, and headed to her room. He stepped out of his study and nearly ran over the tall, elegant woman reaching for the doorknob.

"In a hurry, Son?" she asked, trying to regain her balance and dignity before it was sprawled in the hallway.

"Mother, I don't have time for this right now. Miss Granger is rousing from the elixir I gave her and I need to get there before she panics."

Eileen Snape nodded at Severus' statement. "Yes, but you need to remember what... "

Severus cut her off. "Mother!" He took a deep breath. "Mum, I know who and what she is, as well as I know who and what I am. It has been well-drilled into my head these past few years. But unless I can heal her, it won't matter at all."

Eileen sighed and looked away. "I know, but we are so close... "

"Yes, Mum, but if she doesn't recover, and we don't figure out the genealogical texts, it's not going to make a difference." He closed his eyes. "She is awake and beginning to worry. I need to go."

"See to our guest, Severus, and if you need me I'll be in the library."

Severus and his mother parted ways and he made it to Hermione's bedroom just as a full blown panic attack hit.

## Chapter Four

### *Chapter 4 of 14*

Hermione Granger disappeared from her home and is presumed dead. Nearly two years later, she returns to Hogwarts, guardian of a secret that could end the war with Voldemort once and for all.

Hermione had woken up strangely at ease and quite lethargic for the first time in months. She stretched, or attempted to, and the pain that resulted triggered an anxiety attack. Everything overwhelmed her at once. Not only was she in pain and blind, but she didn't remember where she was, and she couldn't breathe. So tangled were her emotions and senses, that she didn't realize when she was no longer alone. Slowly, the smell of sandalwood and green herbs pervaded her mind, and Hermione tried fiercely to focus on that.

"That's right, Miss Granger, slow, deep breaths. You were hyperventilating, on the verge of passing out. Calm yourself, let the panic fade away. Very good, now, rather than risk your throat, may I use Legilimency on you, so you can tell me what happened?" Professor Snape's soft rumble wrapped around the herbal scent, and Hermione began to relax.

She choked back a painful sob and nodded her head in assent. As soon as she felt him ease into her mind, she began babbling. "I'm sorry, sir. I don't know what happened. I woke up, and suddenly I was overwhelmed, and then the pain... I vaguely remember something bad, but it's like a dream."

"The memories," the professor responded. "There are residuals there, but nothing that can harm you. However, you've suffered an anxiety attack, I presume from waking up to pain and not being able to see your surroundings."

Hermione agreed. "Yes, I think that's what started it. I think I was fine when I woke, but then I moved wrong. It hurt so badly, that I forgot where I was... "

"Understandable, Miss Granger. You remember our conversation earlier? It will take you time to come to terms with everything, but you will. Now, do you feel up to some

tea and perhaps something light to eat? I'm afraid you are relegated to soup or custard for now. I don't want you getting ill on top of everything else. But first, a healing potion for your throat. The damage was caused by a potion, and I have an antidote. It is possible that the scarring won't resolve completely though, because it has been so long since the injury was done."

Hermione nodded and accepted the vial that the Potions master placed in her hand. She quickly drank the spicy, cobalt liquid and shuddered as it eased over the ruined parts of her throat. It was like fire, then ice, and then blissfully, no pain.

The Professor watched intently, waiting for anything to happen. Finally he asked, "Miss Granger? Can you speak?"

"Custard?" Hermione rasped out, licking her lips. "What kind?"

"Vanilla. Nothing too strong yet." Professor Snape rolled his eyes. "Typical--head straight for the sweets. Is your throat painful?"

Hermione smiled sadly. "No, just scratchy." She took a breath and continued. "My parents are... were dentists. I didn't get the chance for sweets like most kids, so I jump at them when I can now. Oh, but nothing overly sweet. I suppose I did inherit something from them." Her voice broke, and her shoulders shook from the strain of holding in her sobs.

Professor Snape closed his eyes and took a breath. "There now, Miss Granger. No need to cry... "

He was interrupted by a whirl of robes and his mother's voice. "There, there, dear, it will be fine. You cry and get it all out." Eileen placed a tray on the table by the bed and glared at her son. "Get out of my way. Obviously, the poor dear needs some comforting, and you are not doing a very good job." She manhandled Severus off the edge of the bed and took his place, arms wrapping lightly around the shuddering girl.

"You just cry; it will make you feel much better." Eileen rocked Hermione slightly and let her scream her sobs into her shoulder. After several minutes, the sobs quieted and Eileen pulled away to look into Hermione's face. "Better?" She asked.

Hermione nodded and then blurted, "Who are you?" She blushed bright red as she realized what she had done.

"My name is Eileen Snape. I'm Severus' mum."

"But I thought you were dead. When I looked up..." Hermione broke off, embarrassed at what she had revealed.

Eileen just laughed softly. "Everyone was supposed to think I was dead. It was a small sacrifice to keep Severus safe. Vol..."

"Mother!"

"Oh, very well. You Know Who wanted Severus to kill me as part of his initiation, something about lowering myself to marry a Muggle... like his own mother hadn't done the same thing... well, no matter, and I'm babbling, but this is a place I found out about when my uncle on my father's side died. I came here to hide away, and have been waiting on you for a long time."

"Mum, please..." Severus interrupted. "Miss Granger needs more healing potions, some food, and I daresay, more rest. There is time enough for your gossip later."

Eileen conceded defeat, not very elegantly, but she allowed herself to be hustled off after promising Hermione that she would return the next day with something to read. "I will come sit with you and read so you won't be lonely or bored. I am sure that son of mine would talk your ears off about potions, but I have some more interesting things to read. If you are interested."

Severus rolled his eyes at his mother's blatant manipulations. "Go, Mum; don't you have a history book begging to be read? I am sure that Miss Granger will welcome you back later."

Hermione smiled at the amused exasperation she heard in the Professor's voice and spoke to the lady. "Thank you so much. I look forward to reading with you tomorrow, Mrs. Snape."

"Eileen, my dear, call me Eileen."

A snort from Severus, and Eileen was gone, closing the door softly behind her.

"Your mother is very kind."

"She is, but she can be quite bossy. Don't let her push you around." There was a note of resignation in that statement.

"I take it you have experience with that?" Hermione probed.

It was a shame indeed that Hermione couldn't see the elegant arch of that brow. "Would you like that custard now, Miss Granger?"

"Yes, please," Hermione agreed. "I think I can manage if you hand me the dish rather than setting a tray on my lap." She hesitated, then plunged onward. "Could you call me, Hermione? I realize it's a bit awkward, but otherwise I still feel like I am at school, and I think we are way beyond that..."

"Very well, Hermione. And you may call me Severus, if you prefer."

A small, warm dish was pressed into Hermione's hand, and she welcomed the feel of it leaching the chill from her skin. A spoon was placed in her other hand, and she carefully took a scoop and savoured the light vanilla flavor that burst on her tongue.

"MMMMM..." Hermione closed her eyes and settled back into her pillows. "I don't remember the last time I had something substantial to eat."

Severus tilted his head and looked at her. "What can you remember? I didn't take everything, just the worst of your memories, the ones that had to do with potions and spells, and the ones that were extremely violent."

Hermione took another bite of her custard, and pondered her answer. After a few minutes, she spoke. "I don't remember anything vividly after You Know Who told Greyback to take me. Mostly, I remember feelings, and what seems like visions. And then, after I couldn't see at all, it was back to voices and feelings. That sort of thing."

"That is to be expected. The majority of the memories I gathered were from before that night. I know it's hard, but if you could tell me some of the things that happened after you were struck blind, that would help me. I know that Bella cast that curse when she visited to get a report for the Dark Lord. I have all your pertinent memories up until then; I also have Cissy's memories that cover the time after you were cursed and..."

Hermione shuddered, and almost dropped the dish in her hand. "That's why I can't see. I tried to stop them from hurting Narcissa, and... well, that woman is a lunatic. Bellatrix screamed at Narcissa for trying to help me, and then she told three of Greyback's newest pack members to hurt her. I do remember Greyback was furious. I begged for them to stop and Bellatrix threw a spell at me. My eyes burned like fire, and after I could only hear the screams, but it did make the rest of it even more horrible. I couldn't prepare myself for anything. It just happened."

Tears were running down Hermione's face, and Severus took the almost empty custard dish from her hands, exchanging it with a handkerchief, and then a cup of tea. "Do you think you can go on?"

She nodded. "I think so. I have to."

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Severus stopped speaking abruptly. This part of Hermione's tale made him exceedingly uncomfortable, not just because of the details, but because of how she had let it eat at her self-worth. Severus was afraid that Hermione might fall back into that well of self-loathing and despair he and Eileen had fought so hard to drag her from. As private a man as he was, it rankled even more that he had to share private details of Hermione, details that she'd had trouble sharing with him in the beginning.

His sudden silence prodded Harry into snidely remarking, "What's wrong, Snape? Forgot what you were going to say next, or having trouble spinning out some more lies?"

Dumbledore's voice rang out over Severus' in answer. "Harry, as you are an important part of these proceedings I will allow you to remain, but if you don't refrain from this childish behavior, then I will be forced to silence you."

Harry didn't listen. "I want to know what he's hiding. There's no way he knows everything that happened. I don't care what you say. I want to know what happened to Hermione, and I want to know now."

Severus opened his mouth to lambast the boy for his arrogance, but once again was over ridden by another.

"Harry, please..." Hermione's sultry voice was thick with sleep, but powerful in its intonation. "You don't really want to know what happened to me, to know those things that I saw and heard and felt. You simply want to hate Severus." She turned towards her husband, knowing he was exhausted and irritated over the evening's development. "I want to check on Alex, but first I think I need to relate this part of the story myself."

Severus stood from his chair and moved to support Hermione. "That's not necessary, love, I'll tell them what they need to know." He looked down into her tired face. "You look exhausted, let's get you to bed."

"No." Hermione touched his face gently. "I know how hard this part is for you, and it is my story to tell."

None of the Order had made a move or a sound, but simply watched the interaction between Severus and Hermione. Even Ron merely observed the proceedings without interrupting.

"Well, if you are going to tell your story, you might as well be comfortable." Severus waved his wand over the ladder-back chair he had been seated on. Instantly, the chair widened and became soft and plush. He took Hermione's hand, and encouraged her to sit in the new seat.

She smiled up at her husband and said, "Did you give up that stiff chair for me?" She patted his cheek. "Be careful, love, someone might think you like me."

Severus rolled his eyes and moved to stand behind Hermione's chair. Hermione, still smiling, turned to face the Order.

"Oi! I thought you were blind!" Ron blurted out over the silence. He looked around at the pained expressions on several faces. "What? What did I say?"

Hermione looked right at him. "I can still hear, Ron... and smell." She got a bit of an unfocused look about her. "I can tell who is here, and where they are."

Ron sat back in his seat, cheeks flaring red. "Yeah, well, you just didn't act blind," he huffed.

Nervous laughter filled the room, everyone looking at each other until Remus finally spoke. "Hermione, earlier I frightened you. What..."

Hermione swallowed heavily and reached for the hand Severus had rested on the back of her chair. He grasped her shoulder and squeezed, then took her hand in his. "It is your tale to tell; stop if it gets too much, and I will finish."

She nodded, and smiled sadly up at her husband. "I'll be OK."

Hermione turned her sightless eyes towards her former best friend. "Harry, you accused Severus of lying and other terrible things. I still say you don't want to know the truth; you just want to hate Severus."

Harry didn't answer Hermione's accusation. After all, she was right. He truly didn't want to know what Greyback had done to her in all those months she was his prisoner.

"You have to know about my time with the werewolves to truly understand why things have worked out the way they have. Severus has done nothing but protect and honor me. I expect that he be given his just due."

That said, Hermione sat back and sank into the memories that she tried desperately not to dwell on. Severus leaned over and spoke gently. "I left off where you told me about why you were blinded."

Hermione thanked Severus and began her narration.

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Hermione took a deep breath, knowing that Prof... no, Severus needed to know what happened next. He was going to have a time trying to determine all the potions that had been used on her. Bellatrix was nothing if not inventive. And as long as the girl stayed virginal, she was allowed to play.

"They left us in that cell for a long time; Narcissa told me they were waiting on a potion. That was all she knew. I wasn't allowed out, but they would come and get her pretty often. She would come back bruised and bleeding, but no one ever bit her. She told me that she was basically a servant, cooking and cleaning. I know that had to be horrible for her, and I'm not so naive about things any longer."

Severus agreed, but he also confirmed her fears. "Cissy was the guarantee that you would be a virgin when the Solstice was reached. She did what she had to do to keep you safe." He hesitated, then went on. "Hermione, no matter that Draco was the initial reason she saved you, Narcissa Malfoy thought very highly of you before the end. I have seen her memories. That is why Bella killed her. She saw that Cissy was beginning to look on you as the daughter she never had."

Hermione let out a harsh sound, and the teacup she had been holding shattered. Blood welled up in the numerous cuts on her hands, and the smell of the blood, along with the knowledge that Narcissa had been used by Greyback and his pack overwhelmed her.

She lashed out at Severus, attempting to strike him. He grabbed her wrist, and had turned her hand over to cast a healing charm when she panicked. Hermione went wild, swinging and kicking, getting tangled into the bedcovers. Severus, not wanting to use a spell to stop her, finally wrapped his arms around her, pinning her to his chest.

"Miss Granger... Hermione. Cease."

The harsh directive broke through the panic, and Hermione began to falter. She still struggled as he held her tightly, and she soon remembered where she was. Before she could withdraw in mortification, Severus eased her back onto her pillows, cast a Cleansing Spell and said, "Let me see to your wounds."

He gently took her wrists and healed the slashes caused by the broken teacup. Luckily, she had drunk most of the tea, so there were no burns to tend.

"I am so sorry. Please, forgive me..." The desolate plea tore at the normally stoic man.

"There is nothing to forgive. I am positive that this is the first of many other scenes as we work through your trauma. I swear to you, I won't ever hold it against you, nor will

I ever use the knowledge I gain to harm you."

The tingle of the magical oath shivered over the two, and Hermione spoke again. "Should I continue my story?"

"If you wish."

"As I told you, for ages I was just kept in the cell. I completely lost track of time and I never asked the date. I'm not sure Narcissa would have known if I had asked her, especially then. For the first time since we had been there, no one came for her. I don't know how long we were in that cell, but after a while, Greyback came to get Narcissa himself. While he was there, he told me that it was time to prepare me for my mate, and these women came in. They were part of the pack."

Hermione began trembling. "They washed me while he watched. It was horrible. They took my clothes, and they washed me. I never got anything to wear after that."

"When they were done washing me, they rubbed this foul smelling salve all over my body... everywhere. I remember that it made me burn. My skin felt like there were things crawling on it, and it made me crazy." Hermione bowed her head. "I tried to fight them."

Severus reached out and took Hermione's hand. "We can stop for now, if you like. I can imagine this is difficult for you."

Hermione shook her head. "No, I have to do this now. I don't know why, but I know that four times in a row they came in, and tormented me with that salve. I fought so hard that Greyback had me chained up. That's also when I was cursed. They left me alone for a stretch of time again, then it happened for another four times. The last time it happened, Narcissa tried to stop them and she was killed. Then I was brought to you."

"Can you tell me any symptoms of the salve, other than the itchy skin?" Severus frowned in thought.

"They put it all over my body, and it was hot feeling, then itchy. It made me restless, I remember that. I would lie on the cell floor, and the only reason I stayed sane was Narcissa. She never touched me, but she would play with my hair 'til I slept."

"Do you remember anything at all about the smell or the texture of the salve?"

"It was thick and sticky. It smelled like them... like werewolf. I don't think I can tell you anything else... specifically." Hermione trailed off, embarrassed, tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Hermione, you have done nothing to be ashamed of. You can tell me anything and I won't... "

She interrupted his speech. "I'm sorry; you have been nothing but kind to me. I know that if the Headmaster can trust you, so can I, but I can't do this right now."

Disappointed, Severus agreed. "I'm sorry I pushed. You rest while I go begin brewing the healing potions you need. Call me or my mother if you need anything." He placed what felt like a rope in her hand. "This is a bellpull. Once for me, twice for Mum."

Hermione simply nodded, then lay back down. As soon as she heard the door close, she burst into sobs and eventually cried herself to sleep.

Severus made his way to his lab, and proceeded to work out his frustrations on innocent potions ingredients. He wasn't sure why he was so upset. Of course the topic would be supremely painful for Hermione, but why did it hurt him when she said she trusted him because of Albus? He pushed the thoughts out of his head, tamped down the emotions, and lost himself to the potions he was brewing.

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Eileen watched her son as he walked determinedly away from Hermione's room. She could tell he was agitated, even though he didn't slam the door. She had been been to the library and was returning to her bedroom when she heard the commotion in Hermione's room. Rather than exacerbate the situation, she allowed Severus to handle things, but she stood sentry outside the door in case she was needed. She quickly slipped into her own room when she heard him making his way to the door. It wouldn't do to be caught snooping, she thought wryly.

After she watched Severus make his way to the stairs and disappear from sight, Eileen made her own way to Hermione's door and she tapped lightly, letting herself in as she did. She saw and heard the girl crying, but decided that it would be wiser to allow her to get the emotions out and under control. There was too much at stake to have everyone at each other's throats. Eileen slipped back into the hallway and headed to the library. She would be paying a call on Hermione much sooner than she anticipated, and she wanted to be prepared.

## Chapter Five

*Chapter 5 of 14*

Hermione Granger disappeared from her home and is presumed dead. Nearly two years later, she returns to Hogwarts, guardian of a secret that could end the war with Voldemort once and for all.

Several hours after Severus left her for his potions lab, Hermione awoke. Her throat hurt again, and her eyes were gritty from crying. She was lying there feeling sorry for herself when a light knock sounded on her door.

"Hermione? It's Eileen; are you awake?"

Hermione sat up as quickly as she could and answered, "Yes, please come in."

Eileen took one look at Hermione's tear-ravaged face and immediately set about pampering her. She conjured a soft cloth and cool, scented water and helped Hermione to wash her tired face and eyes. "What did my son do this time?" she asked a bit slyly.

Hermione was taken aback and then burst into tears again. "Oh, no, he didn't do anything. It was me. I think I hurt him. He was always so mean and hard in school, and here he has been another person, one I could be friends with, I think, and he was only trying to help. I said something about trusting him because of the Headmaster trusting him..."

Eileen tutted and shushed Hermione while embracing the girl. "All my boy ever wanted was to be trusted and liked for himself. I know you didn't mean to, but I think you probably did injure his feelings. He probably doesn't even know why, either."

"I am truly sorry. I do trust him; even when my friends didn't, I always knew he was trying to protect us."

Eileen hugged Hermione again and asked, "What were you talking about?" She brushed Hermione's hair back from her face. "Perhaps something you would be more comfortable talking about with me?"

Hermione blushed. "I was trying to tell him some of the things I remembered after I was blinded. I didn't realize how hard or embarrassing it would be."

"It may be easier to talk about personal things with me. Perhaps I would understand more?"

"I suppose. It does seem easier to talk to you. Narcissa would talk to me when we were in that cell... "

Eileen looked shrewdly at Hermione and then made a decision. She transformed a small table into a plush ottoman. Smiling in satisfaction, she took Hermione's hand and said, "Careful; I am going to let you walk about the room for a few moments, get that circulation going. Then I am going to do something with your hair."

Hermione only hesitated a moment, then took the hand Eileen placed in hers. The two walked around the bedroom until Hermione said she was beginning to tire.

"That's fine. Now, why don't you settle onto this ottoman and I will clean your hair. I gave you a bath while you were sleeping, but you seemed to be having bad dreams, and we didn't want to risk scaring you even more." Eileen placed her hand on the top of Hermione's head. "I am going to cast 'Tergeo' to clean off the worst of the filth. After I brush your hair well, we will clean it again. Luckily, you don't have anything in your hair but dirt."

Hermione blushed in mortification. "Oh! I didn't even think... "

"Hermione, you were taken care of when you got here, and we didn't find anything other than six months of grime. I promise, you are fine, and I am enjoying being able to take care of you." She looked slyly down at her charge. "You know, Severus always refused to sit still long enough for me to do his hair."

At first, Hermione thought nothing of it, but when it struck her what Eileen had said she couldn't contain her giggles. After several moments of unsuccessfully trying to calm herself, Hermione finally got the laughter under control. It was hard not to laugh at the idea of Severus, as a small boy or a young man, fidgeting while his mum brushed his long hair.

"It is beautiful to see you laugh, Hermione. Now, let me play with this hair of yours, and you tell me your story, starting with where you and Severus left off."

Hermione nodded, for once not terrified of what she had to say, and then started speaking. "Greyback had the females in his pack take turns putting a salve on me. Now that I think about it, it must have been around the time of the full moon. Obviously, it was daylight, because they were still human. I am guessing it was part of the ritual that Greyback wanted to perform."

Hermione shuddered at the memory. "I just couldn't tell the professor about the last time that they put it on me."

Eileen thought for a moment, and then made another decision. "You tell me, and I will pass on what is important for Severus to know. It won't be as hard for you to finish now, will it?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, I suppose it won't. I'm just so embarrassed by this. I know that the intent was for me to be raped on the Solstice. I remember the conversation Greyback had with You Know Who, and in my head I know what was planned, but I had never really been touched, much less by a woman. Whatever they put on me, they put it everywhere. I felt like I had to be touched to relieve the burning and itching sensations. They ran their hands all over me, and that salve made me WANT them to. I think I would have done anything to make that feeling go away." Hermione's hoarse voice broke. "I would have let any of them touch me, and it wouldn't have been rape."

"Always before, they came to my cell, but the last few times they took me to, I think, an altar, and the entire pack was there. I could hear them taunting me and Narcissa. Greyback dragged me to a stone and pushed me down. Four times I was chained to that stone twice on my knees, and twice on my back. Four times I begged them to finish me. All I heard was laughter as I begged those women to do whatever they wanted to me."

