

The Scarf

by AnneM

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Chapter 1 - A Time and a Place for Everything

Chapter 1 of 5

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Chapter 1 A Time and a Place for Everything

Weep, as if you thought of laughter!

Smile, as tears were coming after!

Marry your pleasures to your woes:

And think life's green well worth its rose!

Song - Verse 1

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Hermione Granger felt there was a time and a place for everything. As it said in the Bible, there was a time for rejoicing, and a time to refrain from rejoicing. In a few short days, Bill Weasley would be marrying the woman of his dreams, which proved to serve a painful reminder that even in this time of sorrow a time when their world was falling apart there was still a time and a place for everything.

Although Hermione felt guilty shopping for a dress for the wedding when she knew that she had just Obliviated her parents' memories, and had sent them packing to Australia only a week ago, life went on, as it would with or without her. Her earlier thought remained, now was a time for rejoicing and celebrating a continuation of life and love with the wedding of Bill and Fleur. In addition, with the wedding came the need for some normalcy for them all before the uncertainty that was surely to follow.

Keeping in mind that she was shopping for a dress and nothing more, she couldn't resist stopping by the cosmetic counter of the large Muggle department store, when she saw a display with her mother's favourite perfume. Though Hermione usually only wore rose water or perfumed lotion, her mother always wore the perfume, 'Beautiful' and seeing the large display with the gorgeous perfume bottles made her feel nostalgic and wistful, and it also made her miss her mother something fierce.

Lifting a sample atomizer, Hermione sprayed a touch of the perfume on her wrist, waved her wrist in the air, and then sniffed. It smelled divine.

"Would you like some today?" the sales clerk asked.

Hermione discreetly shook her head no and then said, "No, I love it, but it's too expensive. It reminds me of my mother. She always wears it."

Smiling at the woman, Hermione placed the perfume sample back on the counter and walked further into the store. Stopping shortly beyond the perfume counter, she spied a rack with merino wool scarves. Much of merino wool came from Australia, and this too made her think of her parents. She picked up a multicoloured tartan scarf, placed the soft wool to her face, and closed her eyes. She would need a warm scarf wherever Ron, Harry, and she might be heading this fall. Even if she couldn't buy the perfume, she could buy this pretty scarf. At least it was practical.

After purchasing the scarf, she began to peruse the racks of dresses. Hermione kept her guard up, the words of Professor Moody in the recesses of her mind... "Constant vigilance!" In fact, neither Ron nor Lupin thought it was a good idea for Hermione to come shopping by herself today. Lupin warned her that Voldemort would love to weaken Harry by striking at his friends. She already knew that, hence the reason she sent her parents away. Still, she needed this last little time alone. No one understood that, and she wouldn't be able to make them understand, so she wouldn't even try.

Besides, she could take care of herself. She had her wits about her, and her wand, and she was in a large Muggle department store. She would buy her dress and then go right back to the Burrow, where in two short days they would rescue Harry from the Dursleys, and then the wedding would commence a few days after that.

Pulling out a short, lilac dress, Hermione almost scoffed aloud when she saw the price tag. Placing it back on the rack, she fingered a few others when her hand came to rest on a blue dress.

"That one wouldn't look good on you," a man said from behind her.

Hermione jumped, and almost pulled her wand out from the hidden pocket of her jeans. Behind her stood a man, tall, late twenties to early thirties, with long dark hair, worn mostly in braids and dreadlocks. He was handsome in a rogue sort of way, and his manner of dress was haphazard and certainly not usual or the norm. If Hermione had to guess, she would say that he was no ordinary Muggle. This man was a wizard. The only thing she had to figure out was if he was friend or foe.

"Who are you?" she hissed in almost a whisper.

"A friendly, fashion-forward, stranger, who was content to mind my own business, merely standing a few meters away, watching a pretty girl pick out a pretty dress, but then I had to intervene, you see. I can't have you pick out such a horrid colour, no, no, no, it would never do."

He walked around her slowly. All the hair stood out on the back of her neck as he came closer. Everything about this man spelled out danger. She was certain he must know who she was, yet she didn't know who he was. He didn't seem to be a Death Eater, but if he wasn't, then who was he? As he passed by her shoulder his body brushed against hers and she shivered involuntarily, cursing inwardly.

When he appeared in front of her again, he was holding up a stunning, red dress. "This one would look beautiful on you. A beautiful frock for a beautiful girl."

"Who are you?" she asked once more with more force, pushing aside his raised arm holding the dress.

His other hand came up quickly and grabbed her wrist. He pulled her to him and said, "Where are your manners, Miss Granger? You should tell me your name first." Then he winked at her.

"Apparently you already know my name, you imbecile," she seethed.

He smiled at her, with perfectly straight, white teeth. Being this close to him, she held her breath, expecting him to smell badly, or to be unclean, but he appeared neither. He smelled... good. He smelled like musk, leather, and man. His clothes were different, but clean and tidy. His hair was long, but it too seemed cleaned.

He continued to smile and she continued to frown, even wincing faintly as his fingers dug into the tender flesh of her wrist. Sensing this, he loosened his hold slightly, as amusement continued to cross his handsome face. "My name isn't imbecile, it's Scabior. One 'S' and one 'R', if you're so inclined."

"How quaint, you know how to spell," she mocked, removing her hand from his. "And is this your last name or first name?"

"Yes," he answered vaguely.

She moved away from him, a nagging fear deep in her chest. She shouldn't have come out alone. She was in danger. This man knew who she was. Shame shot through her when she turned to leave and she was caught unaware as his arm circled around her waist, gently yet firmly. She swayed slightly, temporarily losing her balance. She fell back against him dropping her small bag with her scarf.

He steadied her, her back against his chest, as he whispered in her ear, "It's not safe for little mudblood friend's of Harry Potter's to be out by themselves, especially when there's a price tag on their heads. Your head has the highest price there can be, beautiful. Hmm, just like the perfume you tried on moments ago."

She took a deep breath, pushed away from him, pulling down on his arm in the process, and turned to see amusement on his good-looking face. "What are you saying?" she asked.

In a perfectly conversational tone, he asked, "Did you know that a particular Death Eater by the name of Greyback has a thing for you? He wants you for his own. He'd eat you for dinner and have nothing left for lunch, sweet thing." Suddenly, his eyes narrowed. "That's the trouble... you're used to taking care of everyone else, but not yourself, are you? I wonder, who's there to take care of you, beautiful?"

"I can take care of myself, and don't you forget it. I don't know who you are, or who you think I am, but leave me alone," she warned, backing away from him, until her hip hit hard against a dress display. She looked around the busy department store. She couldn't Disapparate away from here. She needed to go into the dressing room and leave from there, where no one could see her.

They stared at each other in silence, she wary without a trace of fear, he seemingly amused without a trace of unease. She passed by him, head held high.

He gave her a half grin, leaned into her, and grabbing her wrist again, (the one she sprayed with the perfume) and he took a deep sniff. Exhaling slowly he said, "Now that I'll remember." Waiting a heartbeat, her wrist still close to his nose, each breath scanning her skin, making her pulse skip and beat wildly, he asked, "Aren't you even going to tell me goodbye, beautiful? I don't know when we'll get to see each other again."

She snatched her wrist from his once more and warned, "Really, you have the wrong person. I'm not who you think I am, now leave me alone." Then she scrambled to the dressing room and Disapparated to the Burrow as quickly as she could.

She didn't get a dress, and she forgot her scarf, so overall it was a wasted trip. She also never told a soul what happened that day.

The day before the wedding, a package arrived by owl to the Burrow with her name on it. She was alone on the front porch when it arrived wrapped in brown paper, tied with a string, with a card stating it was for her. Opening it slowly, unsurely, wondering the entire time, what it could be, and if she should tell Harry, Ron, or Lupin, she gasped when she finally saw the contents.

Inside were her scarf, a bottle of the perfume and the red dress.

Chapter 2 - It's Called a Game

Chapter 2 of 5

Hermione meets Scabior again in a field before Bill's wedding

Chapter 2 It's Called a Game

We have met later it is too late to meet,

O friend, not more than a friend!

Death's forecome shroud is tangled round my feet,

And if I step or stir, I touch the end,

In this last jeopardy,

Can I approach thee, I, who cannot move?

How shall I answer thy request for love?

Look in my face and see.

A Denial - Verse One

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

On the morning of the wedding, while preparing for a houseful of guests along with Ron, Ginny, and Harry, Hermione got a prickly feeling along the base of her skull. It was similar to the feeling she got when she went shopping at the department store when she had met that man named Scabior. That was when she knew... he was here, somewhere close by. He had to be here.