Hermione's voice, already roughened, was getting weaker as she went on. "That last night was also the night Narcissa died. She tried to help me by attacking the female that tormented me the most. All I could do was listen to her scream. Right before she died, she asked me to watch over Draco. I was still chained down, but she fell right next to me. I can still smell her blood, but I don't remember any more until I woke up here."

Eileen finished brushing Hermione's hair and cast another Cleansing Spell before plaiting it tightly. She then washed Hermione's face again with the damp cloth and took her hands firmly in her own. "I've finished. You don't have to think about this any more. We'll see if there is anything Severus can do, since it isn't a memory that can be removed normally."

Shrewdly determining the crux of Hermione's torment, she continued, "Hermione, what you've told me is awful, but you must realise you didn't do anything wrong. You were being used, and I know that has to make you feel so unclean, but you must listen to me..." Eileen emphasised what she was saying with another embrace. "You are the victim, and we will make this right."

Hermione nodded tearily, and some of the guilt she had been carrying over what had happened with the potion, and the resulting death of Narcissa Malfoy drifted away. Eileen helped Hermione clean up and change into a fresh nightgown. They shared tea, and then Hermione asked to lie back down.

"I can't believe just moving around for a little while has made me so tired," she yawned before easing off to sleep again, the steady rhythm of Eileen's fingers through her hair lulling her gently into slumber.

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Severus Snape spent the last few days of his Christmas holidays brewing healing potions, along with an assorted supply that one might need during the harsh Highland winter. He also spent several hours a day at Hermione's bedside, giving her potions and counteracting the several curses and hexes that had been used on her. Only two things stymied him the curse that had rendered Hermione blind, and the aphrodisiac she had been dosed with.

The night before he returned to Hogwarts for the new term, he told his mother of his frustration.

"I don't know what curse Bella used. I have never seen anything like it before."

He paced in front of the window in the Library, stirring the heavy blue velvet curtains with every pass. "It's almost like pure, unadulterated Dark Magic is wrapped around the optic nerve. Nothing is broken or severed, there is no damage at all, but a black veil of magic is preventing her from seeing."

Eileen watched Severus pace, and her heart went out to him over this. She knew he prided himself on finding answers to tough questions, and that he didn't like to be defeated. This was definitely defeating him.

"And to make matters worse, the aphrodisiac has no antidote. But even if it did, it wouldn't matter. There is so much of it in her system that it will take months for it to be flushed out completely. There is nothing I can do."

"Do you think it will be a problem?"

"No, from what she related to us, it only seemed to affect her when it was freshly applied. As long as we keep her hidden, she should be all right." He blew out a sharp breath. "She won't be able to have relations with anyone until it is completely out of her system. The aphrodisiac employs the dried, ground seedpod of Cowitch. That

doesn't interact well with the pennyroyal or liferoot flowers in contraceptive potions."

Eileen rolled her eyes. "There are other methods of contraception, son."

Severus just arched a brow and sniffed. "None as sure as those," he stated.

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Severus glanced around the room waiting for the storm. He was fully prepared to remove this night from everyone's memory and take Hermione and Alexander somewhere far away. Deep down, he knew that was no option, but he would do whatever it took to protect his family.

The Headmaster seemed to realize this and spoke up. "If anyone has any questions, Severus will field them. It sounds as though Hermione could do with a cup of tea for her throat."

Severus nodded at Albus in thanks as the Headmaster summoned Winky and asked for tea. "Let us take a break, everyone, and stretch a bit. I'm sure we are all stiff from sitting here for so long."

Drained, Hermione sat back in the plush comfort of her chair and breathed a sigh of relief. No one had been revolted, and no one had left as she spun her tale. She had been terrified to let everyone know what had happened to her for fear they would turn away from her, and she would be left alone. Even now, almost two years later, she still had moments of anxiety when she thought Severus would realize what had happened to her and be disgusted. Almost as if sensing her thoughts, Severus leaned forward, his warm breath tickling her ear.

"Hermione, I know I don't say it enough, but I love you and will never leave you. Mum loves you and Alexander loves you. You won't ever be alone. Don't let these memories latch on again. You have done nothing wrong..."

Hermione nodded slightly, tears welling in her eyes. "I know in my heart what you say is true, but my head doesn't always want to listen."

Severus pressed his lips against her temple. "It will all work out."

Anything else he would have said was interrupted by Winky and the tea trays. As soon as everyone had a cup and a plate of sandwiches and biscuits, Professor Dumbledore said, "We are coming to an important part of this tale. I want everyone to listen closely and keep any questions until it is finished. I believe that Severus will pick up where we left off, as Hermione needs to rest her voice."

Before Severus could start again, Molly blurted out, "What's wrong with her voice?"

He answered somewhat disdainfully, "It was injured during her captivity."

Someone snorted in the background and a few muffled chuckles were heard. Even Hermione smiled at the answer her snarky husband had given. She decided it would be best to answer herself before he could respond again.

"Bellatrix forced a potion down my throat. It was supposed to fix the damage that had been caused by the collar I had been wearing. Unfortunately, while she excels at Dark potions, she's pants at brewing a healing potion."

Hermione took a sip of the hot tea laced with citrus. The mixture immediately soothed the roughness that she was beginning to feel in her throat, and she whispered a thank you towards her husband. The potion that flavoured her tea would ease the pain and tiredness, but nothing would ever heal all of the scarring in her throat.

Severus drank down his tea and resumed his stance behind Hermione's chair. He waited a short time, then cleared his throat to regain the attention of the Order. "The next part I will relate is second hand information given to me by both my mother and Hermione. They spent an inordinate amount of time together researching the weapon we have determined will finish this war."

Before he could continue, Albus interrupted. "I want everyone to listen closely to the research information; you may know something that we haven't been able to discover yet." He nodded to Severus. "Thank you, you may continue."

Severus arched a brow and sneered slightly. "Indeed..."

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Hermione stretched and was relieved when she felt her spine pop in several places. She may not be able to read herself, but sitting in the desk chair, listening to Eileen or a Reading Charm pore over the huge number of genealogy books was tiring. It was nearing the end of February, and, for two months, the ladies had been searching for clues to who the other Ladies of the Vale were. So much information was missing, because entire generations had failed to come to the Vale and keep up the records. One genealogy had sounded promising, but soon the trail dwindled until there was nothing but dusty parchment and guesses.

Eileen had once again risen from her spot near the window and made her way to the massive bookcase that held the Vale records. As she was replacing one book, she reached for another. The new book was wedged tightly between the top and bottom shelves. Using two hands, she yanked on the bound parchment which finally gave way. Shrieking, Eileen fell backwards, along with the genealogy.

"Is everything OK? Eileen?"

She could hear the fear in Hermione's voice, so Eileen answered as quickly as she could. "I'm fine, dear. Just took a tumble along with this last book and..."

Eileen trailed off, her attention drawn to the sheaf of parchments that had been wedged between the top shelf and the book that had thrown her to the floor. "What have we here?" she asked curiously.

Hermione waited a few moments, and when Eileen still hadn't said any more, she asked, "What have you found?"

Eileen looked up from the parchments and apologised for getting lost in thought.

With a rustle of papers, and a quiet call for an elf to bring tea, Eileen sat down near Hermione and spread the parchments on the desk. "What do you know of King Arthur?"

The question surprised Hermione. "Well, I suppose I know what most everyone does. My mother loved 'Le Morte d'Arthur' and the stories about the Holy Grail. She would read them to me at night before bed."

"What if I told you that King Arthur is the reason you are here?"

Hermione frowned. "I don't understand. What does a legend about a king that may not even have existed have to do with me?"

Eileen just smiled. "Do you remember when Severus spoke briefly about the wards that allowed you to pass into the Vale? I told you that only those with the Vale bloodlines could enter."

"Yes, I remember."

"Well, you are a Lady of the Vale. One of the things I have been looking for in the genealogies is which line you descend from. Severus is a Vale Knight. There is only one

at any given time. He is a descendent of the knight Gareth and the priestess Lynette. I have determined that you are a daughter of Roisinn's line. What you have told me of your family, together with the records we have, leads me to that answer. There were three more priestesses: Aine, Brigid and Morgana."

Hermione sat quietly for a moment, then began firing off questions as quickly as she thought of them. "A Lady of the Vale? King Arthur was real? Who else is a Lady? What did you mean the professor is a knight...?"

"Hermione, slow down; I will answer everything I can." Eileen chuckled at the excitement that showed in her charge's face. It was the first true animation she had seen since Hermione had first come to the Vale.

"When Arthur was wounded at the Battle of Camlann, the Lady of the Lake and several of her Priestesses took him to Avalon to be healed. Most of the weapons that he had used were returned to the Fey where they came from. All but one weapon. Arthur carried a dagger called Carnwennan. It had been given to him by Nimue when a terrible evil terrorised the land. The Very Black Witch had killed many, and was invincible, according to any who heard the name. Arthur managed to destroy the darkness using the dagger, but he chose never to carry it again. He was warned that only a select few could touch the weapon and not fall prey to the darkness with which it was tainted. He feared one of his knights, or even an enemy, would acquire the dagger and use it for ill. It was hidden away in a secret room in the castle at Camelot."

Eileen took a long sip of tea and watched as Hermione impatiently waited for her to finish the story. She could see the emotions playing across her face and decided to finish the story.

"Camlann was fought in Cornwall, and Excalibur was returned to Dozmary Pool when Arthur fell. Nimue cast a powerful piece of magic to hide what was left of Arthur's Court and Camelot, and to hide the way to Avalon, as she knew that the mundane world was beginning to encroach on the magical one. Before she completed the magic, she gave Carnwennan into the charge of five of her most trusted followers along with one of the Round Table knights. They made their way here and hid the dagger."

Hermione was nodding her head as she listened, pieces of the story falling into place. "Yes, I see. If we can locate the other bloodlines, we can get the dagger and use it to destroy You Know Who." She sat back in her chair. "Brilliant! You Know Who is the creature Arthur killed, isn't he? It's the only thing that makes sense, the only reason that the effort would be made to summon the bloodlines together. But why didn't the Lady just come back from Avalon and call us more directly?"

"The magic she used to wipe away the evidence of Arthur and Camelot took almost all of her power. She was, for the most part, sealed across the mists in Avalon. When the Old Ways died out, she had no channel to move through the mists at all. I don't know how she was able to summon the blood."

"Professor Snape knew I was connected to the Vale. How?"

"When he touched your hand the night you were rescued, he knew you were a Lady. The Summoning is very strong, and we hope that if we can get even one more of you together it will lead the other two to find us, or us to find them."

"Well, what's in the parchments you found? Maybe we're one step closer to finding what we need to know," Hermione said.

Eileen began to read over the tattered pages and realised that they weren't written by hand. These parchments were self-recording. "It can't be that simple, can it?" she asked.

"What?" Hermione's impatience was returning full force.

"This is a record of an attempt to summon the Carn in 1990. The person who did it was killed because of the incredible amount of power harnessed. She couldn't handle it alone, and that is why there are four Ladies to do the ritual."

"Does it give a name?" Hermione asked excitedly.

"Yes, the name is Columbine Winters. Do you recognise it?"

"No, but I am sure that if she went to Hogwarts, the Professor will know who it is. We must contact him!"

"He will be here for the weekend, and this can wait 'til then. Remember, we don't want to draw attention to him unless we must." Eileen tilted her head at Hermione. "Why are you calling him 'Professor' again? I thought the two of you had decided to use first names."

Hermione shrugged. "Oh, well, I do call him by his first name in private. But 'Professor' is a hard habit to break. I imagine even after many years I would still call him that."

Eileen laughed, and the two went back to their reading until dinnertime. No other headway was made, and after dinner, Eileen read to Hermione all the tales of Arthur she could stand.

## Chapter Six

### *Chapter 6 of 14*

Hermione Granger disappeared from her home and is presumed dead. Nearly two years later, she returns to Hogwarts, guardian of a secret that could end the war with Voldemort once and for all.

"Columbine Winters? Why, that's..." Professor McGonagall started. She snapped her lips together, not sure if she should offer the information.

"Yes, Minerva, Columbine Winters is Luna Lovegood's mother," Albus finished. "It's no secret, as I have asked her father to bring her here so she can safely meet with her friends for a holiday dinner. Hopefully, with Hermione and Luna together, the other Vale Ladies can be located."

A house-elf popped into the room and spoke to the Headmaster, who clapped his hands delightedly. "The Lovegoods are in the Great Hall, and, as we are the only inhabitants of the castle, we will take our dinner there. Let's be off, and afterwards, Severus will catch everyone up on this fascinating tale we have been privy to!"

Severus glared at Albus' joviality, then went to Hermione's side and took her arm as she stood from her seat. "Shall we check on Alexander and then meet the others for pudding? I am quite sure the boy is wondering where his dinner is."

Hermione smiled softly and nodded her agreement. "Is it only dinnertime?" she asked. "I feel like we have been talking for days."

"No, my dear, just hours."

Severus led Hermione to the Headmaster and told him of their plans. As they walked to the Floo, Harry and Ron demanded to know where they were going.

"Headmaster, aren't the Snapes required to join us for dinner? It would be hard for Hermione and Luna to figure anything out if they weren't in the same room." Harry still had an edge of hatred in his voice when he spoke.

Hermione's temper flared, and she fired back quickly, "Harry, I have a son whom I must tend to. I prefer to do so in private, but if you still don't trust Severus, or myself for that matter, you are more than welcome to come watch me breastfeed Alex. You can ensure that the Dark Lord doesn't spring from my bra!"

Ron headed for the door, not waiting to see if Harry was following. "That would be the scary part!" he exclaimed.

Harry, ignoring Ron's comment, turned red at Hermione's statment. He bristled even further as Severus let his displeasure at Harry's pettiness be known. The Potions master was about two ticks from hexing The Boy Who Continued To Be A Pain. Hermione laid her hand back on Severus' arm, and with one last look of loathing, he turned to the fireplace and called out, "Poppy's office." With a flash of green, the two were gone.

Harry had started towards the staircase, trying to catch up to Ron, when the Headmaster stopped him. "Harry, you place too much blame on Severus for things he didn't do. Now you are casting that blame on Hermione. They both have had to make some hard choices and are happy in their circumstances. You should give them a chance, rather than condemning them for surviving."

Albus looked shrewdly at Harry. "Do you truly wish your friend dead, rather than happy with Severus? If you do, then you had best rethink things before you face Voldemort. If you aren't true to yourself, and all of those counting on you, you will fall and everyone you love along with you."

With that, Albus preceded the boys down the stairs.

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Dinner was a raucous affair, full of high spirits and laughter. The house-elves had outdone themselves as usual, serving everyone's favorite foods. For a moment, the war was forgotten and life was good. Everyone ate their fill, and as dinner was being cleared and pudding set out, Hermione and Severus rejoined the group. Immediately, Luna rose from her seat and rushed to her friend.

"Hermione, I have been so worried about you," she warbled. "I knew you couldn't be dead because there were no Curlywurlies at your memorial service."

Hermione smiled indulgently at Luna while Severus rolled his eyes, and Ron was heard in the background whispering very loudly, "Harry, what the bloody hell is a Curlywurlly?"

Sniggers of laughter were heard all around, and the two girls hugged before taking their seats. Hermione wasted no more time and cut straight to the heart of matters. "Luna, have you noticed anything odd recently? I mean, something calling to you?"

Luna looked owlishly at Hermione and then nodded. "Yes, I have been having dreams for almost a year now. Not every night, mind you, but quite regularly. They are very odd."

Hermione leaned close. "Odd? How so?"

"Well, the dreams start out the same every time. It's my mother, and she is doing her experiments. There's an explosion and I see her die. She stands up, looks at me then says, 'You are the one; you must seek out the Vale'. After she gives me the message, I see a what looks like a well, and four women surrounding the well. There is always a bright flash of light, then I wake up." Luna shrugged delicately, "I just thought it was Wrackspurts trying to fuzz my brain while I was sleeping."

Hermione shook her head. "No, no Wrackspurts caused this. Luna, you are a descendent of Nimue's priestesses like I am. You are a Lady of the Vale. Severus is also a descendent. We have been trying to locate all the bloodlines. We've discovered a way to destroy You Know Who and need your help."

Luna's father, Xenophilius, spoke up. "Are you sure? Columbine was always going on about a well or a veil or something, but she never told me what she was doing or looking for. After she died, I forgot all about it."

"I can tell you what I know for sure. Luna's mother felt the call, but she didn't know what it was. She tried to answer using an ancient text she found at the Wizarding Library in London, but the power was too much for one person to control. It overwhelmed her. That is what caused the explosion that killed her. It was the backlash of a great deal of unharnessed magical power."

Xenophilius looked at Hermione in shock. "You mean she wasn't killed because she was crazy?" His look became warily hopeful. "Lots of people thought she was, you know. They've not been kind to my girl about it either"

"No, Mr. Lovegood, sir. Your wife was killed in an accident because she was part of something very important. If the others that were part of the bloodlines had heard the call and answered when she did, You Know Who might have been destroyed long ago."

Luna wiped tears from her face and asked, "What can I do to help?"

"Eileen thought that we should do a Summoning Spell worded to call only Ladies of the Vale. That way, we wouldn't be calling just anyone, even if they are a descendent."

Luna agreed. "We may as well do the spell now. Perhaps we should find somewhere the Kitterplods won't interfere."

Hermione and Xenophilius both indulged Luna and her ideas, while the others chuckled and shook their heads. Things were starting to look up. Perhaps this war could be ended, and on their terms.

Albus clapped his hands, and the remains of the holiday feast disappeared. "Shall we adjourn to the Headmaster's Office again. It is much cosier, and we shouldn't be interrupted by anyone." He started for the doors to the Great Hall, and the entire group quickly followed. Solemnly they made their way to the gargoyle-guarded entrance, and one by one they made their way up the narrow staircase to the office.

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Everyone was settled back into their places in the Headmaster's Office, watching intently as Hermione and Luna performed a modified Summoning Spell. It was similar to 'Accio', but much more direct and specific. There was some argument over whether two heretofore unknown Vale Ladies would respond to such a summons when they hadn't responded to the Lady of the Lake, herself. Minerva finally ended the stalemate when she stated, with Albus' agreement, "Perhaps it would be wise to each mix a drop of your blood, and key the spell to it. That should end any question of whether the Summoning Spell is accurate enough."

Albus produced a ceremonial dagger and the two girls cut the ends of their middle fingers and dropped the blood to mingle on a silk handkerchief Hermione had brought from the Lodge in the Vale. The blood soaked quickly into the silk, and when Hermione and Luna chanted the spell, a blue glow suffused the handkerchief. As quickly as it manifested, it was gone. Everyone sat back; nothing was said, but they were all wondering what could possibly happen next.

"I suppose now would be as good a time as any to tell us how you two ended up married and with a child." Molly addressed the Potions master rather frostily.

Severus arched an eyebrow questioningly and sneered. "I'm not sure what business it is of yours as to how it happened. Just be assured, Hermione is my wife and Alexander is my son. Nothing will change that, regardless of the feelings in this room."

Harry, still looking for something, anything, to attack Severus with, bit out angrily, "Maybe you don't want to tell because you forced her."



"I am becoming rather weary of your ill-mannered accusations and foolishness, Potter," Severus answered back. "My personal life, and that of Hermione, is not your concern. I refuse to give out the sordid details of our interactions because you have a chip on your shoulder."

Severus was beginning to get angry and it showed in the way his voice dropped in timbre and volume. It was obvious he was reaching the end of his tether when Hermione spoke up. "Severus, it's OK. I don't mind sharing a bit of our sordidness." She then addressed the Order at large. "I will tell you what you want to know, but I will not tolerate any interruptions and once I get started, I refuse to stop. If you don't like what you hear, remember, you asked for it."

Several of the Order members looked uncomfortable, and Remus tried to speak up, but he was too late. Hermione had already begun to weave her tale.

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It was late on Friday evening, and Severus should have been at the Lodge hours ago. He had been very good at juggling teaching, both of his Masters, and his spy duties, but Hermione just knew something terrible had happened. Eileen had tried to tell her more than once that Severus was often late, but as long as she had been at the Vale, unless he had night duty at Hogwarts, he would always arrive on Friday evening around seven in the evening.

"I know something has happened, Eileen. I feel it. He has never been this late before."

Eileen pulled the brush through Hermione's curls and told her once again, "Hermione, you have been here for almost three months. There have been plenty of times in the past fifteen years he has been late. Don't worry."

Hermione didn't respond, but Eileen could tell that she hadn't relaxed at all. She continued to brush Hermione's long, curly hair hoping that it would ease the girl and she would sleep. For the past few days, Eileen noticed that Hermione hadn't been sleeping well. She tossed and turned and cried out in the night. Eileen hoped that the restlessness would go away soon, that perhaps Severus could provide an elixir to help her sleep.

Unfortunately, when Hermione had first come to them, they found she was allergic to Dreamless Sleep. Luckily, the nightmares had eased as Hermione grew comfortable in her new home. Because of this, the recent developments in her sleeping patterns were beginning to worry Eileen a great deal.

Finally, Hermione drifted off enough that Eileen felt safe leaving her briefly. She went to the library to pick up the book they had been reading, and to get her shawl. She also needed to get out of the room because she didn't want Hermione to pick up on her own nervousness about Severus' lateness. She paced briskly in front of the fire for a few moments, burning off some nervous energy. A few moments later, Eileen was on her way back to Hermione's room, when she heard the front door open. Cold air from the late spring snowstorm raging outside, swirled up the stairs and wove itself around Eileen. She hurried to the landing to find Severus making his way slowly from the entryway.

"Sweet Nimue, Severus, I've been worried sick. What's happened? You've not been this late in a long time." Eileen looked over her son, but didn't see any injuries. "Something's wrong..."

Severus sighed harshly. "Miss Granger? Is she well?"

Eileen nodded. "She is recovering beautifully. I think that you will probably be a better judge, since you only see her at the weekend." She frowned thoughtfully. "However, there has been something this past week."