She had to know more about him. She had to know if this man was a danger to Harry, if he was a Death Eater, what his purpose was, what he wanted, who he was, why he was here, and what he wanted from her. Therefore, while the boys were safely setting up the chairs in the tent, and Ginny was fastening white ribbons to the outside of the chairs, she slipped off toward the field beside the Burrow. For some unknown reason that was where she sensed he might be.

With a backward glance toward Ron, and undetected by anyone in the Weasley family, or any member of the Order, (who were standing guard) she slipped among the high grass and stalks of summer wheat, toward something she didn't even know. She would stop this man from hurting her boys, even at a risk to her own life if necessary. Once she was in the middle of the field, with her wand at her side, she stood as still as she could, somehow knowing he would come to her. She didn't know if that thought thrilled her, or scared her, or was a combination of both. A light breeze whispered across the field, ruffling the tops of the tall grass and tufts of wheat, which were taller than she was, and she waited.

Somehow, she knew he wouldn't disappoint her.

Disgusted with herself, she knew she shouldn't seek him out. He was dangerous. Pulse racing wildly, she whirled around to run out of the field, when she heard him call out, "Where are you going in such a hurry, beautiful? You only just got here."

She stopped dead in her tracks, an overwhelming sense of dread flooding every pore of her body. She turned in complete disorder, but couldn't see him. Finding it hard to swallow, her fear quickly turned to alarm and then to anger. "What do you want? How did you find us? How did you breach the wards?"

Without answering her question, the voice said, "You look very pretty in your red dress, but then again, I knew you would."

Clenching her wand tighter, she whipped around the other way, squared her shoulders, and brought her chin up in an act of defiance. "Where are you?"

"And you have the perfume on, too," he stated, still ignoring her query. "Again, as I knew you would. You'd smell wonderful, perfume or not. I have an excellence sense of smell. That's what makes me such a good Snatcher, you know. Oh, that's an answer to one of your questions, darlin'."

The sun was starting to glow higher in the sky, and Hermione raised a hand over her brows to block the brightness from her gaze as she looked around. She had never heard the term 'Snatcher' before, but could only imagine what it meant. She was about to Disapparate back into the house when she spied the man approaching toward her left side. Every step he took toward her made her heart pound harder, faster, and more intense.

He was right in front of her before he spoke again. "Look at you, my darlin', but you are a sweet thing. No wonder the werewolf wants you so badly."

Hermione held her ground, her wand still tightly in her right hand. She looked closely in both of his hands and didn't see a wand. "We have wards up. You shouldn't have been able to breach them."

"Yes you do and I wager they're pretty good ones," he said with a slight smile. Biting his bottom lip, to bite back a smile, he said, "I find the freckles on your cheekbones and nose appealing in the bright sunlight, beautiful." He kept his pace slow, but he was walking around her, just as he did in the department store days earlier, and just as before, she felt disjointed, and highly aware of him sexually, and she didn't like it at all, or at least she didn't think she should.

"You're trespassing, and almost every member of the Order of the Phoenix are either already here, or will be here shortly, so you should leave," she said firmly.

Acting almost annoyed, yet coy, he said, "Now why would I want to do that, especially when I went to so much trouble to get here? It truly wasn't easy, you know, but I appreciate your help."

Now Hermione looked annoyed. She turned to face him, as he was at her back, and she harked, "I didn't help you come here today! I never wanted to set eyes on you again!"

He laughed. "Says the woman who's wearing my dress and my perfume."

She hissed, "I didn't have time to buy another dress because you chased me out of the store!"

"Really now? I chased you, did I? Let's re-examine that statement. I think we were having a nice little conversation, you overreacted, and then you rushed away." He clucked his tongue, "Tsk, tsk, yes, I can see how talking to you, offering you fashion advice, and telling you how pretty you were, was so wrong. I should be punished for that. Oh, and what about the perfume?" He leaned in closer and took a deep whiff. She leaned away. "Your natural scent is one of the strongest, most intoxicating smells I've ever encountered. I truly think that's why the werewolf wants you, but combined with this perfume, it's overwhelming, that's what it is."

He was so close that she placed her hands on his chest, even the hand holding her wand, and she tried to push him away.

He grabbed her hands swiftly, with an iron grip, and kept them on his chest, left his hand on top of hers. His smile faded away. "Now why did you have to go and touch me? That wasn't good. You sealed your fate now, beautiful."

"I just wanted you to leave," she said in a whisper.

"I can never leave you now," he said back, leaning closer yet, inhaling more, his nose sinking into her hair, then skimming the sensitive skin of her neck and collarbone. She cringed and tried to pull away.

He finally let go of her hands and she stumbled back a few steps. "As to how I got here," he said, answered a question she asked at the start, "it was the scarf, darlin'. It connects us. I placed a locating spell on it. I couldn't place a spell like that on something like the perfume, besides you told the girl your mother wore it, so it might have been a gift for her. And I didn't know if you would keep the dress or not, but you bought the scarf, so I knew you'd keep it."

Hermione felt dazed. With shallow breaths, she was aware that she had brought this on herself. She had been so stupid. All of this was her fault. Suddenly, she rushed him again, anger seeping out of her. She placed her wand under his chin, grabbed his leather coat with her free hand and said, "If you so much as lay a dirty hand on Ron or Harry, I'll kill you myself, is that understood? I'll kill you! You leave us in peace and never return!"

Staring at her with eyes that showed no fear, he said, "I can't make you any promises, sweetness, but chances are the Death Eaters will get your friends first. Anyway, my job isn't exactly as important as all that. I'm a Snatcher, as stated previously, and the best there is. My job is to find mudbloods, and bring them back to the Ministry."

Then he smiled down at her, placed a hand around her waist, and tight as an iron band, his other hand came up to wrap around her wrist, to pull her wand down from his chin.

She was doomed. This was the end. It was over for her before it began. She had failed Harry in the worst possible way. Now he might never succeed without her help. How could she have been so stupid?

If she screamed, would anyone hear her? Would it be better to die now, or have this man take her back to the Ministry? What would happen to her there? True, she hadn't registered as the new law dictated, but what punishment would be imposed against her because of it?

As all these questions swirled around her brain, he cocked his head to the side and said, "Why so quiet, beautiful? Where's all your fight?"

"Are you going to kill me?" she asked, her head tilting backwards, "because I have to tell you, I won't make it easy for you."

"Good, because I don't like it easy. The fun is in the game, sweetheart. The chase. The catch," he said, his face so close to hers that she trembled. He whispered these last words, "The snatch."

"Yet you have an unfair advantage, if you used the scarf to locate me, don't you?" she accused. "How much fun is it for you when you cheat?"

He raised his eyebrows, smiled a sexy smile, and then lowered his lips so close to hers that she thought he was going to kiss her and he said, "I like cheating almost as much as I like snatching. It all goes hand in hand, but don't worry or fret. The game hasn't begun yet. You go to your little wedding tonight. Have fun, dance, look pretty, and be the belle of the ball. You'll be every man's wet dream tonight. The chase will start later."

A breeze lifted her hair, causing it to brush forward, fanning his cheek. He inhaled again. "I'll remember you forever, and I'll never have trouble finding you, scarf of not, beautiful."

Struggling to get out of his grasp, her nipples tightened as they chaffed against the material of her gown as it rubbed against the leather of his jacket, and heat suffused throughout her body and pooled between her legs. Finally, she had enough whereto well to state, "Stop calling me that, you big oaf!"

He threw his head back and laughed outright. "Big oaf!" He looked her right in the eyes, pulled her closer, and repeated. "Big oaf? Fine, call me whatever you'd like, but I call you 'beautiful' because that's what you are, perfume or not. Hasn't anyone ever called you that before, such as your little ginger boyfriend, or the lord and saviour, Harry Potter?"

"Don't talk about them," she said. She managed to get her hands out from between their bodies, and hit his chest several times. "Don't you ever, ever mention their names! Don't you talk about them, or ever hurt them! I mean it! I'll kill you if you hurt them!"

The man's jaw clenched, anger flashed in his eyes. He shifted her in his arms, holding her even tighter, if possible. Any resemblance of a smile faded, replaced with a grim frown, and fire in his eyes. "I shouldn't let you go. I should take you to the Ministry right now, or give you to Greyback, and let him rape and torture you, teach you that the only place for mudbloods is in the mud."

Her eyes widened with shock and she stared at him speechless. Even as he was saying such cruel things in retaliation to her, his right hand was stroking her back up and down. First, he was touching her hair, then the bare skin above the dress, then the soft silk of her dress. It made her feel soft, wanted, desired and she hated him for causing such a kaleidoscope of feelings to jump to the surface.