Severus looked sharply at his mother. "Tell me."

She was taken aback by the urgency in his voice. "Very well, but let's go to the library and get you some tea. I have a feeling we don't want to be discussing this in front of the girl's door, anyway."

Eileen gestured towards the door at the end of the hall and cast a spell to alert her if Hermione awoke. The two made their way quickly to the library where Eileen called Posey and ordered a tea tray.

"Tell me what's happened to you," she demanded.

"First, what is wrong with Miss Granger?"

"She has had bad dreams all week." Eileen looked Severus in the eye. "Dreams of the ritual. She hasn't said anything, but I think she is in pain. She is most definitely restless. And when you didn't arrive this evening, she was absolutely frantic."

Severus stared at the fire burning merrily in the fireplace and drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair. Eileen didn't push; she knew he would speak when he was ready. In the meantime, she made a cup of hot tea, and pressed it on him. Eileen sat back and watched Severus drain the cup rather quickly for such a hot liquid.

"I have been with Lucius. Bella and Greyback are still both adamant that Miss Granger is alive. It is the week of the Spring Solstice and they are beginning a plan to flush her out."

"But how? I don't understand. No one knows of this place at all, and we both know there are no tracking spells that can be used to find the Vale. As long as Hermione is inside the boundary, she doesn't exist."

Severus nodded. "I know, Mum, but you don't understand. The aphrodisiac salve has a spell trigger. She was their prisoner for six months; they have access to hair, blood, any number of things to cast the spell on. When they do, there is nothing I can do to stop it. They will cast this spell every night until the Solstice and, by then, she will be in more pain than you can imagine, and desperate to find an end to it."

"I have never heard of an aphrodisiac that causes pain." Eileen frowned.

"This one is intended to mate the victim with a werewolf... during the full moon."

Eileen gasped, "Oh, gods, what can we do."

"There is no antidote but to consummate the spell. The pain is such that a woman would rather mate with a monster than to hurt any more. Lucius was able to get most of this information out of Bella. It seems that she has delighted in tormenting him about Narcissa. Bella told him that if she hadn't killed her, they were going to use the salve on Cissy."

Eileen sat in her chair, her mind desperately grasping at what Severus was telling her. Suddenly a thought hit her. "The pain--it will destroy her mind, Severus. There is no way around it."

Severus just nodded. "I'm afraid so. And that is the least of our worries. She is a strong young woman, and it is possible that she would try to leave the Vale to find a solution. In fact, I believe they are counting on that. They wanted to mate her to Remus Lupin, but haven't managed to catch him. They did have some of his hair, though, and used it in the salve to key his reactions to Hermione."

"There has to be something we can do. If she is already dreaming that means Bella has started the spell cycle. We don't have much time at all."

Severus glared at his mother. "Don't you think I know this?" he hissed. "I have racked my brain for an answer, ANY answer, but there is only one. She has to lose her virginity."

"To Remus Lupin?"

"No, I think that the hair was just a failsafe to make sure that Remus, in his werewolf form, would mate with her with no compunction."

Eileen leaped from her chair and waved her hands at Severus. "Fine, then you do it. Now. Go and wake her up and explain. No, I'll wake her and explain..."

Severus shot Eileen a horrified glare. "NO! Absolutely not, Mother. I couldn't possibly... She is a student."

"Severus, we can't let her be found, we can't let her leave the Vale, and we can't let her be hurt any more. Please."

Severus sighed tiredly. "In the morning, Mum. I need some rest, as do you. It will keep until then. Hermione can decide who she would prefer, and I will bring him to Argante. They will have to have relations there, at the Inn."

"Very well, Sev. Good night, then."

Severus kissed his mother's cheek. "Good night to you as well." His robes billowed as he walked out of the room.

Eileen followed soon after.

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Hermione paused in her recitation to take another sip of her citrus tea. As she began to speak again, several of the odd instruments that dotted the Headmaster's Office went crazy, and alarms sounded.

Albus stood quickly and spoke to Severus. "Someone's at the front gate. Will you accompany me?" He gestured absently towards one of the wildly gyrating pieces on his desk. "It seems that whoever is calling is urgently trying to get in the gate."

"Professor Dumbledore, I want to come. This could be a trap." Harry had jumped from his seat and was waving his hands wildly. "Ron and I can help."

"We don't need help, Potter. We can't go out there like we suspect there is a problem." Severus answered quickly, jerking his chin at Remus. "I do suggest we bring Lupin, just in case we have to subdue someone. Between us, we should not have any trouble."

Remus stood in agreement. "I will follow along slightly behind you, and close to the woods nearest the gate. If I am not needed, no one will know I'm there."

Albus nodded. "A good plan; let us go see who is interrupting Hermione's fascinating tale."

"What about me?" Harry demanded. "I can HELP!"

"We don't want anyone to know that there are people here other than Minerva, Severus, and myself. You need to stay here, and we shall return momentarily."

Harry threw himself back into his chair in a fit of temper, and Arthur moved to sit beside him, whispering urgently in his ear.

Severus rolled his eyes in exasperation, then went to Hermione's chair and knelt beside her as Remus and Albus started down the stairs to the main hall. He ignored the stares of the others in the room, and touched her cheek softly. "We'll be right back, my love. Don't leave this office unless Poppy comes to get you." A swift kiss to Hermione's lips, and Severus disappeared down the stairs, black robes billowing around the corner behind him.

## Chapter Seven

### *Chapter 7 of 14*

Hermione Granger disappeared from her home and is presumed dead. Nearly two years later, she returns to Hogwarts, guardian of a secret that could end the war with Voldemort once and for all.

Thank you, peskipiksi, for smoothing this out and making me a better story-teller!

Severus and Remus followed close behind Albus as they made their way quickly down the darkened path to the main gates of Hogwarts. The snow-covered gravel crunched under their feet, marking their progress. Luckily, there were heavy clouds scudding in front of a waxing gibbous moon that hung heavily in the sky. Snow was flurrying around the men, adding to the lack of visibility. As they reached the grove of trees that led to the gate, Remus melted off the path and into the edge of the trees. Silently unseen, he shadowed the other two.

Albus and Severus neared the gate to see two figures huddled close together and frantically attempting to enter the gates. The taller of the two looked up at the men's approach, and called out, "Headmaster, please, you must let us in. We ask for sanctuary."

Albus looked bemusedly at the speaker and asked, "Who are you? Why do you seek sanctuary in this place?"

"Albus, it's Andromeda; Andromeda Tonks. Please, you must let us in. My home was attacked, and I barely escaped. Ted was still at work; I managed to get to him and send him to Nymphadora's flat, but when I tried to get to Nymphadora at the Ministry, Death Eaters attacked me in the open. I ran into my companion as I cleared the Floo at St. Mungo's, and we have been looking for a hiding place for three days."

Severus glared suspiciously at the two. "Who is your companion, and why come here?"

Andromeda turned pleading eyes to Albus. "Please, let us in, and I will tell you everything. Please!"

Remus appeared at Severus' side. "There's no one else here, Headmaster, and this is Andromeda Tonks. Polyjuice can't mimic a person's smell."

Deciding quickly, Albus waved his hand and the gates opened enough for the two figures to slip through. "An explanation in detail will be expected when we get to my office. But for now, I simply want to know who it is I am inviting into my school."

Andromeda nodded to the Headmaster. "Of course, Albus." And two hoods were lowered.

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The group left behind in the Headmaster's Office spent most of their time in silence. Only Luna and Hermione spoke, and that was in quiet discussion between the two of them. No one else seemed to be interested in anything but the doorway leading to the stairs. It seemed like an eternity before Hermione breathed a relieved, "Severus," and the others looked on in shock as he entered the room a moment later, Remus right on his heels.

They were followed by the Headmaster, who appeared deep in thought. After several moments of gathering his thoughts, he remarked, "Hermione, Luna, I believe that our greatest hopes have been fulfilled. The Summoning Spell worked, and the two Vale Ladies that were lost are now found. They fell into each other's company by accident, and when you cast the spell it drew them here. As soon as they have been seen to by Poppy and have eaten a meal, we will introduce them."

Hermione spoke sharply. "Alex?"

Severus took her hand and squeezed as he reassured her. "Alex is safe. Posey is with him in his nursery. We felt it would be best to take him to our chambers where there is less traffic, and more wards."

Hermione tilted her head in acknowledgement. "He is still sleeping?"

"Yes, I think you have a little while before your presence is demanded again."

Her chuckle was all the answer Severus' remark deserved.

Small conversations had sprung up around the room at this point, and Albus now regained control of the meeting. "While we await our guests, let us finish the story with which Severus and Hermione have been regaling us. I think we have almost caught up on Hermione's life at this point..."

Hermione arched a brow in response. "Certainly, Headmaster," she said. "There is not much more to tell."

"Pray continue, then, Madam Snape!"

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Hermione woke early the next morning. She didn't know why, because normally Eileen had to rouse her. Being blind had really thrown her internal clock into a tailspin. She couldn't see light; therefore she didn't wake unless someone woke her. Eileen attributed it more to the lack of sleep and near starvation she endured at the hands of the werewolves. She constantly told Hermione to take it easy and rest. Her body needed time to fully heal itself.

So waking up without Eileen or one of the house-elves in the room was a bit disconcerting. She rapidly got over that when she realised she had gone to sleep not knowing where Severus was. He was never late, and last night had disturbed the sheltered world she had been residing in. She was about to tug the bellpull when Eileen floated into the room in a cloud of nervousness and energy. She bullied Hermione up and into a set of comfortable robes, and then she brushed her hair 'til it snapped and sparked in retaliation.

"Library. Hurry. Severus..."

Hermione jumped in. "Severus, is he here?"

"Didn't I just say that? He's waiting in the library. He needs to speak to you urgently."

Hermione shrank back at those words. "Urgently? Oh no! Greyback has found me, or Bellatrix has. Please, please don't let them take me..." Eileen cringed as Hermione began to panic. Just as she was about to grab the girl, Severus stepped into the room.

"What in Merlin's name is going on? I heard shouting."

Hermione stood and attempted to follow Snape's voice, reaching for the Potions master. "Please, Professor, please don't let them find me. Kill me if you must, but don't let them have me!"

Severus closed the distance between them swiftly and took Hermione by the arm. "No one is going to find you. And you certainly aren't going to be killed. You are safe here, I swear it."

He looked at his mother, who sighed. "When I told her you needed to speak to her rather urgently, she panicked."

"Mother, why didn't you just tell her I was in the library? This was not necessary."

Eileen shrugged and slipped past them to the door. "I'll just check that Posey has tea in the library for you."

After a few moments of allowing Hermione to regain her bearings, Severus led her to the library and sat her in her favorite chair by the window. "The sun is shining today, would you like the curtain open?"

Hermione nodded, smiling shyly and thanking Severus for the warmth she felt playing along her cheek and throat. The sun shone through the leaded glass panes, and sparkled and shimmered on her skin, warming her slightly. She had been so cold that no amount of fire on the hearth or Warming Charms or even blankets and clothes could touch the chill she felt to her bones. The sun was the only thing that could chase the chill away, even for a short time.

After tea was served and finished and the pot replenished for later, Severus sat debating on how to break the news of the newest attack on her body to Hermione. She could feel the tension in the room and decided to take the bull by the horns, so to speak. "What's wrong? I can feel that there is something weighing heavily on you."

Severus looked at the girl no, young woman before him and chose to just tell her. "Hermione, do you remember the ritual potion?" At her nod, he continued. "It is a powerful aphrodisiac, and Bella and Greyback are trying to use it to draw you back out into the open."

Hermione sat in shock, not knowing how to respond.

"The purpose of this particular brew is to mate a human female with a werewolf. Such a dark act will lock away the human part of him as the wolf grows stronger and stronger. You were to be used to bind Lupin to Greyback and the Dark Lord. In fact, they used some of his hair to key the potion to him, ensuring that he took you no matter what amount of humanity he may retain."

Severus paused as Hermione, face in her hands, sobbed. "What can we do? I don't want to be used to hurt Remus or the Order. What can I do?"

Severus handed Hermione a handkerchief, shaking his head in bemusement. "In all my days, I have never seen a witch less prepared to deal with emotions."

If Hermione hadn't been crying her eyes out, she might have found that remark funny, but all she could think of was finding an escape. After some time had passed, Hermione got herself back under control and looked to her professor once more for guidance.

"Miss Granger." He paused, a flush of pink in his cheeks. "Miss Granger, I have searched and searched, but there is no antidote for this aphrodisiac other than to consummate a relationship."

Hermione frowned. "Consummate..."

"Yes, consummate..." Severus responded agitatedly. "You must lose your virginity and then the ritual potion will be null and void. If you will recall, they need a virgin for this to work."

"My virginity? But I'm not..."

"Not what? A virgin? But it was required..."

"No, I mean, yes, I'm a virgin, but I'm not ready to be with someone."

Severus took a deep breath. "You have no choice, other than on whom you might choose to bestow this gift. I will return to Hogwarts tomorrow and make the necessary arrangements. Unfortunately, I will have to take you to the Inn at Argente, as you can bring no one here. It will be dangerous, but you need to do the deed as quickly as you can so that the ritual will be lost to Greyback."

Hermione jerked her head towards the Potions master. "Arrangements; what kind of arrangements?"

"I will have to arrange a way to get the Weasley menace here without the Dark Lord or the Headmaster knowing. Thus, the arrangements."

"Don't call him that," choked Hermione. "He is a perfectly nice boy."

Severus's brow arched like a hissing cat. "Indeed."

"But, why would you bring Ron?"

"You were 'dating', were you not? At least, that is what your friends are saying. Weasley has been moping about the castle being pampered and coddled by everyone around him ever since they returned to school to find you missing."

Hermione arched her own brow at that. "We have never been more than friends. I love him like a brother. Why anyone would think that we are compatible I have no idea."

"Yes, yes, very good; so shall I collect Potter then? No? Please, tell me you don't hold a candle for that cauldron-exploding dunderhead, Longbottom." He hissed a relieved sigh as she shook her head, once again crying.

"There has to be someone I can bring. Shall I bring a random Muggle? What can I do? I'm trying to help you here, but I can't if you don't help me in return." Severus' eyes grew a bit wide, and he blushed again as another thought struck. "Oh, well, perhaps that isn't what you need? Maybe there is someone else, perhaps a... female."

Hermione just cried harder.

"Please, let me get one of your friends. At least you will know them."

"There is one other choice..."

Eileen's voice, from the doorway, startled them both, and they immediately gave her their attention. "There is one you haven't named." And she melted back into the hallway like she was never there.

"Mother, I'm trying to help her, not terrify her." He turned back to Hermione. "Are you sure I can't bring you Potter or Weasley; or is there a girl you prefer? There has to be someone you prefer. Hermione, please, or you leave me no choice! You MUST be rid of your virginity or we will lose you!" His normally silky voice cracked with loud emotion.

Hermione sobbed into her hands. "At last, a reason to be grateful I am blind. At least then I don't have to look at..."

A sharp breath halted Hermione mid rant. The resounding slam of the door shocked her into action, and she quickly rose from her seat and took a step forward. Unfortunately, the tea table she couldn't see caused her to stumble. With a frightened cry, she fell, and not being able to judge distance, couldn't catch herself. Her head struck sharply against the hardwood floor, and she never felt the broken shards of teapot that cut her face, or the hot tea that scalded wherever it touched her skin.

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It felt like she was drowning. An undertow was pulling her down and away from the shimmering surface she could see above her. Her lungs were beginning to burn from holding her breath, and she was quickly tiring. One last effort, one final push for the surface, and she broke free. Hermione woke herself gasping desperately for air.

It was deep in the night, and both Eileen and Severus had taken turns watching over the injured girl. They had healed the cuts on her face and hands and had done everything that could be done for the burns on her back and arms. They would heal completely; it would just take a little longer because of the new skin that had regrown on the wounds.

Eileen was sitting by Hermione's bed, reading, while Severus paced endlessly in front of the fireplace. No matter how she had hurt him, had torn at his heart and soul, he didn't want to see her hurt. The guilt he felt over her injuries did nothing for his temper or demeanour. And when she started to wake, thrashing about as if drowning in water, he joined Eileen at the bedside, holding one arm as she held the other to prevent further damage to Hermione's skin.

Hermione opened her eyes, but still couldn't see. However, she immediately recognised the Potions master's touch on her arm and his scent in the air. She breathed deeply, inhaling that unique aroma of herbs she recognised as his. He released her suddenly, but before he could get to the foot of the bed, she begged, "Please, you misunderstood."

He stopped at the end of the bed, but didn't turn around until Eileen touched his arm on her way to the door. "Call if you need me, Son." He simply inclined his head in answer.

Severus moved to the chair Eileen had just vacated and gingerly sat down. "I'm still here," he said.

"I never meant to hurt you, I only realised what it sounded like I said when you slammed the door."

Severus tried to interrupt, but Hermione would have none of it. "Please, hear me out, then we will decide what to do about my situation."

"Very well." She was pained by the flatness of his voice, but she soldiered on.

"As you were reeling off people who could release me from this ritual, I became aware of what I wanted, and would prefer. I know you don't have any feelings for me other than those of, dare I hope, friend. But I would gladly give myself to you, even if it was just for one night. I could only think of how grateful I was that I couldn't see the look I know was in your eyes. My being blind would save me from seeing how horrified you must feel to have to do this for me. Just one more burden a hated student has hung on your shoulders."

Severus stared, partly ashamed, partly awed, at the girl--no, the woman--who felt such a need to ease what she perceived as a burden on him. He was so accustomed to following others' directives, directives that normally never took him into consideration, that he couldn't wrap his mind around Hermione's heartfelt and teary declaration.

"Miss Granger... Hermione." He took a deep breath before plunging on. "If we are to do this, I insist that it all be above board. I cannot, in good conscience, take this gift you offer and not offer something tangible in return."

Hermione shook her head. "No, Prof... Severus, I can't expect a sacrifice like that. I am content to know that you will accept me just once, even though you have no reason to."

"Hermione, you don't understand the ramifications of what we must do. You can't have a contraceptive; they won't do any good because some of the ingredients in each potion cancel each other out. Also, several ingredients in the salve have built up in your blood and will react with the ingredients in the contraceptives making you ill, much like the Dreamless Sleep did."

Hermione was quick to respond. "What about the 'Charm'?"

Severus blew out an aggravated breath. "The ritual is a fertility ritual. As a werewolf is an animal, they don't mate indiscriminately. They mate to procreate. I am afraid nothing will protect you except sheer luck. I promise to do everything I can to ensure that luck has a fighting chance, but I want you to understand the consequences. This is why I only offered myself as a last resort. You shouldn't be tied down to me because you had no choice."

Hermione pushed up from her stomach and gingerly sat up in her bed. She pulled Severus forward and managed to touch her forehead to his without too much damage being done. "I have grown inordinately fond of you. I truly think, given time and other factors, I could fall in love with you. I understand that you don't feel this way, therefore I don't hold you responsible for me, or any child that might occur because you chose to save me."

"Hermione, listen carefully. I am inordinately fond of you too. I think that after things settle down, and if we give ourselves the chance, we could be content, if not happy. But if you don't agree to handfast with me, I will not touch you. I will not take a chance on fathering a child without some way of protecting both the child and his mother."

"His mother?"

"Of course, his. A boy with your nose."

Hermione laughed softly, imagining a small boy that looked like Severus, then she sobered.

"You are so worried about hurting me, being wrong for me, that you don't take into consideration my impact on you." Hermione lay back down on her pillows, taking care not to reinjure her back. "I'm so broken, Severus; after all this. Like a pane of glass, I'm shattered beyond repair."

Severus brushed a curl from Hermione's face and chased down the tear that tried to follow. "Oh, no, Hermione, never something so mundane. You may be broken, it's true, but the shards of your soul are as brilliant as stained glass. Even shattered, it is a sight to behold. Those stained glass shards have come together to form a vision so lovely, so strong, that it is painful to look at. You are perfection in your flaws."

Severus took Hermione's hand in his. "All I can do is ask that you trust yourself to me, as I will trust myself to you. I know only too well how difficult that can be. And, if you choose to accept me, you will have a family again. I told you when I first brought you here, that you would never be alone. I meant it."

## Chapter Eight

### *Chapter 8 of 14*

Hermione Granger disappeared from her home and is presumed dead. Nearly two years later, she returns to Hogwarts, guardian of a secret that could end the war with Voldemort once and for all.

Thanks to peskipiksi -- you are the best! Just swinging in the HP playground. I don't own.

A light snuffling sound broke in on Hermione's recollection. She only wished that she could see the faces she was positive were being made by her friends. She was sure that shock at the Potions master's easier side was the least of the emotions being felt.

Molly came forward and touched Hermione's shoulder. "I'm so sorry I frightened you earlier. It's just we've missed you so." She started crying again, this time joined by Hermione.

Severus said nothing, just handed his wife a handkerchief. Before she could even open her mouth, Severus said, "Yes, I know, why carry one, when your husband does." This snarky remark caused a ripple of laughter to flow through the room.

"So, what happened next?" Luna chirped. "Who handfasted you? Did you have any Swallowswots to bring you luck?"

Hermione smothered a laugh. "I'm not sure about the Swallowswots, Luna, but our luck has been rather good, so there must have been some around."

Luna nodded sagely. "We need all the luck we can get!"

"As to what happened next, well we had to be handfasted as soon as possible because the spell Bellatrix cast on whatever blood or hair of mine that she had was becoming stronger and stronger."

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Eileen finished brushing out Hermione's hair and began plaiting it into seven braids. She started with a long, heavy braid at the back, followed by three smaller braids on either side of Hermione's head. The three on either side were plaited again into one larger braid into which Eileen wove a pink and a blue ribbon representing love and loyalty. The two side braids and larger braid were then plaited together with black and white ribbons representing protection and purity, and all was secured by binding the ribbon ends together.

Eileen stepped back and told Hermione. "You look radiant, my dear."

"Thank you, Eileen."

"Hermione, I love my son with all my heart, but I've always wanted a daughter, too. I would like to think that perhaps I might stand in for your own mother."

Hermione started to speak and burst into tears instead. Eileen immediately went to her knees before the girl and gathered her into a tight embrace. "I'm sorry, forgive me; and on your wedding day! Oh, Hermione, I don't want to replace your mum, I just..."

"I know," Hermione sobbed. "It's just... I've started to look at you as another mum, and when you said that, it overwhelmed me."

"There, there. Let's get you calm and fix your face. We don't want Severus to think you didn't want to marry him."

Hermione's face took on a rosy hue as Eileen repaired the damage caused by the flood of tears they had shared. She finished none too soon when a knock on the door alerted them to the time. The two ladies, dressed in their transfigured best, followed Severus out into a garden that in the Spring would be bursting with color. Right now, it was various shades of green marked by splashes of red berries, and furred with late season snow. They made their way to a small pavilion decorated with holly and evergreens and bright ribbons. It was here that Severus and Hermione would make their vows to one another.

Eileen led Hermione to the center of the pavilion and helped her to kneel on a soft cushion. As she waited there, she could feel the proximity of Severus as he knelt too, his strength and his magic ebbing and flowing around her. When he took her hands, the magic he possessed tangled with hers, dancing and caressing and joining. When they started the ritual, and Eileen wrapped the ribbons around their hands, their magic began to pulsate and become tangible.

Eileen wrapped the ribbons loosely, but didn't tie them. When she had finished, she spoke. "As you have agreed together to come to this place, in this time, you will now give your vows. Do not take them lightly. The ribbons will knot themselves as you make your promises one to another. Hermione..."

Hermione took a deep breath to try to control the trembling in her hands. Whether it was caused by fear or the frisson of entwined magics, she didn't know. When she spoke, her words were quiet, but strong. "By the life that courses through my blood and the love in my heart, I take thee to my hand, my heart, my spirit. You are my Chosen One. I wish to desire thee, and to be desired by thee, to possess thee and be possessed by thee. I wish to hold thee, and to be held by thee; I wish to love thee, and be loved by thee."

Severus thrilled as she spoke these words to him. The magic was dancing around him now, and he took his turn to repeat the same vows to Hermione. As they both spoke, the ribbons wrapped around their hands cavorted with the magic flowing around and between them, and tied themselves in knots, binding the two for a year and a day.

When the ribbons were tied, and the magic dulled to a low roar that both could still feel hovering just within reach, Eileen declared them handfasted and then said, "You may kiss your bride, and after one year and one day you may choose to finish the vows and seal yourselves one to the other, forever."

Severus and Hermione, both somewhat shy in the aftermath of the ritual did indeed kiss. Severus pressed his lips softly against Hermione's and she reciprocated. With a gentleness no one knew him capable of, Severus gave Hermione her first taste of passion. An easy kiss, all soft lips and tentative tongues, ignited something in the two lonely souls that were now bound.

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The handfasting ceremony was complete, and Eileen smiled brightly at her son and new daughter. "Come you two, let's go enjoy your wedding supper."

The trio made their way back to the Lodge. "I wish I could see all this," Hermione remarked as they walked through the snowy garden. "I imagine it is beautiful still covered in snow, but starting to come to life." The wistful tone made both Severus and Eileen flinch in sympathy.

Eileen quickly answered. "Hermione, I will be your eyes for you until Severus finds a cure for your affliction. After your honeymoon is over and the weather moderates, we will start taking your exercise outside if that suits you."

Hermione's face couldn't have been anymore animated and happy. "I would love that, Eileen."

Eileen smiled and touched Hermione's hand. "Mum," she said before hurrying ahead of the new couple.

The three made their way to the dining room and were dazzled by the repast the house-elves had laid out. All of Hermione's favourites, and a fair few of Severus' were laid out for everyone to enjoy. Severus took Hermione by the arm and led her to the table where they sat and started to eat. Food was washed down by a light, delicious wine, and tea was served with the wedding cake that was pudding. After everyone had eaten their fill, an ice bucket bearing a bottle of sparkling wine appeared at Severus' arm. He poured each a glass, and the now extended family shared a toast to the newly bound couple.

"May your every wish come true," Eileen toasted Hermione and Severus. She soon excused herself for the evening and left the two alone.

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"I never asked you, where will I sleep tonight?" Hermione's quiet voice broke the silence that had stretched a little too long for comfort.

Severus drained his glass, and pondered his answer before he spoke. "Unless you have a valid objection, I would prefer that you move into my rooms. The ones you have used are normally guest rooms. I will, of course, follow your lead."

Hermione let out a breath of relief. "Oh! Thank you, I was afraid you wouldn't want to be more than..."

"Hermione, for all intents and purposes, you are my wife, if only for a year and a day. As such, I will give you your due, and I never want to sleep apart unless we have to." Severus went to Hermione's side and knelt down in front of her chair. "I am a difficult man, I know. I won't always say or do the right thing, and I am quite sure your feelings will be shredded more than once. I can promise that I will try to reign myself in around you. I feel more at ease in your presence than I have in anyone else's, including my mother. I don't know why I feel that way, but I will try not to ruin that."

Hermione reached a hand out, and touched Severus' face. "I will try to do the same. And I will always give you the benefit of the doubt because you ask it of me."

Severus leaned his face into Hermione's small palm. "Shall we retire, my dear?"

A most becoming blush stained Hermione's cheeks. "Yes," she answered just a bit breathlessly.

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The next two weeks passed by too quickly for both Hermione and Severus. They spent a portion of their time trying to find a counter-curse for the one that Bellatrix had used to blind her, but the majority of the holiday was spent learning each other. The requisite consummation out of the way, Severus and Hermione determined to make that facet of their relationship more important than just an act done to keep Hermione safe.

Hermione was sitting in the library in her favorite chair when Severus came to take his leave. He had stayed in the Vale for as long as he could, but now it was time for him to return to Hogwarts. Fortunately for him, the Dark Lord had been out of the country chasing down some illusive magical tome, and Severus had not been summoned over the Easter holidays. Severus was well aware that break would be over too soon, and for the first time in a long while, he dreaded his return to the real world.

He stood in the doorway and looked at Hermione sitting by the window. She was bathed in a mixture of firelight and the moonlight that flooded through the windowpane. He hated to disturb her, especially to take his leave, but needs must, and he had to get back to ensure he was ready for classes the next day.

"Are you just going to stand there watching me, or do I get a goodbye before you leave?"

Severus smiled slightly and moved across the room to take a seat next to his bride. "I just wanted to capture this image of you for when I return to school. I won't be able to come back until the middle of June because of exams and my extracurricular work."

Hermione bowed her head. "I know, and I will miss you terribly." A pink flush crept up her throat and suffused her cheeks. "I'm not sure I'll be able to sleep alone in that big

bed."

Severus snorted. "You, my dear, have no trouble sleeping anywhere, if the occasion calls for it."

Hermione laughed. "Thanks ever so..." She said. "I truly will miss you, but I'm sure that Eileen... Mum... and I will be quite busy trying to figure out the genealogies we have been working on."

Severus ran his fingers along Hermione's cheek. He leaned over and pressed his lips to hers, coaxing her to open to his kiss. His fingers ghosted down her throat and across her collarbone until they gripped her shoulder. His other hand he tangled in her long, curly tresses. Hermione returned his kiss with fervour until he broke away reluctantly. Leaning his forehead to hers, he spoke softly, breath puffing across her face. "I must go," he whispered. Then he was gone.

Eileen met him in the hallway as he made his way to the front door. "Please, Son, stay safe."

Severus kissed his mother's cheek and nodded. "I will certainly try."

"That is all I can ask," she sighed as she followed Severus to the foyer. "Is Hermione still in the library?"

"Yes, she was trying to keep from crying in front of me, so I left her as soon as we said our goodbyes. I refuse to make this any harder on her."

Eileen looked at her son. "Do you think she conceived?"

"I don't know. It's possible that our luck held out. I did everything that I could to keep her safe, but I also didn't want to treat sex as something we simply did to protect her from Greyback. That would have done more damage, I think." He shrugged his shoulders. "I didn't see any reason in bringing it up to her as of yet as she hasn't shown any magical symptoms. Of course, she could develop them in the next week or two. You know what to look for."

Eileen hugged Severus. "I read that book you found, and I will certainly keep my eye on Hermione. I'll contact you only if I need to."

"Thank you, Mum. I need to get to Argante. I'm running out of time to cover my trail from here to Hogwarts. Goodbye."

Severus turned and billowed away as Eileen stared after him. The cold evening air forced her to shut the door, and she took a few moments to settle herself before returning to the library and her daughter-in-law.

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Several weeks passed, and the weather began warming up. Eileen and Hermione spent as much time as they could outside, enjoying the warmth of the Spring that was blossoming over the Vale. Eileen had kept a sharp watch over Hermione, watching for magical signs that she might be pregnant. So far, nothing had happened and she was beginning to feel both relieved and a touch sad.

Hermione was working on yet another genealogy when it happened. She was standing by a bookcase, levitating one enormous tome back to the shelf it rested on when she experienced a sharp surge of power. The shelf she was aiming for exploded, and papers and wood splinters went everywhere. Hermione's startled shriek drew Eileen's attention, and she rushed to her daughter-in-law's side. "Hermione, what happened?"

Before she could answer, Hermione began to feel nauseous. "I'm going to be sick," she groaned. Eileen barely had time to conjure a bucket, when Hermione began retching. Eileen held Hermione's hair back out of her face and then sponged her face off when she was done.

"Are you all right? Can you get up?" Eileen queried anxiously.

"I think so." Hermione groaned wearily. "I haven't ever felt so bad before. What's wrong with me?"

"Let's get you to bed first. Then we will see."

Eileen called Posey to prepare the bed in Severus and Hermione's room, and then she helped Hermione ease off the floor and down the hall. They had to stop twice more at the onslaught of the nausea that overwhelmed the younger woman. She was quickly tucked into bed and dosed with an anti-nausea potion. Hermione promptly fell asleep, and Eileen performed the ancient spell Severus had found in the library. Glowing white runes crystallised and danced above Hermione's sleeping form. They settled into a pattern and then shifted color. The runes shaded into a deep blue before fading away.

Eileen settled heavily into the chair Posey had placed beside the bed. 'Pregnant,' she thought. 'I'm going to be a grandmother!' She pushed herself out of the chair and called for Posey, trying not to disturb Hermione. Posey Apparated in and promised to watch over the sleeping girl throughout the night while Eileen tried to get some sleep herself.

The next few weeks were hard on both Eileen and Hermione. Hermione was constantly sick and having problems controlling her magic, to the point that she was put on bedrest by both Eileen and Posey, and told not to even turn over without help. Hermione's independent nature fought against this stricture, but another part of her felt so ill that she simply obeyed without protest.

Eileen sent an owl to Severus as she had reached her wit's end, and Hermione was beginning to lose weight from her illness. She did everything she could to make sure that Hermione and her baby were safe, but she knew she needed potions that she couldn't make and didn't have access to. By the middle of May, her owl still hadn't been returned, and she began to worry that she wasn't able to do enough and that maybe, just maybe, Severus was hurt or worse. Just as she was about to leave her sanctuary for the first time in years, the front door banged open, and in a swirl of robes Severus was there.

He was pale and haggard, but he forced himself to face his mother. "I'm sorry I wasn't here sooner. There was an incident with the Dark Lord and I have been under house arrest in Poppy Pomfrey's care for the last three weeks. She held the letter you owled, and if not for my attempt to leave the hospital wing today, I would not have received it." Severus rolled his eyes. "She tried to stop me from leaving, and I fell into her desk. When I braced myself to straighten up and walk out, I saw your seal on a scroll. Poppy will not keep my things again."

Eileen burst into tears. "Oh, Severus, I'm so glad you are finally here. Hermione has been so ill. I don't know what else..."

"You can explain as we walk. I need to see Hermione."

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Severus entered his bedroom to see Hermione kneeling on the floor, Posey holding her hair as she sicked into a bucket the elf had conjured. He immediately went to her side and took over from Posey, telling the house-elf to go to his lab and get the emerald green bottle from his stores. Posey disappeared as soon as he was finished speaking, and Severus then turned his attention to his wife.

"Hermione, I'm here. We will get you better as soon as we can." He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and gently cleaned her face.

"Severus, you're home." Hermione said nothing else as sobs wracked her body.

He picked her up and laid her on the bed that Eileen had cleaned and changed as she waited. A wave of his wand had Hermione freshened and changed into a clean nightgown.

"Everything will be fine now, Hermione."

Posey Apparated back into the room and handed Severus the emerald green bottle. He uncorked it and coaxed a dose into Hermione's mouth. She swallowed weakly, falling asleep before Severus had the bottle resealed. He sat back on the edge of the bed and brushed the tousled hair from Hermione's face. Then pressing a quick kiss to her forehead, he stood from the bed.

"Posey, watch over her; if she needs anything I will be in the library."

"Yes, Potions master, Posey will watch the Miss."

Severus left the room followed by Eileen. Neither said anything as they made their way to the library. Severus made his way to Hermione's chair and took the seat next to it. "Tell me everything," he demanded of his mother.

"She had no symptoms until the end of April. Her magic has been erratic, and she has had morning sickness just about all day for the past few weeks. I wasn't concerned until she started losing weight."

Severus nodded. "I was afraid of that. She and I are both descended from the originators of magic. We were bound to create a powerful child. It seems that the Lady was correct that great care should be taken if these bloodlines ever mixed."

Eileen nodded her agreement. "That could be why the only time two of the bloodlines combined was when the Eldest and the Knight joined to create your immediate line." She stood up and paced before asking, "Do you have all the information we need to see this safely through?"

"I believe so. Much of it was in that book you read, the one with the spell to detect the magic of a foetus."

"That's the spell I used to determine if she was pregnant. The usual charm didn't detect it early enough."

"No, it wouldn't; the spell I gave you detects living magic tied into the bloodline. The charm detects the heartbeat. This spell won't work unless one of the parents has the Vale blood. Now we watch and wait and make sure that Hermione stays safe."

## Chapter Nine

### *Chapter 9 of 14*

Hermione Granger disappeared from her home and is presumed dead. Nearly two years later, she returns to Hogwarts, guardian of a secret that could end the war with Voldemort once and for all.

"And you were safe until the other night," Severus remarked.

Hermione agreed. "True, Bellatrix got a little too clever, didn't she?"

Severus snorted. "She managed to trace part of my apparition trail to London, and she tried to convince the Dark Lord that I was betraying him. Luckily for us, she never had any viable evidence, and Lucius was able to show him my 'innocence'."

The Headmaster perked up at that. "You never did tell me how you and Lucius were able to convince Tom that Bellatrix was wrong when it came to you."

"Polyjuice, Albus. We took a leaf out of your book, and Lucius happened to have access to some hair from Bella--one good thing about being her brother-in-law. All we needed was a willing whore, more money than she made in a month, and a quick Memory Charm. The Dark Lord used Legilimency on Lucius, and he showed memories of Bella trying to seduce him more than once. She was punished for attempting to break her vow of loyalty to her master. Bella may be married, but it is in name only."

Severus grimaced at the thought of the only female Death Eater and her position with the Dark Lord, then continued, "I was given leave to come back to Hogwarts, as any suspicion was neatly shunted away from me. Unfortunately, Greyback finally had an intelligent idea and used the last bit of Hermione's blood in their possession to cast a dark tracking spell. He was able to locate her general area. I knew that Greyback couldn't find the Vale, but, with his affinity for ancient magic, the Dark Lord could possibly have, and that is why we decided to risk coming to Hogwarts. There is something very odd about his magic. I don't think he realises it, but for as long as I have known him, I can feel a strangeness, an oldness, to him."

Albus stroked his beard thoughtfully. "Is it possible that he is a reincarnation?"

"I suppose it is possible, but I don't think so. It is more likely he is possessed. I was reading some of the manuscripts that have been collected at the Vale, especially those which reference the weapon we have located. Hermione and I both agree that what the Dark Lord has become is very similar to an entity that terrorised Britain at one point in the distant past, but was thought to be eradicated. We have theorised that when Tom was using the ancient spells to create an immortal body for himself, he conjured or summoned what was left of this entity when it was destroyed. Evil never completely goes away, hence the rise and fall of more than one Dark Lord."

Arthur spoke up at this news. "You aren't speaking of that old bedtime story concerning the Black Witch that King Arthur destroyed?"

Severus glanced warily at the man. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, I know most people don't believe in those legends. The few that do are generally crackpots." He glanced towards Luna and her father. "We all know that Merlin was real, he is where our magic comes from, but he never spoke or wrote of a King Arthur or Black Witch, just that he granted the use of magic to his lover, Nimue, and she tried to kill him. That is why she was banished from this world."

The Headmaster looked between Severus and Arthur. Before either could continue their conversation, he mused, "Just because it isn't in the commonly known records doesn't mean it isn't true."

Arthur laughed. "Albus, you know as well as I that King Arthur was something the Muggles created to explain away the traces of Merlin that were never hidden."

Severus interjected, "Arthur, I beg to differ with you. There are those who know a truth that most of the Magical World is not privy too. Some secrets can be kept."

"So you are telling me that King Arthur was real?"

Several members of the Order laughed. "Old wives' tales, Severus. Those are nothing but old wives' tales told to entertain children on rainy or cold nights," Molly added.



Minerva gazed shrewdly at Severus. "You know something that the rest of us aren't aware of. Something that has to do with this Vale, and Hermione and Luna."

Severus nodded sharply. "Yes. And to set the record straight, Merlin didn't originate magic. He was just one of the last standing after the fall of Arthur, and he took advantage of that fact." There was a murmur amongst the group which was shushed by Minerva, who told Severus to finish his thought. "Oh, Merlin was magical, but he never had children. He was kin to Nimue, not her lover or her teacher. Some of his actions led to the dispersal of magic into the mundane world and he played around with magic that released the Black Witch into Britain, but he didn't directly participate in the propagation of magic into the world."

A new voice sounded from the doorway of the Headmaster's Office. "Are you telling us you know the truth then, Snape? You know where magic came from and only you can save us all?"

The group looked around to find Mad-Eye Moody and Nymphadora Tonks in the doorway. They had just gotten off Auror duty and had joined the meeting as quickly as they could. "Sounds like quite the tale you have to tell." Moody sneered at the man he would always dislike.

Tonks wasn't as rude. "Sounds like we're just in time to hear a lovely story. Don't mind us; I like bedtime stories!" She grinned unrepentantly and conjured a seat next to Remus. "Wotcher, Remus, Weasleys. Hello, Headmaster. Sorry we're late; there was a crazy attack on someone at the Ministry today. The person got away and the Death Eaters just disappeared. We figure it was a test on how fast the Auror Office responds since no one knew who the victim was."

As they responded to her greeting, and before Albus could question Tonks further, Mad-Eye suddenly realised that there was another in the room. "What's this, Albus? Who have you brought here?"

Albus smiled broadly. "Alastor, Nymphadora, you remember Hermione, I'm sure. Isn't it wonderful to have her restored to us after thinking she was lost all this time!"

Mad-Eye immediately went on the offensive. "Hermione Granger is dead. This is an imposter. Has anyone given her Veritaserum? You, girl! Who sent you? How did you find out about the Order?"

"Calm yourself, Alastor. This is indeed Hermione Granger, well, Hermione Snape now. It seems our esteemed Potions master has been caught in love's snare." Albus chortled in glee as he revealed this information to the two newcomers.

This statement was met by surprised welcome by Tonks, and sheer disbelieving anger by Mad-Eye. "Have you lost your mind, Albus? How do you DARE bring this obvious spy into our midst? Your pet Death Eater is bad enough, but we have to be subjected to this..." He trailed off with his finger pointing harshly at Hermione. The object of his ire found herself hyperventilating as his harsh loudness focused more and more on her. "I told you he couldn't be trusted, and now you have brought in another snake? Why don't you kill Potter yourself and be done with waiting!" Before anyone could react, Moody had fired a modified spell at Hermione pinning her to the seat she was ensconced in.

Molly jumped up and made to move towards Hermione when Mad-Eye's wand was focused on her. "No one move!" Molly, generally a force of nature, was taken aback by the fury he displayed.

Remus and Arthur both stood up, furious at the actions the old Auror was taking. "Leave off, Moody," growled Remus. "You need to get all the facts before you make a huge mistake."

Arthur nodded his agreement and added, "You are threatening Order members now. Sit and listen before this goes any further."

Mad-Eye glared towards Severus, his magical eye spinning in its base. Sneering at the man, he rasped out, "Make your move, Snape, I've been waiting for this for a very long time. You'll finally pay for your loyalties." He stood his ground as the Potions master palmed his ebony wand and moved from Albus' side.

Severus never faltered as he made his way to where Moody stood. "You aren't worth anything to me, old man. However, if you ever threaten my wife again, neither Albus nor the Order will be able to stop me from tearing you apart. You always think you know everything. Fool."

Mad-Eye looked triumphantly at the Headmaster and the Order that stood around unsure of what to do now. "A poisonous toadstool doesn't change its spots, I always say..." He raised his wand and began to cast spells at Severus. Suddenly, Mad-Eye's wand was jerked from his hand. He looked in shock at Harry, Ron, and Albus who all had cast "Expelliarmus" at the old Auror.

"Alastor, you are a hotheaded fool." Remus and Arthur appeared to either side of him and sat him in a chair, while Albus approached Moody, his blue eyes no longer holding the twinkle usually dancing in their depths. "Did you honestly think I would jeopardize any of the people in this room by assuming anything? I know for a fact, beyond any doubt, that this woman you have attacked is, in fact, Hermione Granger-Snape. You owe her an apology, if she will have it. And you owe the Order an apology for doubting all of them. If you wish to remain part of this Order, never raise your wand at one of them again."