She had a funny feeling he felt them too, because his eyes strayed from her eyes down to her heaving chest, then back to her lips, which she licked self-consciously. Then, before she could protest, his mouth came down on hers, his lips touching hers softer than she could imagine, after such cruel words had escaped them moments ago.

She froze. This was such madness. This man was her enemy, he was a threat to them all, yet he was kissing her, and she wanted it to continue, and he was pulling on her bottom lip with his lips, urging her mouth open, and for some insane reason she obeyed.

He loosened his grip slightly, bringing his arms around her waist and hips, and she dropped her wand, as her hands bunched into the fabric of his leather jacket. Her eyes closed when his mouth left hers to kiss her closed eyes, one by one, then he returned to her mouth, gave her another slow, agonizing kiss, then he pushed her away.

They stared at each other. For the first time, this man's feathers seemed as ruffled as hers. He pointed at her and said, "That meant nothing! You're still fair game, beautiful! Keep on your toes, because I'll be right behind you."

He bent down, picked up her wand, thrust it into her hand, and stalked away. She stood in the now empty field, arms around herself, trembling, with the noonday sun now high in the sky. She stayed there until she heard Ron and Ginny calling her name. Finally, she answered them and ran out of the field toward their voices.

Chapter 3 - Are You Lost?

Chapter 3 of 5

Hermione takes Ron and Harry by the hands and Disapparates with them to Piccadilly Circus. Yet, somehow he finds them there.

Chapter 3 Are You Lost?

Love you seek for, presupposes,

Summer heat and sunny glow.

Tell me, do you find moss-roses,

Budding, blooming, in the snow?

Snow might kill the rose tree's root

Shake it quickly from your foot,

Lest it harm you as you go.

Verse 1 - Questions And Answers

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Hermione found it hard to breathe. How had the Death Eaters found them? How had they breached their wards? The wedding reception was well guarded by members of the Order of the Phoenix, but then again, the Ministry was supposed to have been the safest place in their world yet it had fallen as well.

Everything happened at once. Mass confusion and chaos reigned everywhere. Wedding guests began to Disapparate away. Death Eaters began to Apparate inside their wards. Order members began to duel Death Eaters, and she grabbed Harry's hand with her left hand, Ron's hand with her right and Disapparated them to the first place that came to her mind.

Piccadilly Circus.

She had been ready to go for weeks, with everything packed away in her little beaded bag. Still she wished they had more time to prepare. Holding their hands tightly, they walked along the busy streets, looking at every face they saw along the way, wondering, could this person be a Death Eater, could that person be one, too?

Hermione ushered the boys down a dark, almost abandoned-looking alley, explained how she had packed their things in her bag, and then she reached inside and retrieved clothing for them both. She told them to go deep into the alley and to change and that she would wait, wand at the ready, at the mouth of the alley for them to finish, and then she would trade places with them.

Looking at her surroundings closely, her mouth was dry, and she felt as if her throat was closing tightly. Her bag gripped securely in her left hand, her right hand in the secret pocket of her red dress gripping her wand, suddenly, she felt that same, similar feeling at the base of her skull down the back of her neck that she felt that day in the department store and in the field outside the Burrow.

She didn't know if she could handle seeing 'him' right now here of all places of all times. If she saw him right now, she would have no choice but to regard him as her enemy, for the fight had begun, the war was staged, it was the beginning of the end.

Scanning the crowd, first to the left, then to the right, she only saw nameless, faceless Muggles. Harry walked out of the alley first, startling her when he touched her bare arm.

"Oh!" she sighed.

"Sorry, Hermione. Here, let me stand guard and you go back and change now," he urged. She nodded, passing Ron and trash bins, and rubbish littering the ground. She stepped over boxes, planks, and around empty crates until she found a somewhat private area in the dark, deserted, damp alleyway.

Reaching deep inside her bag, her wits reeling and her senses keen and on alert, her stomach lurching, she saw the familiar person she least wanted to see walking toward her from the mouth of the alley from where Harry and Ron were supposedly standing guard.

She pulled her hand out of her bag, and reached for her wand instead of her clothing. She knew she couldn't waste one second of precious time calling for help. However, the man before her seemed unfazed by her actions. He wasn't preening, but he certainly wasn't afraid either.

"Are you lost, little girl?" he asked. "Because I happen to know that you're a long way from home."

The dark alley didn't afford much light for her to study him, yet his jaw seemed set, and his hazel eyes seemed calculated, focused and innate. He had grace, and he alluded a sort of elegance and intelligence that coiled deep within his body, waiting to spring forth, waiting to repel or sway people, whichever the case may be.