Moody stared steadily back at Albus. "Whether she is who you say or not, I don't trust Snape, never have, never will, and I'm not sorry for trying to protect Potter when no one else seems to care about his safety!"

"ENOUGH, Alastor. I'll thank you to leave this meeting, and I will talk to you later, after you calm down." Albus looked at the two men still standing over Moody. "Remus, Arthur, escort Alastor to the guest quarters at the head of those steps." He gestured to a small door behind Fawkes' perch. "I will see to him later."

The two men walked with Moody, who struggled before being pushed into the stairwell, and saw him through the door which faded from view as soon as it shut. "Shall we continue with our meeting?" Albus asked the group staring at him in silence.

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While all this was going on, Severus had rushed to Hermione's side and released her from the spell imprisoning her. Even though she had been secured for only a few moments, it had certainly taken its toll on her. Severus grasped her face, gently, but firmly in both hands and was quietly issuing orders to her, one after the other.

"Breathe, Hermione. Slowly. That's right, slowly and deeply. Inhale through your nose. That's a good girl. Exhale through your mouth. Listen to my voice. You are in the Headmaster's Office at Hogwarts. I am with you, and you are safe. Focus on my voice; now tell me, what are the first three ingredients in Polyjuice Potion?"

Hermione's breathing slowed as she focused on the only voice she could recognise in the swirl of noise around her. When the spell cast on her had bound her to the chair, she began to slip into a flashback. This hadn't happened since the first few months she was in the Vale and never because of physical bonds, so the experience was worse than it should have been. She began to hyperventilate and struggle, which cause her bonds to tighten. Her sense of smell, heightened as a result of her blindness, detected a familiar, frightening smell -- werewolf. She didn't want to die, and she didn't want to be bitten. Memories came flooding back in a torrent that she couldn't control as reality quickly slipped away. Molly, well-meaning as ever, tried to calm the girl and made matters even worse.

"No, please, not again; don't touch me please!" Hermione pleaded with the ghosts in her mind.

Severus had immediately cleared everyone away and set about helping his wife. "Hermione, the first three ingredients in Polyjuice Potion, what are they?"

For a moment she faltered, then she choked out. "Lacewing flies, antimony, leeches."

"Very good, my love. Breathe slowly, in through your nose, out through your mouth. Slowly, slowly. What is my mother's name?"

"Eileen."

"Yes, you are doing very well. Why did you name our son Alexander?"

"It was to be my name if I had been a boy. Hermione from Shakespeare, for a girl, and Alexander the Great for a boy. My father loved literature, my mother, history." By this time, Hermione was breathing much more normally, and the shudders brought on by the harsh sobs that had wracked her body were easing. "Severus?" She queried timidly.

In response, Severus gathered his wife in his arms and gently rocked her. "I am taking Hermione to our rooms. She needs rest, and to see Alexander." He stood, bringing Hermione with him and tucking her securely at his side. "Headmaster, as it is late, I suggest we all retire and pick this up tomorrow when everyone is fresh and less testy." Severus never looked at anyone but Hermione and led her to the Floo without even waiting for an answer. They were gone in a flash of green, and the atmosphere in the room grew less tense.

"I agree with Severus, Headmaster. This has been a very long day, and I have a feeling that it will only get more interesting as we get into discussion of Merlin and this weapon we need to find." Remus spoke up.

The rest of the Order, and the Lovegoods, agreed with Remus and Severus, and plans were made to meet up in the Great Hall the next morning for breakfast. "We also have the two mystery guests to meet with," Minerva added. "Speaking of which, Poppy can see to them; they can stay in the hospital wing. I suggest everyone else sleeps here tonight also; that way we won't attract attention with Flooding in the main Floo network or Apparating. And we can meet just as soon as everyone is ready."

Albus nodded. "Splendid idea, Minerva. As Severus and Hermione have their own quarters, they are taken care of. We can have all the boys bed down in Gryffindor Tower. The girls can take Ravenclaw Tower. Is this acceptable to everyone?"

Tired heads nodded in agreement, and before long Albus was left alone with only the problem of Alastor Moody to resolve. He sighed, knowing that the night was far from over for him.

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Severus gently settled Hermione into the large bed that dominated the bedroom of his dungeon quarters. He conjured a warm, damp cloth and wiped her face as he spoke softly to her. "Everything will be fine, Hermione. Albus has taken care of Moody, and no one believes the drivel he was spouting."

Hermione nodded. "I know, I could tell that the reactions were against him rather than me. I think Molly tried to help me, but I only know I was terrified. I haven't had a flashback like that before. Bad dream, yes, but nothing that drug me down so quickly or thoroughly."

Severus brushed her cheek with his finger and pressed a kiss to her temple. "I'm going to go get Alexander so you can feed him. Then, it is bed for you; we have a long day tomorrow."

"Thank you, Severus. It has been a tiring day, and I need to hold my baby."

Severus went into the next room and made his way to the crib nestled against the wall. Alex was starting to get restless, rousing from the sleep he had been enjoying. Posey sat in a small chair close by, keeping watch.

"I'll just take him to his mother, Posey. We'll call when it is time to put Alexander back down."

"Yes, Potions master, Posey will be waiting."

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Severus woke to the satisfied mewling and growling of his son. Hermione was propped up in bed holding Alexander against her breast. With a flail of his hand, he finished his breakfast and started fussing. Hermione readjusted her son to prop him on her shoulder and encourage him to burp. Her movements jostled her husband enough to rouse him from his sleep.

"I'm sorry," Hermione said quietly. "We tried not to wake you up."

Severus stretched gracefully, then moved up to prop himself against the headboard. He then wrapped his arms around his wife and child. "Are you recovered from last evening, my dear? I wasn't sure I was getting through to you at one point. I must admit, I haven't been so afraid of anything in a long time."

Hermione opened her mouth to answer when he added, "Repeat that, and you will remember why I am known as the 'Bat of the Dungeons'."

Hermione giggled. "I'm not scared of you anymore. I know what you're really like underneath the bluster."

Severus looked down at the woman in his arms. "Hmmp. I think that I shall have to work on that... Posey!"

The little house-elf appeared instantly. "Yes, Potions master? Posey is wanting to know what is needed of her."

Severus smiled smugly, "It seems that Little Master has fallen asleep. Would you take him and put him to bed?"

Posey's long ears flapped, and she nodded her head excitedly. "Oh, yes, Potions master. Posey is loving the Little Master. Posey will take good care of him."

Hermione began to protest as Severus turned to the sleeping baby and handed him over to Posey. "Severus, I was bonding with him."

"No, he was sleeping, and now you are going to pay for thinking me soft."

Hermione's token protests became delicious encouragement as Severus pulled her more tightly into his arms and began to kiss the side of her neck. She turned slightly and greeted his mouth on hers with a sigh of contentment and arousal. Severus' hands roamed a bit, and he and Hermione slid back down onto the bed. He had just unbuttoned her nightgown to feast on sensitive skin, when a sudden noise interrupted him.

"Severus, Severus!" Came from the study, and an answering growl emanated from the Potions master. He looked up from Hermione's breast and reached up to kiss Hermione one last time, then slid out of bed, waving his arm as he did. His dressing gown flew to his hand, and he swept it over his nudity as he headed for the bedroom door.

He slammed the door open, snarling at whoever it was entering his domain without permission or notice. "This better be bloody good, or I am going to have someone's head on a platter!"

Minerva stood next to his desk, shaken. "Severus, I would never bother you unless it was important. You must come quickly, Albus needs you."

Instantly, Severus was all business, and he nodded sharply. "Allow me to get dressed and tell Hermione where I am going. If you haven't yet, perhaps you should alert the others not to leave the towers until they are summoned."

Minerva nodded, then stepped back into the Floo and said, "Gryffindor Tower." She spun away in a flare of green.

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The Headmaster's Office was empty except for Remus Lupin and Nymphadora Tonks. They were standing near Fawkes' perch and watching the wall where the hidden guest room door stood yawning open. As Severus stepped out of the Floo and brushed his robes clean, Remus approached him.

"Minerva said the Headmaster needed me." Severus was frowning darkly at the werewolf.

"Yes, seems he had a bit of a surprise waiting for him this morning. Luckily, Tonks had come through to talk to Moody when everything happened."

Severus looked at the Auror. "Nymphadora?"

She rolled her eyes at his usage of her given name, but didn't take him to task for it. She was still in a bit of shock over recent events. "I came through to see Mad-Eye about that weird incident that happened at the Ministry. Something about it has been bothering me. Anyway, the Headmaster asked me to hold off and went up the stairs; I heard a crash and a cry so I followed as fast as I could. Lucky I did too, Albus is still fast, but not fast enough."

Severus inhaled harshly. "Yes, yes, what am I needed for?"

Albus spoke quietly from the doorway. "Severus, I need your considerable skill at Legilimency. Please, follow me."

Severus mounted the stairs and followed the Headmaster, Remus and Tonks close behind. When he entered the room, Albus moved aside. Severus stepped forward and brought his wand to bear. He approached the chair slowly and dug his wand under the eye of Barty Crouch, Jr. Looking into the face of a very dangerous man, Severus sneered. "I shall enjoy this, Barty. I've always regretted that we didn't get to finish our last visit with each other. How fortuitous for me that the Dementors didn't feast on your soul during your sojourn in Azkaban. *Legilimens.*"

## Chapter Ten

### *Chapter 10 of 14*

Hermione Granger disappeared from her home and is presumed dead. Nearly two years later, she returns to Hogwarts, guardian of a secret that could end the war with Voldemort once and for all.

Breakfast, served by the house-elves, had come and gone. Hermione spent the morning bonding with Alexander and learning to care for him even without her sight. Posey wasn't too far away and helped as much as she was allowed. Poppy, in a seemingly ongoing apology for keeping Severus from the Vale last spring, came and spent several hours watching and helping mother and child.

The rest of the Order and their guests spent their time visiting and gossiping and, quite frankly, curious as to why they had been left to their own devices throughout the morning.

After several hours of idleness, the younger members began to get restless, which led to Arthur trying to contact the Headmaster. The Floo to his office was still blocked, and wary concern was beginning to infiltrate the ranks.

"Oi! Maybe Hermione knows what's going on. She's married to Snape, after all. We can ask her what's going on." Ron suggested.

Of course, that only infuriated Harry. "I doubt she knows anything but what he lets her know. She wouldn't be any help at all." He threw himself into a plush red and gold chair as he spat, "Why would she? She obviously doesn't care about us, or she would have come back to Hogwarts rather than stay with the Greasy Git!"

"Harry, that not fair, and you know it. Hermione did what was best for her so she could continue to help you. She had no control over her circumstances at the time," Arthur said.

"Whatever; we could have protected her just as well here. She chose to stay away." Harry was determined to hold on to this stubborn opinion.

"Really, Harry? And which one of you would have taken my virginity? Would you have given me a choice?" Hermione's voice came from the back of the room where she had Floo'd with Minerva to retrieve the Order for their meeting. "Would you have slept with me yourself, Harry, regardless of what Ginny would have said? Or would you push me off on Ron? Or better yet, would you have been so concerned about the state of my virginity and who was allowed to take it that you would have left me vulnerable to Greyback and Remus?"

There were gasps of dismay and shouts of denial as Hermione's words sank in. Harry jumped from his seat, his eyes blazing. "We wouldn't have let anything happen to you and you could keep your bloody virginity. How dare you make Remus a bad guy; he wouldn't hurt any of us! You chose to sleep with Snape, and now you have to deal with it! Don't be surprised if all your old friends don't get over your betrayal so easily!"

"Even after I told you everything, you still think you're right? And how did I betray my friends? I was kidnapped, Harry. I was tortured, and I was almost raped by a werewolf! How DARE you accuse me of betraying you! Should I have just let them do it; should I have just given in and returned to Greyback when Bellatrix cast that spell on my blood? Did you not hear the story Severus and I shared? They were trying to get to Remus and bind him to the dark using me!" Hermione ranted in a furious storm.

Harry stood in silence for a moment and then started yelling again. "Maybe Mad-Eye was right, maybe you ARE a spy! I can't trust you! You didn't... "

As he berated Hermione again, Ron grabbed his arm to try to calm him down and get him away from Hermione. Minerva was shocked into action by the sudden change in her demeanour. The furious girl was suddenly replaced by a very wary, almost submissive stranger. She was trembling viciously, her sightless eyes wide, and her breathing was coming in harsh pants. Harry, Ron, and the others were so intent on Hermione that no one noticed Minerva stepping quickly into the Floo.

Ron jerked Harry back as he headed towards Hermione again, and the two stared in confusion as they watched this transformation. "Hermione? Hermione, what's wrong?" Ron was getting seriously concerned as no one was doing anything, but staring.

"I'm what's wrong." Remus Lupin stepped through the door to the Gryffindor common room. At the sound of his voice, Hermione whimpered. "She can smell the werewolf in me."

"Please, don't hurt me..." The sheer despair in her voice reverberated through the other occupants in the room.

"Hermione..." Remus reached towards the girl he looked on so fondly.

"Do. Not. Touch. Her. She is genuinely afraid of you." The venom dripped from the words Severus spoke as he followed Lupin into the room and stared down everyone gathered around. "The next time my wife is cornered for your entertainment, someone will regret it."

He moved to Hermione's side and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "It's OK, Hermione, no need to be afraid. Lupin needs to speak with you and I want you to listen

carefully to what he says."

Hermione nodded, but stiffened when he made to release her. "I will be here the whole time. There is nothing to fear, my love. Why don't you sit here; that way you feel more secure."

Severus led Hermione to the chair Harry had not long before vacated. As she sat, Severus glared around the room. "You are lucky that Minerva came looking for me." He focused on Harry. "If you ever attack Hermione again, I will deal with you, Chosen One or not. I..."

He was interrupted by a small voice and a hand on his arm. "Please, I need to go to Alex."

One last glare at Harry, and Severus answered his wife with a small sigh. "First, you must deal with the Wolf situation. Then I will take you back to our quarters before we have to meet Albus."

He nodded towards Remus who knelt at Hermione's feet. "I am so sorry this has happened, Hermione. Please know that I would never hurt you, or anyone I consider family." He took her hand gently as she made to speak. "Please, hear me out. I know about the potion. I know what Greyback planned. Severus managed to get some of the salve they used on you, and he created a counter to it. As a precaution, I have taken it. There is no chance I would ever touch you, Hermione, not in any way other than in friendship. I swear to you."

By the end of Remus' speech, Hermione was sobbing again, and Severus lifted her from her seat. "If you have all finished causing damage to those you profess to care about, you might be interested to know that the Headmaster and I have spent the better part of the morning interrogating Barty Crouch, Jr. who was masquerading as our own Mad-Eye Moody using Polyjuice Potion." With that, Severus and Hermione headed to the Floo. "Snape quarters," Severus sneered.

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As soon as they were gone, Remus turned on Harry. "Harry, you heard what they said about the potions and ritual to bind me to Voldemort and Greyback. Severus couldn't be sure that the modification to the aphrodisiac would disappear, and Hermione has been living in fear that I would rape her, through no fault of my own. The potion was keyed to the animal in me, not the human. Never act that way again. Your parents would be extremely disappointed, as I am. You can't always be the hero, you know, and whether you like Severus or not, he is Hermione's husband. And she has done nothing to deserve your treatment of her."

Remus then addressed the room at large. "The house-elves will bring a late lunch as soon as the women join you, and then we are expected to meet again. The Headmaster is waiting in his office. We need to finish what we started yesterday, and discuss Moody."

"What was Severus talking about? Moody, Polyjuiced?" Arthur queried.

"Yes, Barty Crouch, Jr., late of Azkaban prison. He was thought dead, but his mother traded places with him. It was she that died. He was impersonating Moody so he could kidnap Harry."

"What are we going to do?"

"Nothing. Severus and Albus used Legilimency and have recovered the real Moody who will be out of commission for a while. Crouch has had his memory wiped and has been returned to Azkaban. That's why Kingsley Shacklebolt still hasn't made the meeting. The attack at the Ministry yesterday required his attention and now this. Hopefully, he will be able to join us before anything else happens." Remus headed for the door as the elves Apparated in with food. "Don't dally; we have a lot to do today."

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"I hope that everyone had enough lunch; it is going to be a long while before dinner. As I am sure you know, Barty Crouch, Jr. was masquerading as Alastor Moody. We have located the real Moody, trapped in an expandable trunk in his home. We don't have anything to worry about from Crouch as I have just received word that he was given the Dementor's Kiss for his crimes. The least of which was his escape from prison." The Headmaster greeted everyone with this information as they came through the door.

He allowed everyone to sit and then continued, "I trust also that there will be no more unjustified accusations made towards any member of the Order, or our friends?"

An uncomfortable silence met this question, some knowing precisely why the question was asked, and others wondering what happened.

"I am sorely disappointed in Harry, and in everyone else who stood by and let him act so harshly towards a friend. I have already spoken to him once about his attitude towards friends and loved ones. I see that it did no good."

Harry stared at the floor, face glowing red with shame. "I apologise to Hermione for what I said."

Hermione only nodded and Severus snorted rather rudely, but Dumbledore spoke again. "Harry, you had best look inside yourself. If you are not firmly in the Light, you will not be able to use the weapon necessary to vanquish Tom. You will become what he has!"

Harry paled and looked at the Headmaster in shock. "What? What do you mean, I'll become like Riddle?"

"Severus, would you care to relate what you know about this weapon we are hoping will be the end of Tom Riddle and his threats on the Wizarding World?"

The Potions master rose from his place beside his wife and strode to the Headmaster's desk. He leaned against the front of it, biding his time. After a little while, and just before restlessness set in, he began to speak.

"You all know who I am; what you don't know is that I am the Knight of Carnwennan, descended from the first Knight and the eldest priestess of the Vale. I am protector of the Vale of the Carn, and the Ladies who rule there. Hermione is a Lady of the Vale, descended from one of the other four priestesses that Nimue, Lady of the Lake, sent to conceal and protect the last weapon of Arthur, after his fall. Miss Lovegood is also a Lady, descended through maternal lines from yet another priestess." He cleared his throat and paused to ensure there would be no interruptions. "The last two lines are represented by the Ladies waiting in the hospital wing."

Arthur frowned at Severus. "How can we be sure of all this? King Arthur is a myth, a legend, as we discussed yesterday. We all know the story of Merlin and his decision to share his magic."

Severus sighed. "Did no one listen to me yesterday? Merlin was a fraud. He was the Lady of the Lake's uncle, not her lover, and he certainly wasn't her teacher. Magic was passed down through the maternal line, and that took power out of his hands. The magic that is now part of us was derived from Nimue's priestess. Each was from magical lineage and came from the Isle of Avalon. The fall of Arthur and Camelot was a move on Merlin's part to attempt to secure his position of power in the mundane world."

"Incredible, Severus; do you have records of this?"

"Indeed, Headmaster. The Vale library is full of genealogies and historic records. I have read quite a few over the years."

"Why did Merlin act against his niece?" Molly was curious on that point.

"She fell in love with one of the Knights of the Round Table. If she had consummated the relationship, and had borne this knight a child, the babe would have been magical, a worthy ruler in his own right. Merlin wanted to be the only magical being in Arthur's world."

The doubt on the faces of some of the Order was beginning to clear.

"So, what happened? Are all the legends true, or is the truth a different story completely?"

"That is where it gets interesting. Merlin used a love potion on Arthur's queen and used her to dose and distract Nimue's love. When that in turn distracted the Lady, Merlin summoned a dark witch to help him cement his control over Arthur and the Round Table."

"Nimue's love? Lancelot of the Lake?"

"Precisely, Minerva. He was 'of the Lake' because they were bound in matrimony. When he broke his vows to Nimue, he also broke his vows as a Round Table knight. This action resulted in others that led to the fall of Camelot, and the disappearance of Merlin. And yes, he was trapped in a cave by Nimue. Between that act, and the magic she performed to hide away the traces of Camelot and the Battle of Camlann, she hadn't the strength to cross back over from Avalon."

"Then how did the Vale come to be?" Minerva asked. "I am Highland born and bred and I know nothing of this place."

Severus chuckled. "No, you wouldn't. The Very Black Witch was summoned and terrorized the countryside, and finally Nimue gave Arthur himself the Dagger she called Carnwennan. At this point, she suspected that Merlin was behind the terrible things happening, and she no longer trusted him to safeguard the fey weapons she had given Arthur. Arthur managed to kill the witch and hide the dagger at Camelot because it had been tainted by the evil it touched. He knew that if anyone, especially Merlin with his ambitions, handled the Carn, they could potentially absorb that darkness themselves."

"Merlin manipulated events that led to the Battle of Camlann. His intent was to destroy Arthur and set a new king on the throne, a king he could control. Nimue and her ladies got to Arthur in time and took him with them to Avalon before he could succumb to his wounds, but not before she did her last bit of magic."

"She summoned a trusted Round Table knight, Gareth, and he was charged with protecting five priestesses from Avalon that were handpicked to safeguard the dagger. Eventually, they found their way to the Vale where they created a home using all the magic at their disposal. Only those with the Blood of the Vale can cross the boundaries. I am able to do so because Gareth and Lynette were handfasted, and I am their descendant. There is only one Knight at any given time and you can tell us by this mark."

Severus took a deep breath. "I am only doing this so there will be no doubt as to who I am, that I speak the truth. Only the Knight bears this mark." He removed his robes and unbuttoned his shirt before turning around. Between his shoulder blades, following his spine was an exquisitely wrought dagger tattoo. The blade itself was inked in black, but it had a silver shimmer that seemed otherworldly. The handle was also black, but it held a golden shimmer. Severus turned back to face his audience, buttoning his shirt as he did. "No one else will have this tattoo until I die. Then Alexander will bear the mark."

"The other Ladies, when they decided to take a husband, were directed to their mates by way of magic. That was how magic was propagated. The stories Merlin's followers passed down were lies."

"That was one more story, Severus. I can't believe that no one has ever heard of the Vale, though." Remus said. "You would think that guardians of a magical weapon, especially one used more than once, would be well-known."

"Nimue used her magic to erase the existence of Camelot and Arthur. Unfortunately for her, the bits of magic that remained didn't allow all of the traces to disappear. This, in turn led to the legends."

"But, Severus, why haven't these stories been passed down in Pureblood families, at least?" Minerva asked. "They are known for collecting their histories."

"It's simple." Hermione spoke for the first time since they had begun the meeting. "Magic was known, even to the mundane world, for years, as long as the Old Ways and rituals were practised. When the families let go of the traditions taught to them by the Ladies of the Vale, magic began to fade, and the histories became legends at the best and forgotten at worst."

"As Severus' mum and I went over the genealogies, we discovered entire generations missing from some lines and others that just ended. The last time we can positively pinpoint a gathering in the Vale was during the terror of the Dark Lady Elisabetta in 1682. It was around that time that Muggles stopped executing Witches, but the magical world truly began to hide itself from the mundane world. Over the years, the stories just faded away."

Albus interjected at this point, "So the weapon we seek is the dagger King Arthur used to destroy the original incarnation of whatever has possessed Tom. How do we find it?"

"The Carn is indeed the weapon," Severus acknowledged. "The four priestesses can summon the dagger if they go to the Vale and complete the ritual."

Molly asked. "Do we know the ritual? Was it written down?"

"Yes," Hermione answered. "The ritual is quite simple. It simply requires the four Ladies of the Vale to cast a circle and call forth Carnwennan."

Minerva chuckled. "Well, if it's as easy as all that, I reckon we should bring the other two Ladies in so we can finally meet them. I certainly hope they are willing to help!"

Albus called for a house-elf and directed it to have Poppy Floo her guests to his office. He, Severus, and Remus looked at each other, knowing the introductions would make for an interesting event.

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The Floo flared, and two women stepped into the room. The first was Andromeda Tonks.

"Mum! What's this? You're a Vale Lady? Who's that with you?" Nymphadora Tonks leapt from her seat, her hair flashing several different colours as her emotions raced.

Andromeda Tonks didn't answer her daughter, but stepped forward to address the group. "I understand that I was summoned here by blood magic. I have brought another that was lost." She beckoned at the hooded figure who joined her at the front of the order. "You can show yourself now," she said.

A gasp was heard when the hood was dropped and several of the Order recognised their guest. Molly jumped from her seat and exclaimed, "Alice!" before enveloping the woman in a huge hug.

"Alice?" was murmured over and over before Albus decided to speak.

"For those of you who don't know, this is Alice Longbottom."

Stunned silence filled the room, then Ron shouted out, "We need to get Neville!"

Alice looked at Ron. "Neville? He is well?"

Ron smiled. "Yes, he has become a really good wizard. You would be proud."

Alice smiled in return. "I would love to see him. But it will have to wait until the vale business is complete. We must keep our presence here as secret as possible."

Remus, Molly, and Arthur then took Alice's attention back. The four traded stories and tears as the Order milled around digesting this newest turn of events. After several moments of reminiscing, the Order settled back down and everyone returned to their seats to continue planning the end of the Dark Lord.

"Andromeda, I thought that Bellatrix was older than you. She has always made it seem that she was the oldest sister, anyway," Severus stated.

Andromeda nodded her head. "Yes, well, she would, wouldn't she? I was never pure-thinking enough for her, and her Dark Lord would not have been happy to know that the control over the Black sisters' fortune was mine. She and I are twins. Obviously we aren't identical, but I am the older twin by about ten minutes. I never said anything, because it was easier not to rock the boat, and it kept me from marrying Rodolphus Lestrange. Then when I met and married my husband, it eventually kept Ted safe."

Minerva added, "I'm thankful you are the oldest or we would have been in even more trouble, I'm sure!"

"Indeed," Albus agreed. "Now, we've been here for hours. Let's adjourn for dinner in the Great Hall and we will make plans after we eat. It shouldn't take too long to plan the trip to the Vale and the summoning of the dagger. After that, it is merely strategising a final push to defeat Tom once and for all."

With that, Albus led the large group to the dinner waiting for them.

## Chapter Eleven

*Chapter 11 of 14*

Hermione Granger disappeared from her home and is presumed dead. Nearly two years later, she returns to Hogwarts, guardian of a secret that could end the war with Voldemort once and for all.

Thanks to peskipiksi once again for the friendship and the betaing! You are the best! The chants used in this chapter are variations on a call written for public use by Silver Ravenwolf...

Dinner was again a joyous affair. It certainly seemed that luck, or at least Luna's Swallowswots, was finally on their side. As they sat down to eat, a lynx Patronus found Albus, and he was delighted to welcome Kingsley Shacklebolt to join them at long last.

"We wondered if you would ever get the chance to slip away, Kingsley," Minerva told the Auror as he sat down beside her.

He smiled brightly, "Well, I managed to secure the day off to recover from the excitement at the Ministry. It seems the head of the Aurors got the idea that I was extremely upset about the breach of security and needed some time off." He looked down the table to Tonks who grinned back unrepentantly. "Thanks, girl, I owe you one!" Kingsley's booming laughter was infectious, and soon the entire table was surrounded in giggles and guffaws, sniggers and chuckles.

Tonks recovered from the howls of laughter that wracked her body and shot Kingsley a thumbs up. "Any time, mate, I reckoned you were tired of dealing with Umbridge so I thought I'd give you a break! Besides, we need to know who from the Aurors we can include in our last stand against the Death Eaters!"

With that comment, talk at the table turned from common, generic topics back to the battle brewing under what was left of Voldemort's nose. Ideas as to where and when things should culminate led to serious discussion of everyone's roles in the upcoming fight.

Albus addressed Molly and Arthur first. "I know that most of your family will be joining us in this fight, but does anyone know about Percy? And when will the twins, Charlie and Bill arrive? And has Ginevra decided to assist Poppy in the Hospital Wing?"

Molly answered immediately. "Ginny's agreed. She knows that her help will be needed there. None of us has heard from Percy, so we don't know where he stands for certain. We've decided, as a family, that we won't approach him, just in case he isn't with us. Fred and George sent word several days ago that they would be ready whenever they were alerted. They decided that they couldn't close the store just for this meeting; the wrong people might notice. We don't want any suspicion falling on us, of course."

Arthur nodded at his wife, then took up the conversation. "Good thinking by the boys, and Bill agreed, so he won't leave his job at Gringotts until he hears from us. Even if the Goblins claim neutrality, we don't want them to alert the other side. Charlie will be home in the morning. He's taken time off from his duties at the dragon reserve. His partner at the reserve was injured recently, so they were authorised time away from the dragons."

Albus accepted this information, a very pleased look on his face, and he spoke to Molly first. "Perhaps you would send Ginevra to Poppy when we have decided on a date. She could help Poppy prepare." He then addressed the table at large. "You all know that there are others in the Order, some you know, some you don't, but we won't summon them until we fight. I feel that this is a large enough group to have to keep under wraps. Now all we have to do is determine what date to send the Ladies to the Vale and proceed from there."

Severus and Hermione conferred for a moment on the best time to proceed, and then Hermione addressed the group. "The best time to do this ritual is the night of the full moon. We can easily access the power needed to summon the Carn from its hiding place. If I'm not mistaken, the next full moon will be soon."

"Yes, the full moon occurs on the twelfth of January. I am in the process of brewing Lupin's Wolfsbane, and it is at the half-way point now." Severus and Remus shared a glance and a slight nod.

There were murmurs around the table, but after a few moments everyone was in agreement.

"When should we attack? Do we wait, or do we act as soon as we have the dagger?" Harry asked.

"I think that we should attack as soon as the dagger can be delivered to Harry," Ron stated. "In fact... where did Arthur and the Black Witch fight?" He got a faraway look in his eyes as he asked this.

"They fought near Camelot itself. Arthur had tracked the Witch far and wide, but never had any luck with the search. Merlin was growing impatient with the lack of results and ordered the Witch to Camelot. He, of course, absented himself so that no one would realise that he was the summoner. Because of this, he never knew about the Carn." Severus looked at Ron, hard. "Yes... I see where you are going with this. A rather brilliant move, Weasley."

Ron almost swallowed his tongue at the compliment, but recovered quickly. "It seems the most logical course, Sir."

"Indeed... "

The others stared at the two in bemusement until Hermione asked wryly, "Is there something that we should know?"

There were chuckles all around as Ron stammered and blushed, and Severus answered for him. "The site of the final battle, we should fight in the same place King Arthur fought the Black Witch."

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The twelfth of January dawned cold and snowy at Hogwarts. Severus rose early and made the preparations he needed to be ready for the evening. Finally, it would end one way or another. He sincerely hoped that it ended well for him; he had so much to live for now. He briefly thought about his wife and son, and the upcoming anniversary of the handfasting that had led to this unaccustomed happiness he felt. Three nights ago, on the evening of his birthday, Hermione had offered Severus a platinum ring and asked if he would make their bond permanent. He had no words to answer her, but he showed her more than once throughout the night that his answer was, unequivocally, yes. He had returned to Hogwarts for the first time in a long time, with hope. Now, he would leave once again, burgeoning with that same hope.

No one noticed as he made his way to his hidden spot on the Black Lake. It was the only part of Hogwarts grounds that had no Anti-Apparation Jinx. No one, not even the Headmaster, was aware of it. Severus had found it by accident one night when he had been so wounded by the Dark Lord that he was delirious. He had tried to Apparate, and rather than focusing on the grounds in front of the main gates, he could only think Hogwarts. He woke to find himself half in the lake, half on shore, but fully inside Hogwarts grounds, and luckily, not splinched. After experimenting several times to ensure it wasn't a fluke, he created a circle blood-warded to himself alone. Severus assumed that it was because of the proximity to the Black Lake, and somehow Nimue had helped him. Well, now this circle would serve as a portal to his future, however it would play out. It was finally time to slip out of the yokes of his masters, and take his place as his own man, as Knight of the Carn.

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The Lady and Dagger Inn at Argante was no more crowded on this day than any other. Once again, the handful of locals making use of the warmth and ale ignored the passage of strangers in their midst. Over a period of several hours Severus met the Vale Ladies one by one and led them to the bridge and through the test of the bloodlines. When all met on the other side, the Vale came to life, magic trilling through the land and waking the dormant power ensconced there.

Eileen and Posey had readied the Lodge for the group of women to prepare for the ritual that would be held when the full moon reached its zenith over the Vale. Hermione and Eileen, through their research, had determined that the glade protected by the copse of trees nearest the house was the place intended to be used for rituals, so they made sure everything that would be needed was secured at the site. They also went over the particulars of what Hermione herself would need to do, so that she needn't worry about her lack of vision. All they were waiting for now was evening, and for all the Ladies, and their Knight, to be prepared.

The Lodge didn't seem overly large on the outside, but the interior had obviously been created for lots of people to inhabit. As each Lady entered the house, more rooms appeared. In no time, there were three new suites of rooms branching off the main central staircase. When Hermione mentioned this to her mother-in-law, and asked why she hadn't been given rooms, Eileen simply answered, "Perhaps the house knew you and Severus were destined for each other." Hermione pondered that statement, feeling even more secure in her decision to make her bond with Severus permanent.

After time in the library to determine what role each Lady would take, and to ensure that each knew the ritual completely, the Ladies retired to their rooms to bathe and dress in preparation. Then each Lady proceeded to the dining room, where they were greeted with a light repast. They spent time in fellowship with each other, amazed at how they all felt as if they had always known each other.

"Have you spoken to Neville?" Luna asked Alice as they sat at table, four sisters in power, if not blood.

Alice looked sadly at her plate. "No, I have seen my mother-in-law only because she knew I was missing from the hospital, but felt I couldn't see Neville until after this is over. Augusta agreed that it would be too much of a distraction for him and for me. I am so proud of him, though. We spent an entire night looking at pictures, and Augusta told me everything about him."

The others looked sympathetically at Alice. "When this is over, we will come back here and drink a toast to our families, and to the end of the darkness that has overshadowed us too long!" Andromeda declared. "But now the hour draws close. Let's have a toast to us, sisters, to success, and to Nimue. May she see us though our task now, and through the task yet to be."

"To Nimue and success!" was chorused around the table.

"To all who have gone before in the fight against the dark, and to those who will fight and give all at this full moon," Alice toasted and was answered.

Luna took her turn and offered, "A toast to everyone who has fought and survived, and who will fight and survive the coming battle. Let them know peace."

Finally, Hermione spoke. "To our loved ones. May we never lose sight of them, whatever happens or wherever we may be."

Silence settled over the four as they waited for their escort to the copse. Only too soon, Severus, resplendent in dark green robes, knocked on the door to the dining room. "My Ladies, it is time."

Hermione rose, and he slipped a heavy cloak over her shoulders. The others, in turn, followed suit and slowly, the procession made its way to the copse and their future.

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The brilliance of the full moon drowned an ocean of stars as it painted a path through the heavens. The deep water of the Vale river flowed quicksilver smooth, and reflected the moonlight, intensifying it, giving the earth an otherworldly seductiveness. The procession, almost invisible in their black hoods and cloaks, reached the copse of sacred trees. Between the molten river and the stand of sacred magical woods stood an altar nestled in the protective embrace of a grove of Nimue's apple trees. The magic of the Vale, and of Avalon, pulsed here, filling the five that stood in silence awaiting the apex of the moon's orbit.

Before they were to move into position, Alice remarked suddenly, "We must summon the Watchtowers before we perform the Carn ritual. Evil is afoot; I can feel it edging along the boundaries of the Vale magic. It is searching for us."

Andromeda agreed. "I can feel it as well; as I come to be more in tune with the magic here, I can sense that someone is feeling for our magic."

"The Ministry is tracking magic. It has that feel about it. Only the Watchtowers will be able to prevent the Ministry and You Know Who from discovering us before we accomplish our goal. We certainly don't want this to be known until Harry is prepared to use the Carn," Alice said.

As the eldest priestess by right of blood, Hermione stepped forward and removed her hood and cloak as the moon reached its zenith. The light pooled down, bathing the altar and apple trees in silver light, and making Hermione's ceremonial robes glow. Even without her sight, she walked confidently around the grove of trees, casting a circle of protection. She took her place at the top of the circle and waited. Luna then stepped forward, then Andromeda, then Alice, each asking for permission to enter the circle, then taking their respective places according to birth. The last to ask permission to enter the circle and to take his place, just inside the trees as protector, was Severus, Knight of the Carn. He stood inside the protective circle, but in a place where his magic wouldn't interfere with the Ladies'.

As soon as the circle sealed behind him, and the four priestesses stood ready, Hermione began her quarter call.

"I call upon the Guardian of the Watchtower of the North.

The earth, the rain,

Protect us now, upon earth plane."

As she finished her chant, Luna began hers.

"I call upon the Guardian of the Watchtower of the East.

The sun, the wisdom, the sight,  
Protect us now, this sacred night."

Andromeda intoned from her position of South,  
"I call upon the Guardian of the Watchtower of the South.

The power, the passion, the gift,  
Protect us now in this energy shift."

Lastly, Alice called her quarter to ensure the hiding of the Carn ritual.

"I call upon the Guardian of the Watchtower of the West.

Gates swing wide;

I seek the protection that lies inside."

A flare of colour flashed from the cardinal points where each priestess stood and fanned out, engulfing the grove and beyond, to the river and copse of trees. The women could feel the presence of the Guardians and began to work the ritual to summon the Carn and rid the world of Voldemort for good.

Hermione led the others in the chant to Nimue, asking for her help in opening the way to Carnwennan. The wind rose and swirled around the altar, catching the white robes that the Ladies were wearing. They continued the chant, hands raised in supplication, when suddenly a sharp cry sounded. Their concentration was broken when they realised it was Severus. He was on his knees, obviously in pain, which seemed to increase as the ritual broke and the winds faded.

"Concentrate, quickly. Resume the chant." Andromeda cried. "His pain got worse as we stopped. Something is trying to keep us from retrieving the Carn!"

The Ladies began to chant once more, and Severus' cries got lower. He pulled himself up from the ground, but lost his balance as he tried to regain his former position. He fell completely from the sheltering grove of trees and into the circle surrounding the altar. Hermione and the others continued to chant and the winds got stronger, grabbing at hair and robes. Suddenly Severus seemed to convulse. He scrambled on the ground searching for purchase to pull himself back up. His hand hit roughly against the altar, which he then used to lever himself into a standing position. The pain hit again and he grabbed at his robes, pulling them off. He screamed and ripped at his shirt, tearing it in an effort to remove it as well.

Hermione acted first, the fiery glow that emanated from the shreds of Severus' shirt spurring her into action. The others followed suit, continuing to chant as Andromeda had directed. Luna grabbed one arm and Alice the other as they manhandled Severus fully onto the altar, and Hermione ripped the remains of his shirt to the ground, exposing the light fully. It was the dagger tattoo, glowing like molten metal. As the chant continued and the glow brightened, Hermione suddenly pressed her hand against her husband's back. As soon as she did, the glow disappeared and Hermione fell back, grasping her hand in pain. The chant ended abruptly when Hermione reached out and showed her sisters the Carn she held in her hand.

She looked to the altar and saw Severus lying there, panting heavily, eyes barely open. She scrambled to his side. "Severus, we have it. We have the Carn." She stopped, overwhelmed. "Oh, gods, Severus, I can see you."

"Hermione," he rasped. "Finish the ritual and close the circle. We need to get back to the Lodge." Severus' eyes closed as he talked. "You can see me?"

"Yes, my love, I see you. Something happened when your tattoo began to glow and, then, when I touched your back, I could see clearly." She pressed a kiss to his temple.

"It must have been magic," he quipped. "Hurry finish so we can start the next phase of our plan." With that, Severus passed out.

As quickly as was possible, Hermione led the Ladies into the ritual chant that took up the circle surrounding the apple grove altar. As soon as they were done there, it was time to thank and release the Watchtower Guardians. When that was done, the Ladies and the Carn got Severus back to the Lodge as quickly as they could.

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After several hours of doctoring and tears, ritual baths and sending owls, the Ladies and their Knight met in the library. Eileen was already waiting with Posey and a large tea tray. She stood up and met her son before he could sit and hugged him tightly. "I never knew you could be hurt, Son, I'm so sorry," she cried. "And, Hermione, how is it you have your sight? You must tell me everything while we wait."

When everyone had a cup of tea and some of the cake that Posey had provided, the story was told. Hermione started. "I cast the circle like we rehearsed. I knew exactly where to step. We called the Watchtower Guardians because Alice and Andromeda detected a foreign magic trying to feel into the Vale. After the Guardians appeared, I cast the smaller circle and we began the ritual to call the Carn. That's when Severus began to be affected. He screamed out and fell. When that caused us to stop the ritual, it made his pain even worse, so Andromeda rallied us and we continued chanting."

Alice took over from there. "Severus was in real pain at this point and when he breached the circle, it got worse."

Severus was nodding in agreement. "As soon as I touched the altar, it felt like my spine was on fire. All I could think of was getting my robes and shirt off. I don't remember anything else."

"Hermione reacted to the light that surrounded Severus," said Luna. "She went right up to him like she was being pulled forward. We continued the chant, and suddenly she touched him and it was all over. That's when we realised she had her sight back."

Eileen frowned at her son and daughter-in-law. "Can you explain?"

Severus shrugged. "It's merely a theory, but from what was written about the Carn, I think it must have an affinity for dark magic. King Arthur was able to defeat the Very Black Witch because part of the dark power was absorbed by the dagger. If you will recall, the dark taint was why it had to be hidden and why only a certain few can handle it."

"You had no idea that your tattoo was the actual dagger?" asked Hermione.

"Not at all. I remember when my uncle died the next day I had a new tattoo. Luckily, mum had an inkling of what was going on and was able to reach me before I went to my associates to demand who had done it and how," Severus answered.

"Hmmm. I wonder if it only hurt because of your Dark Mark. Perhaps the Carn was trying to remain where it was, in proximity to the darkness there. If it didn't hurt when it manifested, it stands to reason it wouldn't hurt when it left your body," Hermione mused. "I know it burned my hand when I touched your back."

Severus looked up intently. "It burned your hand? Did your eyes hurt too?"

Hermione closed her eyes in thought. "Now that I think about it, yes, they did ache for a short time. But they have ached off and on since the spell was cast on me, so it didn't even register with me."

Alice spoke up. "The Carn resisted the summoning because it was attracted to your Mark. When Hermione physically claimed it, it drew out the dark magic in her eyes. It



makes sense when you look at the dagger and even your tattoo, when it was there."

Everyone stared quietly at the dagger lying on the library desk. It was definitely metal, but was burnished black, with silver runes and designs etched into the blade. The pommel and hilt were gilded with additional runes. It was a beautiful weapon, but there was a sinister undertone to it. It made one feel as if one wanted to move away from it rather than to actually pick it up. As they sat there waiting and looking, the enchanted Galleon that Hermione had given Severus to pass to his spy vibrated.

He addressed his charges. "It's near time for you to go to Hogwarts. I will be summoned any moment now. We won't meet again until the battle. I ask you all to be safe. Let us meet again in a world free of this darkness."

Each Lady embraced Severus and offered a blessing to him before standing aside for Hermione. She embraced her husband, kissing him fiercely. "Stay safe; take no chances. I expect you to help me raise our children after we seal our bond when the year and a day are up."

"Children?" gasped Eileen. Hermione and Severus both laughed and brought her into their arms.

"Yes, children. As many as Severus wants."

Anything else that would have been said was cut off by the burning of Severus' Dark Mark. "It has begun. My Ladies, we must go to Argente. When next we meet it will be in battle. Fight well."

Eileen was left standing alone, crying and praying to whoever and whatever would grant her the honour of listening to her pleas.

## Chapter Twelve

*Chapter 12 of 14*

Hermione Granger disappeared from her home and is presumed dead. Nearly two years later, she returns to Hogwarts, guardian of a secret that could end the war with Voldemort once and for all.