They continued to gaze at each other, and when she didn't answer, he walked ever closer. Grabbing a handful of her hair, gently, he said, "Did you run away, lovely? Are you still running? If so, I have to say, it seems that I've already caught you."

Hermione was aware that her breathing had become ragged and dull, and besides the sounds of dripping water and the distant sounds of the city streets, her breathing mingling with his were the only things she could hear.

Aware that he was still walking and as he walked he was pushing her further into the alley, she finally placed her hands on his chest. She said, "Stop." They were in the darkest part of the alley, where now he was nothing more than an outline. She sensed his masculine power, and with her hand on his chest, she felt his heart beating, and she knew it was beating as fast as hers was.

"Why are you skulking around here in this alley? What are you doing here?" she asked.

He laughed a bit and said, "Didn't I just ask you the same thing? I thought I did. And I never skulk. Are you sure you know the meaning of the word?" He placed one of his large hands, rough skin, over hers on his chest, trapping it against the leather of his coat, and under the warmth of his skin.

"I know more than you'll ever know, and you seemed to be skulking to me," she retaliated. "Why are you here?"

"Because I've got a secret for you, sweetheart," he began.

"I don't care; let me go." She hesitated. "Please." She wondered if he knew Harry was close by. She wondered if Harry and Ron wondered what was taking her so long. Then, with dread, she wondered if Harry and Ron were still waiting for her. "Wait, did you hurt them... my friends?"

Suddenly, she pulled her wand from her dress pocket and pointed it at his chest. With a set jaw, a frown, and a determined gleam in her eyes, she said, "What have you done to my friends?" All rational thought left her hazy, foggy brain, and she pushed the man hard, using her shoulder against his chest, until he was up against the other side of the alley, against the other brick wall.

He had an amused look on his face. Of course, he let her push him, for he was so much larger than she was, and she knew it, and that made her even angrier, and she hit his chest with her fist and said, "Tell me right now or you'll pay!"

"Ah, sweets, I didn't know you had it in you," he said with a laugh. He grabbed both her wrists and pulled her up against him. "Calm down, calm down, lovely, calm down," he began to coo softly, even as she fought harder against his grasp. "I'm just here to give you a warning; your friends are still waiting, like proper little friends should, at the edge of the sidewalk, for you to finish dressing. Now if I was a lad, I would sneak a peek, but that's just me."

She made a strangled sort of noise in the back of her throat, and in desperation, she tried to wrench her wand hand from his grip, but he pulled her even tighter against him. "Let me go!" she commanded.

"I will, but you're wasting your time fighting, now calm down, as I said, and just listen for a minute," he insisted, the smile gone from his face, his hold slacking. Moving his hand from her wrist to hold her hand, he kept her wand hand firmly in his while his other hand released her other hand to move around to circle her waist.

Pulling her up against him, just as someone started down the alley, he said, "Time to think quickly, beautiful." Then without warning, he kissed her again. He kissed her as if he had every right to kiss her. He kissed her like he was a man on a mission, like he was a man with a thirst, and she was his well.

Someone walked behind them, and he continued to kiss her, his mouth moving tantalizing over hers, his tongue snaking out to glide across her bottom lip and then inside her mouth to caress her tongue. Heat swelled in the bottom recesses of her stomach, flared to each limb, and she melded her body against his.

He only broke the kiss, his mouth hovering closely over hers, when the person behind him said, "How about giving me a taste of that sweet little thing."

Tucking her head protectively into his chest with one hand on the back of her head, he said to the person behind them, "Sod off, you blimey tosser, or you'll know what's good for you."

"Fine, fine," the man said as he continued down the opposite way, his footsteps growing fainter and fainter.

Hermione lifted her head from his chest to see that he was smiling down at her. He shrugged and said, "I had to protect my reputation, didn't I, as well as my property? I didn't know it was a harmless, Muggle drunk. It could have been one of those unpleasant Death Eaters, speaking of...." And he released her.

There was really no help for it, for when he released her, she pulled back her hand to hit him, but he caught her hand in one smooth movement and then raised it to his mouth and placed a kiss upon her knuckles. She wanted to hit him more than ever after that.