Thank you, peskipiksi, this one's for you!

Bodmin Moor, desolate and windswept; its rocky heart was once the site of a fiercely fought battle. In the shadow of a beautiful castle, a great evil was put to the sword and defeated. In the shadow of that same castle, an era came to an end and a new one emerged. Time passed, peace reigned, wars were fought, and now that evil was once again converging upon the moor. Once again, this time in the shadow of a beautiful castle's ruins, the sword would fall. Once again, a magic would fill the air and the land. Once again, the mists would thin. The beautiful castle awaited.

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Thick grey clouds churned in from a storm brewing on the Atlantic Ocean, battering the land with chilling temperatures and the promise of precipitation. Damp fog shrouded the landscape as dark figures gathered near the smallest of the three stone circles known as The Hurlers. Normally, there were Muggles milling about, locals and visitors alike. Now, in the fading light of day, the land was quiet, deserted, and silently writhing under the dark magic that washed over the area. It was of course, the ideal setting for the end of Albus Dumbledore and his followers of the Light. Tom Riddle, the dread Dark Lord Voldemort, fairly trembled in anticipation of the coming fight and his ascension to power. He was drawn to this place, though he didn't understand or question why. He could feel the magic that pulsed around him even if he couldn't quite figure out how to harness it. The power caused his senses and synapses to fire off, and he scented the air as if searching for prey. From his vantage point on a small hill, Voldemort watched the chaos below him. He pushed the magic pulses to the back of his mind, sure that it was a result of the full gathering of his followers that had finally reached Cornwall. Sneering at the massing of his minions, he looked forward to ending his enemies once and for all, and becoming that which he had always dreamed of, a king, bathing in the blood of his defeated foes.

"Severus Snape, come forward and make your obeisance to your Lord and Master. What news of my enemies have you brought? Are they anticipating a confrontation this soon in the year?" the serpentine man hissed at his trusted lieutenant as Severus made his way to where Voldemort had enthroned himself.

The Potions master, warmly garbed in his heavy Death Eater robes, and masked, knelt on the damp ground and answered, "No, My Lord, they have grown quite complacent in their holiday celebrations, and the students are preparing to return to Hogwarts, therefore minds are on education rather than war. The rumour is that you won't strike before summer, much as you did last year."

The Dark Lord grinned malevolently. "Good, my servant, very good. That is indeed welcome news. It is time to finish this fight once and for all. Tonight will see the end of Harry Potter and Albus Dumbledore, and the beginning of my reign over the world, both Wizard and Muggle alike!"

Voldemort's declaration was met with wild cheers from his followers. "Let us take back the Wizarding World from the filthy Muggles and their spawn! Kill them all! Make us kings and make them slaves!"

Throughout the cheering, pontificating, and preparations for battle, Lucius Malfoy stood smirking at the commotion brewing around him, and Severus Snape stood quietly, ignoring it. The Dark Lord had fallen for the bait completely. Severus nodded surreptitiously to his partner-in-crime and made his way over to lean against a circle stone. He could feel the magic seeping from the earth through the stone and into his body. If it were not for his skill in keeping a blank expression, he would have drawn attention to himself and what was happening as the feeling startled him. All Severus could think was how lucky they all were that the Dark Lord had never cared to tap into the ancient magic that flowed around them, that he was only interested in the potions he dosed himself with daily. Close by, Lucius fingered the coin that flared hot in his pocket and prepared to wait. The Order was coming, and his revenge was in the offing.

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Another coin, this time one in Hermione's pocket, burned hot. She looked at her fellow priestesses, her friends, and at the Order gathered at the Shrieking Shack. Others were gathered elsewhere, waiting for the signal to converge on different areas of Bodmin Moor. Within moments of the flare of her coin and Severus' alert, Hermione spoke one sentence, "For Carnwennan and Nimue!" She also sent out the same message to others holding the charmed coins. That was the call to battle, and the sound of multiple Apparitions and activating Portkeys resounded through the building and in other hiding places. Within moments, it was sheer bedlam on the moor, and the Death Eaters were trying to recover from the surprise attack. The bulk of the fighting occurred near the three rings of standing stones, with bands of Death Eaters and Order members, along with those Aurors that supported Dumbledore, fighting in ever widening swathes across the moor.

The Weasleys and the Vale Ladies formed a vanguard around Harry Potter and protected him as he made their way around the moor looking for Voldemort. They knew he would have his most elite fighters, his Inner Circle, around him. The rest of the Order was given the task of subduing the remaining groups of Death Eaters in whatever

way they had to. "Don't forget, Severus and Lucius Malfoy will be near Tom Riddle," Hermione reminded the group. "Please don't mistake one of them for the enemy."

Several members of the group looked mutinous at this reminder, but refrained from saying anything. Andromeda took this moment to say, "Severus is the Vale Knight; I wouldn't think Nimue would appreciate anyone trying to kill someone loyal to her. I think his wife would be even less amused." Sufficiently reminded and a tad reprimanded, they waded into the fighting and began to work their way towards their ultimate goal.

It seemed to take forever, and already several Order members were wounded and had to be Portkeyed back to Poppy for treatment. They had had to spread out more than they wanted because of the terrain and the fighting. Only the Vale Ladies managed to still stay close by Harry. As soon as they got within sight of Voldemort, Hermione took Carnwennan from its hiding place in her robes and handed it to Harry. The blade glowed silver in the half light of flying hexes and curses, and a jolt of power surged through the Boy Who Lived when he grasped the hilt. He looked at Hermione and said, "It's time to end this once and for all."

As soon as Hermione surrendered possession of the Carn, she and the other Ladies formed a circle and began chanting pushing and pulling the power that suffused the moor. The winds picked up, and a mist crawled across the field. The Dark Lord, watching the proceedings from his vantage point above the battleground, immediately ordered the four women to be stopped. He didn't know what they were doing, but he could feel a familiar ancient magic creeping up and around the stones scattered across Bodmin Moor. He watched as a handful of his most trusted followers, led by Greyback, set off to put a stop to the circle.

"The Mudblood is mine, once and for all," growled the werewolf as he began to morph into his feral alter-ego. The moon was full, but the heavy cloud cover didn't allow for a complete transformation. The gruesome figure stalked quickly towards Hermione and the others, howling his hatred to the night.

Harry felt as though he were encased in armour. Through the haze of battle, he thought he heard horses and the clash of steel ringing across the land. Shaking his head to clear his vision and mind, Harry looked across the field to his nemesis. He saw Dumbledore gliding through the mist like Merlin returned, and he suddenly knew what he had to do to end the battle. Raising Carnwennan above his head in a two-fisted grip, he charged at Voldemort, who stood staring in surprise at the sudden attack out of nowhere by Albus Dumbledore. The Headmaster sent several spells towards the Dark Lord, drawing his attention away from Harry, who scrambled up the incline towards the two. Voldemort managed to cast one spell at the old man that actually connected, a rather nasty Cutting Curse, but that was all the advantage Harry needed. Before Voldemort could bring his wand to bear on his adversary and cast a curse, Harry stabbed Carnwennan through Voldemort's chest. An explosive shockwave of Dark Magic knocked anyone within fifty feet to their knees. Then, as suddenly as it had come, the dark force collapsed in on itself and disappeared. The dagger lay on the ground, once again a defeater of evil. As Harry reached down to pick up the Carn, it shimmered bright silver and gold, the black of the blade and hilt sloughing off like old skin. With a crack, it vanished. The unexpected action caused Harry to stumble back in shock and hit his head as he fell. Across the field, a sudden surge of magic jolted through another wizard, who began to gain consciousness.

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Silence reigned once again on Bodmin Moor as the Order gathered up the remaining Death Eaters. Many were dead, and some had fled early on, but the Aurors collected the ones that remained, taking the wounded and dead to St. Mungo's, and the rest to Azkaban to await the Ministry's pleasure. The Order wounded and dead were gathered together and Portkeyed back to Hogwarts. The survivors couldn't get to the main battleground, as a magical barrier encircled the area. Inside the barrier, those that were affected by the magical backlash that occurred when Voldemort was destroyed began to stir and take inventory of the wounded and dead.

Severus roused and pushed himself up off the ground. He felt somewhat punch-drunk, but managed to find his feet and start looking for any survivors. He found Lucius right away. He was wounded, but not too terribly. Nearby was what was left of Bellatrix Lestrange's corpse. Lucius had finally enacted his revenge for the death of his beloved Cissy, and Bella had not gone gently at all. When Lucius was sufficiently recovered, thanks to Severus and his dab hand at healing charms, the two men began to make the rounds of the battleground looking for other survivors. Harry was close by, unconscious, but not hurt. Severus cast "Ennervate" and set him to checking bodies as well, telling both Harry and Lucius that he had to find Hermione. They watched the suddenly frantic man rush off and, without comment, continued their search.

He didn't know how far he had walked, but after not finding anyone at all in the area he had last seen the Weasleys, Severus called out into the eerie silence. "Hermione, Hermione, where are you?"

Almost immediately he heard a reply. "We're here, close to the pool."

He turned in that direction and quickly made his way to a terrible scene. There was the cadre of Voldemort's finest Death Eaters, all dead, lying close to the circle that the Vale Ladies had cast. The circle itself still glowed softly, not having been taken up, but now ebbing from a lack of magical strength. As Severus made his way to where he knew Hermione was, he stumbled over Remus Lupin's body, the man's eyes staring sightlessly at the sky. Nearby were the remains of Fenrir Greyback. Severus took a moment to gather himself, thankful Greyback had been stopped, but then he made his way over to Hermione. She was kneeling on the ground, working feverishly over Luna. He moved quickly to join her when he felt her magical energy beginning to ebb.

"Stop, my love; let me help. If you continue to expend magic you will hurt yourself."

"I don't care!" Hermione shouted. "I have to help her."

"I will help her. Please, Hermione; let me help."

He looked over at Andromeda who was kneeling beside Alice Longbottom. She shook her head sadly at Severus and rose to check on the others that remained nearby.

"Greyback led an attack directly on us," Andromeda told Severus after she had sent the wounded to Hogwarts. "We had no choice but to hold the circle. We knew we had to keep Voldemort isolated as much as we could, and also to direct power to the Carn."

"Are you all right? That explains Hermione's energy depletion. Yours is similar?"

Andromeda nodded yes to both questions. "Greyback got Luna. He was aiming for Hermione, screaming that he would get her. Remus caught him as he came at her with a knife... the impact sent Remus and Greyback reeling; they passed Hermione, and when Greyback lashed out the knife hit Luna instead. It had some kind of poison on it; we could see it taking effect as soon as she was cut." Andromeda shuddered at the memory. "The two of them fought, and Remus killed Greyback, but was fatally wounded himself. He bled out before anyone could get to him."

She took a deep breath. "Severus, we couldn't leave the circle; there was nothing we could do. And then Luna collapsed, and the circle began to weaken. Alice tried to get to her, but she was hit with a curse I have never seen before. She seems to be drowning in her own fluids, and none of the spells we have used are helping. She's getting weaker, and all we can do is clear her lungs. We need to get them back to Hogwarts as soon as we can."

As Andromeda talked, Severus caught Hermione up in an embrace. She hugged him back and whispered, "Harry?"

Severus rolled his eyes. "He is fine. I left him sorting out the wounded with Lucius. As soon as they get down here, we will take a Portkey back to the school. I am afraid Apparition would be too dangerous for Luna and Alice."

Hermione nodded and buried herself back into her husband's arms. It wasn't long before the handful of Order members that hadn't already been Portkeyed made their way to where the Ladies had made their stand.

As they stood there, recouping their strength and getting ready to transport Luna and Alice to Poppy, a mist blew in across Dozmary Pool, obscuring the water. It swirled and shifted lazily, dancing with the silver light of the moon that had risen. The sound of rhythmic splashing met the ears of the survivors, and the mist parted around a barge.

In awe, Hermione and the others watched as a beautiful lady and several attendants disembarked from the barge and made their way ashore. Hermione was the first to move forward in sudden recognition, and she and Andromeda quickly bowed their heads. "Nimue, my lady, you have returned from Avalon at long last."

"Hermione, Andromeda, you have made it possible through your loyalty and strength, as have Luna and Alice with their sacrifice. And I have a duty to my Ladies, to see that they are brought home now that they have fulfilled their tasks."

This announcement was met with silent tears. "No, do not grieve. Luna is not long for this world; she is of the Fey now. Alice, too, has fulfilled her destiny one that was interrupted many years ago. Now she belongs to Avalon. But, for that disruption of her life, I will grant her the one thing she has dearly wanted."

When this was said, suddenly Neville was there and kneeling by his mother. "Mum? What's this? How... "

Nimue looked at him and smiled. "So long as Alice lived, her position as my priestess was hers alone. The price of her life was her mind. I could not do much more, trapped as I was behind the mist. When the Ladies began to gather, the mist thinned enough, and I was able to awaken Alice to fulfill the destiny of which she had been cheated. You may have a short time with her, but we must sail by the time the moon is fully overhead. And, Neville Longbottom, your daughter will take her place in my circle in the Vale. See that she is trained well."

Neville knelt down beside the mum he had ever only seen staring blankly at nothing and folding Drooble's wrappers. The clarity of her eyes broke his heart, and he cried to see her smile.

"Oh, Neville," she whispered. "My son, you are a man a good man. I am so very proud of you and everything you have done. I spoke to your grandmother and she has some things for you. She told me everything of your childhood, and I want you to know that you are the most wonderful thing I have ever done." Alice smiled up at her son. "I will always be with you and your father. Never doubt, we will be together again."

"Oh, Mum," Neville choked out. "Mum, I love you, and I don't want you to leave me..."

"Never... leave you... Son..." Alice released a deep sigh and was gone. Neville buried his face against his mum's throat and cried for her loss, but also for the chance he had been given to hear her speak to him. After a while, Nimue's attendants carefully took Alice from her son and laid her next to Luna beneath a gossamer canopy in the centre of the barge. Neville watched silently as his mother was borne away and then collapsed with a cry. Hermione and Andromeda immediately went to him and offered what comfort they could. Nothing helped until Severus came to him and whispered the same spell for sleep that he had used on Hermione ages before. With a sigh, Hermione activated her Portkey and sent him to the Hospital Wing and Poppy's comfort.

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"Hermione." Nimue stood in front of her Lady. "Priestess mine, Daughter of the Elements, Keeper of the Carn, you who summoned the Northern Watchtower and its Guardians, I give unto to you the keeping of the Vale of the Carn. For too long it has stood alone, quiet, unprotected. The blood requirement is lifted. Those you consider family may enter, blood kin or no. Guard the sacred place well; guard the dagger. Pass on your heritage; let it not fall by the wayside again. And fear not, you will see your sisters again. Once the magic has been fully returned and the mists have cleared, all shall be as it once was and how it was always meant to be."

Nimue finished her speech to Hermione with a press of gentle lips to her forehead. When she pulled back, the mark of the crescent moon was visible on Hermione's skin.

Nimue then turned to Andromeda. "My follower, you have long held back the side of you that was searching for the Vale. Do not fear it any longer; embrace it and live the life from which you have always hidden. You and yours will find a place in the Vale. Go and search it out, but know that the Vale needs you also. Only by gathering regularly will the power be restored." Nimue smiled at Andromeda and pressed the same crescent into her skin. "You must pass on your gifts; you have much more than a daughter who needs you now."

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When the moon was directly overhead, Nimue called to her attendants and returned to the barge gracing the still waters of Dozmary Pool. "Look what magic you have wrought, my Ladies. This evil has once again been banished from this plane. Look at what you have done!"

Nimue raised her hands and gestured broadly. Hermione turned around and gasped at what she saw. The rest of the group turned and looked in awe at the sight laid out before them. In the distance, the standing stones known as The Hurlers were no longer visible. In their place stood a magnificent castle, banners blowing on the highest parapets and gleaming silver in the moonlight. Hermione thought she could just make out someone standing at the top of the highest tower, but decided it was a trick of the light until they saluted.

She turned to Nimue and opened her mouth to ask, when the Lady laughed delightedly. "Yes, Hermione, your actions, and those of your sisters and friends have restored Camelot to its glory. You are seeing it as it was before I had to remove it from history. I cannot replace it on those pages, but you can come here and visit and learn at any time. The return of my powers has released the enchantment from wizarding eyes. There is much you can learn here in the libraries."

As Hermione's eyes lit up, a smothered groan was heard behind her. "Libraries? As if the Vale library wasn't big enough, you have to give her more?" Severus looked rather pained at the thought.

As the others laughed, Nimue smiled at her Knight. "You will not be left out. You are a part of the Vale bloodlines, too. All of this is as much your right as it is my Ladies'. Keep them and the Vale safe, Severus." With that last request, Nimue bade her followers a good even, and, as the moon started to sink, the barge sailed away, disappearing before it got to the centre of the pool. Andromeda, Hermione, Severus, Lucius, and Harry stood and looked over the water and then at Camelot. It was a lot to take in, and the group was suddenly bone-weary. Severus took his Portkey from his pocket and held it out to Hermione.

"Let's go home," he said.

## Chapter Thirteen

*Chapter 13 of 14*

Hermione Granger disappeared from her home and is presumed dead. Nearly two years later, she returns to Hogwarts, guardian of a secret that could end the war with Voldemort once and for all.

The Lodge in the Vale was finally quiet and dark. The moon had set hours earlier, and a new day was fast approaching. It had been almost midnight when Hermione and Severus had returned from Bodmin Moor and the battle fought in Camelot's shadow. Between letting Eileen know that they were safe, and checking in on Alexander, it was deep in the night before the couple was finally settled in. As soon as they had retired to their rooms, Severus had run a bath for Hermione and enhanced it with healing and calming potions, before insisting that she take full advantage of the peace while they had it. He had joined her in the bathroom after calling for Posey to bring them a light meal and tea. She had brought a heavily laden tray to the bedroom and had then left to keep watch over the baby so his parents could recover from the things that they had

seen and done earlier.

Hermione was nearly asleep in the tub of steaming water and Severus gently roused her so he could help her wash away the grime and gore from the battle. He gently scrubbed away the dirt, healing the handful of cuts and scrapes Hermione had gained while fighting. Severus then washed Hermione's hair, massaging her scalp and healing a cut behind her ear, taking care to be as gentle as possible. After a final rinse to her curly mane, he emptied and refilled the tub with a wave of his hand ensuring that the steaming water was clean and treated with the same potions he had used initially. Hermione smiled sleepily at her husband and offered to scoot up so he could join her.

"Don't you want to share my bath?" Hermione's voice was thick with sleep.

"I've just washed you and cleaned the water. You don't want me to dirty it back up; I think I will just take a shower, my love. You lie back and soak until I've finished." Severus went to the separate shower tucked in an alcove near the tub. "There is a late supper if you're hungry when we've finished in here. Rest now, and I will rouse you when I am ready to go to bed."

Hermione closed her eyes and murmured her assent, and Severus stepped into the scalding shower and proceeded to cleanse himself of the night's events. After long minutes of scrubbing and washing, he felt somewhat returned to normal. Another eternity of just standing under the steaming water until his skin was lobster-red relaxed Severus, and he ended his shower.

As he stood in front of the mirror over the sink, Severus looked over his face and healed several abrasions and a long cut over his right eye; he then quickly shaved and brushed his teeth. By this time, he was certain that the potions in Hermione's bath had done everything that they could, and he went back to the tub bringing a plushly thick towel with him.

He looked down at his wife dozing in the steaming water and marvelled that they had come through the past year as well as they had. It had been difficult and painful at times, but they had survived together. And now, they had survived the battle against the Dark Lord together. Tomorrow was surely to be a difficult day after the events of earlier came to the fore, but tonight he had a wife to share his bed and a son to carry on his name. Tonight, they would reaffirm their commitment and remind each other that they were still alive.

Severus shook himself from his reverie and touched Hermione's shoulder, letting her know he had finished his shower. Another wave of his hand, and the bathwater was gone. Severus reached down and wrapped Hermione in the towel he held, and lifted her from the tub. She snuggled into his chest as he silently carried her to the bed and laid her down before proceeding to gently dry her skin. A drying charm finished the job of drying Hermione's thick tresses and also dried the pillows where her damp hair had been spread. Another charm bound her hair in a heavy plait so that it wouldn't tangle while she slept.

"Sev, you don't have to coddle me. I can get ready for bed myself," Hermione said.

"I know you can. I want to do this for you," he replied as he gowned her in a soft flannel nightshirt. "I feel like I need to do something to prove that this isn't a dream, that we're both here and safe." At this point, Hermione was propped up in bed clean, warm, and dry, and Severus ventured to change the subject. "Are you still hungry? What do you want to eat? Posey brought several different sandwiches and some soup."

Hermione touched Severus' hand. "I know, Sev, I feel the same way." She cocked her head at him and smiled coyly. "Nothing sweet for me?"

Severus chuckled. "No, food first, then something sweet."

Hermione pouted. "You're no fun. But I'll have ham if you have it, and what kind of soup is there? Is there tea?"

Severus handed Hermione a plate piled heavily with a ham sandwich loaded with her favourite condiments and extras. There were pickle spears piled beside it, along with a plentiful handful of her favourite crisps. After she had the plate securely resting on the tray covering her lap, Severus handed Hermione a bowl of beef and barley soup. While she was eating quite ravenously, he told her there was no tea. "I'm afraid Posey sent you a rather large glass of milk. She says that is what you need so you can feed the baby."

Hermione rolled her eyes and wrinkled her nose at the glass of milk that was handed to her, but she thirstily drank the icy cold beverage. "It isn't too bad when it's cold like that, I suppose," she grouched. "And I suppose I could do without the caffeine for now."

Severus laughed and attacked his own meal and cup of tea. They didn't waste much time, and both were soon finished eating. Impatiently Hermione demanded, "Where is the pudding?"

"Aren't you full yet?" he teased.

Hermione shook her head, and Severus chuckled at the greedy look on her face as she anticipated the sugar-filled treat. He handed her a dish of sticky toffee pudding and shook his head as she intently devoured every last morsel. Still shaking his head, Severus cleared up the dishes, finishing just as Posey Apparated into the room holding Alexander.

"Little Master is being hungry too, Mistress."

In no time, Alexander was cradled securely in his mother's arms and greedily nursing. Hermione sat snuggled into her husband's embrace, and both were watching their son. "We did it, Sev; we saved our baby from growing up in a dark world."

The night finally caught up with Hermione, and as she watched her baby, the tears slid down her face and splashed onto Alexander as he fed. Severus wrapped his arms more tightly around his family and whispered in Hermione's hair. "Yes, my love, we saved the world, but remember, you saved me first, and for that, I love you. Hush now. We are all right. Alexander is safe, we are safe, and the Vale is secure. Everything will be fine."

Severus continued to hold Hermione as Alexander finished eating. After the baby was changed and rocked back to sleep, he called Posey and turned the slumbering infant over to his devoted nurse. She promised to bring him back as soon as he was hungry again, but Severus told her to feed him if he woke before Hermione so she could get plenty of rest.

"Yes, sir, Potions master. Posey will feed Little Master his breakfast."

The elf and baby were gone in an instant, and Severus turned to his wife. "Are you tired, my dear?" he asked, gently brushing the tears from her face. Before Hermione could answer, his lips were pressed to hers and his tongue was caressing her lower lip, begging her to open to his gentle assault. Hermione relaxed into Severus' arms, her head falling back, and she parted her lips allowing him to kiss her deeply. The kiss lasted an eternity before the two broke apart, gasping for breath. Severus leaned down and kissed Hermione again, suckling on her lower lip before tracing a fiery path from her mouth to her ear and then down her throat. The tip of his tongue lapped lightly at the hollow of her throat, drawing a sweet sigh from her. Severus then drew his wife down in the bed and eased her over to lie flat on her back. He wandlelessly removed her nightgown and dragged heated kisses from her throat to her breasts. He toyed with her nipples, suckling one turgid peak then the other, worrying the sensitive peaks until she began to beg for something... anything.

Severus leaned over his wife and watched Hermione's eyes as his fingers plucked her nipples then ghosted down over her abdomen to the juncture of her thighs. It pleased him to no end to see the answering lust blaze in her eyes as he touched her, and to see the underlying emotions that lurked there, showing how she truly felt about him. The love he could see swirling and mixing with the lust he caused, heated her gaze and it burned him to his very soul. The lust burned even brighter as his fingers slid between her thighs to stroke her most intimate secrets.

"Please." Hermione's breathless plea pulled at him and he grew impossibly hard as he rubbed and plucked and invaded her hotly. "Please... "

Severus rolled over onto his back, pulling Hermione with him until she lay atop him, her legs straddling his hips, trapping his length against her core. His fingers, caught between them, continued to plunder her sweetness, and he whispered wickedly to her, "If you want relief, you will have to find it yourself. Come, wife, what are you searching for?"

Hermione whimpered. She was boneless with pleasure and close to the edge of completion. But she was missing something, anything that would complete her journey. She whimpered again, jerking her hips, trying to increase the pressure of his fingers as they grazed her sensitive flesh, and he trembled in response as her wet heat slid along his hardness.

"Ah, ah, ah. Take your pleasure, witch. Find what you want and ease the burning you feel."

Hermione arched her hips again, trying to reach the fingers that tantalized just out of reach. It wouldn't take much to send her over the edge, and she sobbed her need. "Please," she begged again, this time easing forward, then back and down. Severus hissed in pleasure as Hermione's fiery wetness engulfed his length. With a broken sob, she quickly gained her rhythm, stroking both of them into oblivion. As she rose and fell, gripping him in her fire, there was nothing else, only the two of them reaching for completion. Suddenly, it washed over them in a raging tide. This bliss was drowning them and saving them and wrapping them in each other.

"I love you, Hermione." Whispered through the darkness.

"I love you, Severus," was whispered back.

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The sun was beginning its descent when Eileen roused Severus and Hermione from their sleep, calling them to a late lunch. She was full of questions and the need to make sure that her family was hale and whole. She had already taken charge of Alexander who had been fed and dressed for the day, when she bullied his parents into sitting down at the table. They had not been eating for very long when an owl interrupted their meal. It carried a brief note from Headmaster Dumbledore asking for their return to Hogwarts as soon as possible. There was to be a final Order meeting to discuss the events of the night before and how things would proceed from there, and Severus was needed in the lab.

"Just for once I would like to be at no one's beck and call," he grumped. "No matter what I do or where I go, there is always something I need to do for that man."

Hermione grimaced in sympathy. "Do you want me to do your lab work so you can rest? I am a competent brewer, you know."

"Yes, I know you are, and normally I would trust you to brew almost anything that the Hospital Wing needed, but I am sure that it will be held over my head if I don't do things myself." Severus threw his napkin over his almost empty plate. "No rest for the wicked, I suppose; I'll just go and get ready, and we can go back to Hogwarts."

"Can I at least help you brew?" Hermione asked.

"Of course, you daft girl; who else would I allow into my private lab?" Severus turned to his mother. "We planned to leave Alexander with you when we received our summons; I just didn't expect it to be this soon. Hermione will have her coin with her if something happens, or you can always send Posey for us."

Eileen nodded her agreement. "I don't plan to go anywhere but the back garden. There are a few things I want to do before Spring arrives and I can't do anything but plan right now. Alexander will be fine with us for a while longer. I am glad to have him here, and Posey is a wonderful nanny for him."

"I will be back when I need to feed him again. If he gets hungry before then, there are bottles in stasis in the nursery," Hermione added. "I filled them before we left yesterday. Posey knows where they are."

"I am quite capable of taking care of one small boy, I think. You two need to go before someone comes looking for you instead of just owling."

Eileen shooed Severus and Hermione off and settled down to spend time with her grandson. "You are so small, my boy, very much like your father before he sprouted up on me. You and I, we're going to get along famously."

Alexander yawned hugely in agreement and drifted off into a contented sleep.

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Apparition from the Vale wasn't as bad as it had been, as the secrecy was no longer needed. Still, because of the innate protections of the Vale, they had to travel to Argante on foot before they could Apparate to Hogwarts. After walking along in silence for a good while, Severus spoke hesitantly. "Hermione, I have an errand I need to complete before I can go to Hogwarts. I am asking for your absolute trust and discretion on this. After we have finished we will talk if you like."

Hermione absorbed Severus' rather ominous sounding statement and pondered on her answer. It didn't take long for her to make up her mind and respond accordingly. "Severus, I trust you with my life. Whatever it is that you need to do, you can count on me no matter what."

Severus breathed a sigh of relief. "I will remind you of that after we reach our destination," he muttered wryly. Severus wrapped his arms around his wife and with a muted pop, they vanished.

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The old house that appeared before them was quite dilapidated. Shingles were missing from the roof, the porch banister was falling down, and part of the porch itself was sagging. Hermione looked askance at the crumbling facade and asked her husband, "Is it safe? Are you sure we are at the right place?"

"Don't forget, my love, there is magic afoot." Severus led Hermione up the weed-infested drive, and she shivered when they reached the protections surrounding the house.

Stepping through a layer of wards, suddenly Hermione saw a small ivy covered cottage in place of the old house. She looked up at Severus with shining eyes. "It IS magic! What a wonderful place after all! Is it ours or just some random cottage you chose? I know the wards are yours and there are no others, so it can't be someone else's home. Who lives here?"

"Daft girl, you will get all your answers and more soon enough," Severus answered with affection. "Now let's go in and take care of my errand."

They walked up the steps, through the front door and Severus led Hermione to the small kitchen. "Sit, and I will get you a cup of tea. And please stay calm; this is going to be a long story..."

Before Hermione could answer, the cottage's occupant walked through the door. "Oh, thank Merlin, you survived... I was... Why is she here?"

Hermione just stared in shock as Severus demanded silence and then started his explanation.

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Hogwarts Castle was strangely quiet without the laughter and voices of the students that should be in school at this time of year. Considering that a battle had been just fought, and the injured and dead that were now ensconced in the Hospital Wing, the Headmaster and staff declared that the first of February would be the beginning of the new school term. That gave the Order and everyone who fought against Tom Riddle and the Death Eaters an opportunity to gather themselves together and to heal the wounded and hold memorials for the dead. It also gave them time to show the Muggle-borns that they would be safe again in the Wizarding World.

Severus and Hermione found themselves brewing potions almost as soon as they reached the castle and Madam Pomfrey realised they were available. They had stayed longer at the cottage than they had planned, so they made a quick trip to Diagon Alley to pick up supplies as an excuse for their lateness in arriving.

"Severus, I need Bruise Paste and Blood Replenishing Potion, something to ease the Cruciatus Curse, and as much Dreamless Sleep as you can create." The matron rattled off a list that would have stocked St. Mungo's for months. "I know I'm asking a lot of you, but I'm nearly out of potions, and I'm down to the patients that were the worst of the injured."

Severus waved away the explanation. "I understand, Poppy. Just give Hermione your list and whatever else you can think of. I will be in my lab checking the ingredients stores. I tried to get what I remembered being low on, but there may be some of my rarer ingredients that I need to supplement."

Poppy nodded and commandeered Hermione as Severus made his escape to the dungeons. "I appreciate the help, dear; I know that you have to be as exhausted as the rest of us, and I'm sure you're missing your little one. I promise that I won't need you and Severus for anything after the potions stores have been restocked."

Hermione laid a comforting hand on Madam Pomfrey's arm. "Everything's fine; we knew we would need to come back. Eileen is pleased to have Alexander to herself for a bit, and Severus and I need to feel like we're doing something."

"Call me Poppy, dear. Now let's get you that list."

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It had taken the better part of a week, but potions were brewed, memorials and funerals were held, and trials were conducted. The last remnants of the Death Eaters were dead or in Azkaban, those that were forced into service, whether by coercion or spell were allowed to go home, but were heavily monitored to be on the safe side. Hogsmeade became the site of a new Wizarding cemetery that held the remains of those who had died on the side of the Light during that battle at Bodmin Moor. There was also a small stone marker erected to the memory of Luna Lovegood and Alice Longbottom, who had gone on to Avalon and their reward for sacrifices made. The final meeting of the Order of the Phoenix was sombre, yet filled with relief and hope for a better future. The night before the children were to return to Hogwarts, Headmaster Dumbledore hosted a dinner for his Order and their families. The next day, everyone would return to their lives as though nothing had happened. Teachers would teach, Ministers would minister, and students would attempt to learn. In his closing remarks, before dinner was finished, Albus added one last thing.

"Everyone, remember to keep the last Tuesday of April free from plans. We are all invited to the Vale of the Carn to visit, and to witness Severus and Hermione Snape as they make their handfasting vows permanent. Owls will be sent closer to the date as they will be asking some to participate in the rituals. Until then, farewell, my friends."

## Chapter Fourteen

### *Chapter 14 of 14*

Hermione Granger disappeared from her home and is presumed dead. Nearly two years later, she returns to Hogwarts, guardian of a secret that could end the war with Voldemort once and for all.

Thanks once again to my most fabulous cheerleader and beta, peskipiksi. You have made my writing so much better! Thanks for the friendship! Once again, I don't own, just dabble...

It was the beginning of April and the Vale was once again beginning to bud. Even though the nights could still get frigid, the days were passably warm. There was a feeling of sunshine in the air even on the cloudiest of days. One last heavy dusting of late snow was holding on to the newly greening trees that lined the garden in back of the Vale Lodge. The small pavilion ensconced there was once again draped in finery that spoke of Spring and rebirth and renewal. It had been a year and a day since the site had last been used, and rather than being solitary as it had been before, now it was filled with friends and family gathered to see the handfasting vows between Severus and Hermione Snape finalised. The lively chatter that filled the room faded away when the imposing figure of Severus Snape entered the magical circle cast for the occasion. Eileen Snape, resplendent in her ritual finery, followed her son and took her place as mother of the groom.

The sound of sweetly tinkling windchimes and the fragrance of apples heralded the arrival of the bride. Hermione appeared in the doorway of the Pavilion, dressed in the same robes and ribbons of blue and pink, black and white that she had worn for that first ceremony. She was accompanied this time by Lucius Malfoy, who had graciously accepted her friendship and extended his, both having been bound in mutual grief over the loss of one woman, one friend. Lucius led Hermione to the centre of the pavilion and helped her to kneel in her place on the cushion where Severus waited. Placing a soft kiss on the back of Hermione's hand, he then took his place opposite Eileen to stand in as Hermione's family.

Andromeda Tonks, as the only other living member of the Vale ladies, followed next. She carried Alexander so he could be part of the handfasting to be followed by his Naming Ceremony. After Hermione and Severus completed their ritual, they would then ask the blessings of Avalon on their son and the day would be complete.

The handfasting ceremony, being one to forever seal the vows between Hermione and Severus, was more ornate in its trappings, yet simpler in its vows. Eileen, as representative of the groom's family, said a blessing over the company and asked for the original binding ribbons to be brought forward. There was some interest in this, as no one could work out who was to be in charge of the ribbons when all the people important to the couple were seated to watch the ceremony having done their part in the decorating of the ritual area. Eileen merely smiled as the small group gasped, and a father was once again face to face with his child.

Draco Malfoy stepped through the gathering, bearing the handfasting ribbons belonging to Severus and Hermione. He didn't speak except in ritual answer to Eileen's questions and then Lucius', then he stepped back into a spot opposite Andromeda and Alexander to allow the vows to continue. Hermione, her smile blazing brighter than before, and Severus, answering with a smile lit in his eyes, repeated together the words that would seal them as one, for eternity.

"Heart to Heart

Soul to Soul

Body to Body

Forever and Always

So mote it be... "

The company repeated in unison, "So mote it be," and the ritual was finished.

Andromeda then brought the baby forward and said the blessing over him, while his parents swore vows to him. To complete the ritual, Lucius and Andromeda were asked

to serve as Godparents and, after accepting, repeated their own vows to Alexander. The day was complete, and Hermione invited the attendees to join them inside the Lodge for food and fellowship.

As Severus helped Hermione to her feet, Lucius remained kneeling in his place, staring at Draco. Hermione placed a hand on his shoulder and said, "Go to him, Lucius, you've both longed for this moment." For the first time in over a year, father and son were reunited with tears and thanks.

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It had been many years since the Vale of the Carn had enjoyed the sound of voices raised in happiness and love. The Lodge rang with laughter and tears as the wedding party and their friends celebrated the love of Severus and Hermione, the addition of Alexander to their family, and the reuniting of Lucius and Draco.

"I still don't understand; where have you been hiding all this time?" Molly asked Draco. "When it got out that you had not returned to school, everyone thought you were dead or had joined the Death Eaters." She turned to Hermione. "And where did you get an illegal Portkey? Children shouldn't..."

Arthur interrupted his wife's spiel before it could get any worse. "I don't believe that Hermione has ever been a child; she is an Old Soul if I have ever seen one."

Hermione laughed in agreement. "That is probably true, and, Molly, I am a married woman with a baby. I don't think I count as a child any longer. Besides, I knew that a Portkey might come in handy sooner or later. I read up on them after the Quidditch World Cup and made a set for Harry, one for Ron, and one for myself. They were to take the user to a rendezvous place that only we knew about and they could only be activated by one of us."

Molly nodded, sighing, "I know you aren't children in my head, but it is hard to realise in my heart that you have all grown up, and not only that, but you have fought in a war."

Draco jumped in before Molly could continue down that line of thought. "Hermione saved me."

At the look of puzzlement from some in the group, Draco continued. "Hermione knew that we couldn't both get out of the Dark Lord's dungeon. If she had even tried to walk from the room, she would have died because of the collar he forced on her. Even though I was ordered to torture her, she knew I was there against my will and she activated that Portkey before I even knew what was happening."

Hermione laid her hand on Draco's arm and smiled at him a bit sadly. "All I needed to know was in your eyes."

Lucius spoke up at this time. "Where did you Portkey to, and why not seek sanctuary at Hogwarts? I looked for you for months before I began to believe you were dead."

"The Portkey was to take the user to the Shrieking Shack. Unfortunately, because I was already kneeling on the ground and was caught off-guard, I wasn't able to prepare and landed hard. I didn't have any balance and fell into a mirror that was propped against the wall. The mirror shattered and the glass cut me badly. I would have bled to death if Severus hadn't been using the Shack to Apparate in and out of."

Severus joined in with his portion of the tale. "I came in not too long after Draco Portkeyed. I found him half-dead from blood loss and was preparing to take him to the castle when I got Lucius' Patronus asking for an urgent meeting. I cleaned him up and did what I could to heal him. When I finished my meeting, I knew I had to hide Draco, so took him to a property my mother's family owned. It hadn't been used in years, so a few well-placed spells, and Draco had a hiding place."

"But why not tell me? You didn't think that it was important?" demanded Lucius.

"When I first hid Draco I had no idea where you stood. After half a year, Draco and I decided that it would be best for him to stay hidden. If I had told you after what happened with Narcissa, I am not sure you could have carried out our plan. Revenge would have been foremost in your mind. That and reconnecting with Draco," Severus answered.

Lucius nodded. "You are probably right, my friend. I was able to stay the course, because I was focused on destroying the Dark Lord and getting to Bella. Draco would have split my attention from what I needed to do."

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The camaraderie and stories continued throughout the evening, everyone sharing their experiences with the war and stories of long passed family and friends, and as the hour grew late, Posey announced that beds were ready for any who wanted one, and breakfast would be served at eight the next morning.

Hermione smiled broadly. "We hope that everyone will stay for a few days. It has been wonderful to have all of our friends and family with us today. Severus and I appreciate everyone joining us on our special day and want to let you know that all of you are welcome in the Vale at any time. We have decided to make this our permanent home."

This announcement was met with well-wishes and thanks. Hermione had to raise her hands and ask for quiet to finish her little speech. "I would also like to let everyone know that the Vale is flourishing again and will soon have a complete circle to carry on the work of the Lady of the Lake. Luna Lovegood was the last of her mother's immediate line, but, with Nimue's help we have found the next Lady in her line. Luna had a half-sister that no one, not even her father, knew about. She will be joining us here, soon, to take her place as a Lady of the Vale. It seems Luna's mother had prophetic dreams and chose to act on one she had experienced several times. I hope that everyone will make Selene welcome when she arrives."

"Andromeda has chosen to keep her home in London, but she will be here for important occasions. And finally, Neville has agreed to visit often, and when his daughter is born, she will be raised here. And, of course, all of you are welcome in our home any time. We want to make the Vale into the home it was always meant to be."

Ron and Harry, who had been standing with Neville while Hermione made her announcements, turned to him in shock. "You're going to be a dad? Who's the mum, you ol' sneak?" Harry asked, while Ron punched Neville's arm.

Ron didn't speak, but clapped Neville on the back.

Neville turned beetroot red, but managed to answer, "Hannah Abbot. We got together right before the Christmas hols. I didn't even know Hannah was pregnant until the Lady told me when she came for mum and Luna. Hannah was going to get rid of the baby, but I told her I wanted her, even if she didn't. Hannah said it was fine, and me and Grandmum will be bringing the baby here when she comes."

Congratulations were offered and the party continued on into the night.

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The full moon reached its apex, spilling brilliant white light over the Vale. The sacred grove was alive with ritual and chanting, and then the sounds of splashing and voices on the river. Hermione Snape, eldest Lady of the Vale by virtue of bloodline, stood at the top of the circle and welcomed Nimue and her ladies to the initiation ceremony.

Hermione waited until everyone was in place then began the chant to pledge the newest Lady to the Vale.

Alice Longbottom knelt in front of the altar in the centre of the circle and made her vows and offerings. Her long blonde hair gleamed in the moonlight as her grandmother gently pulled it back and secured it with a silver circlet. The final incantation was spoken over her and Nimue pressed her lips to Alice's forehead, leaving behind the crescent moon symbol all her Ladies wore.

"I am so proud of you, my dear," the elder Alice told her namesake. I know we have only seen each other a few times, but know I love you and am always with you.

Welcome to the Circle."

Nimue made her way around the group and blessed her ladies, giving advice and words of wisdom.

"Hermione, you have returned the Vale to what it was meant to be. I thank you and Avalon thanks you. All of you have fulfilled everything that you were meant to do. Know that we are always with you and now, with the full strength of the Vale returned, I and the Ladies who have gone before you can pass from Avalon to this place at any time. The veil between these places has finally disappeared. Never let us be forgotten again."

When Nimue was finished with her speech, Hermione led the circle in finishing the ceremony and they turned to make their way to the Lodge. The impromptu celebration continued until dawn began to show in the Eastern sky and the Lady of the Lake and her priestesses returned to the barge moored on the Vale River. Once again, they sailed away, this time with promises to return more often.

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The years in the Vale were good ones. Severus remained the Potions master at Hogwarts, but chose to return to his home at the Lodge rather than to live at the school. He used his hidden Apparition circle that connected to a secure spot along the Vale river. No one ever found out how he was able to go so quickly between the two places.

Hermione never gave up on her education, choosing to study everything she could get her hands on, and, between the libraries in the Vale and at Hogwarts coupled with the library at Camelot, she grew in knowledge and wisdom that she happily shared with any who needed her help. She filled her days with her three children -- Alexander, who was training to take his father's place as not only the Vale Knight, but also a Potions master; Serenity, destined to be a Lady of the Vale, and the youngest, Corinna, she of the bushy hair and know-it-allness. Hermione filled her nights with books and with her husband of whom she was inordinately fond.

Life ebbed and flowed, loved ones passed and new ones were born, but the Vale was a permanent fixture in the lives of those who had fought for the Light. The strength of magic had returned, and those that had gone before were allowed to come back and forth to visit the living as they were needed, in good times and bad. All of this was the result of two people who decided to take a chance and trust that, even when shattered like a pane of glass, a person could be put back together, and sometimes the patterns in stained glass shards were the most beautiful of all.