Still smiling fondly at her while she was more horrified than ever, he said, "As I was saying, my love, before we were so rudely interrupted, and before you almost tried to perform bodily harm upon me, you do realize that every Death Eater under the Dark Lord's control is now out looking for your little boyfriends, right? I hope you have a better plan to keep them safe than to take them to an alley in central London."

"Are you out of your mind?" she hissed. "Of course I have a plan!" Then she realized that she really didn't have a plan and that this man had found them far too easily, and it was because of the scarf. Berating herself for keeping it in the first place, and then for packing it in the second place, she pushed away from him, then pulled it out of her beaded bag, throwing it to the pavement by their feet.

"Take it!" she ordered. "Take it back, and don't even think of following us!"

He leaned against the wall, crossed his arms, and said, "I think something might be troubling you. What is it, sweets?"

"Oh, you're so ghastly! You're so atrocious!"

"If you insist on using big words, I might have to buy a dictionary," he mocked.

She stomped her foot and asked, "What sort of little game are you playing with me? Just stop it! I won't have it. I don't want it, and I won't have it. I'm not some sort of girl who can easily be played! I'm not subject to my emotions, and I'm not turned by a compliment, nor do I think you mean anything when you kiss me. As you said the last time, it's all a game to you, but listen to me, Scabior, with one S and one R, if I'm so inclined, and listen good, I'm not playing your stupid, silly little game, do you understand?"

Turning, she started back toward the mouth of the alley, but turned back. "I won't be outsmarted by someone like you!" she huffed.

That broke him from his stupor. He pounced. Literally, he bounded from the wall and pounced onto her, backing her onto the other side of the alley in one swift movement.

"You had your say, cupcake, now I'll have mine," he mumbled, pressing her against the opposite wall with his body. She pushed at his body with her hands, but he was too strong. His elbows were beside her head, his hands in her hair, his nose trailing down the side of her face.

"I'll only say this once, so listen carefully, lovely," he said right into her ear before his tongue came out to give the whorl of her ear a small tickle. She squirmed, which he seemed to like, because he smiled against the side of her neck. Kissing the side of her neck, back up to her ear, he said, "This is a game, you're right, with everyone except for with you. I don't know why, so don't ask me, but with you it's different. Don't ever, ever expect me to admit that again."

He bit the end of her ear, harder than he should have, softer than he wanted to, and she moaned, and he grew taut, his thigh pressing between her legs. "When necessary, I'll do what I can to help you, but only you. I won't purposely go after your boys, but if the chance arises that I can get them, without you, I'll go for it, I have to. Still, I won't go after them if you're with them unless it can't be helped."

He sighed, long and hard, ragged and desperately.

She sagged, her hands now on his shoulders, her forehead resting on his chest. Biting her bottom lip to keep from responding, she shook her head back and forth. Urging her head back with his, his palm came up to cup her cheek, his middle finger sweeping away a tear she didn't even know she had shed.

Placing a hand on the middle of her chest, he pushed her up against the wall, and said, "Stay there." Moving back toward the middle of the alley, he picked up the scarf. Turning toward Hermione, he stepped in front of her and placed it around her neck, wrapping it once her neck once and then tying it, his knuckles brushing the tips of her breasts as he did.

"With this, I'll know where you are, but I'll only come when you want me to come. You'll realize how it works. Get changed and watch out for Death Eaters." Gripping her

chin and gazing into her eyes he said, "Why do I have a terrible feeling you'll be the death of me? And I rather like me, too." He smiled, laughed, and then winked at her before saying, "I wish I had something of yours to keep."

Scabior turned to leave.

"Wait!" she called to him.

He turned back.

Hermione reached inside her bag and pulled out a battered, small brown book. She handed it to him. Reading the cover, he said, *Selected Poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. Really, poems? Do I look like a bleeding poetic-reading fool?"

To which she only smiled and shrugged, then said, "You don't really look like you can read at all."

"Ah, well, that hurts, love," he remarked, taking the book in hand and tucking it in his coat. Without another word, he left. Hermione sagged against the wall of the alley, and just then, she heard Harry calling, "Aren't you dressed yet, Hermione?"

"In a minute, Harry," she called back. In a minute.

Chapter 4 - A Pulse and too Much to Bear

Chapter 4 of 5

It's Hermione's birthday and she'll cry if she wants to.

Chapter 4 A Pulse and Too Much to Bear

Oh, she fluttered like a tame bird, in

Among its forest-brothers

Far too strong for it, then drooping,

Bowed her face upon her hands

And I spake out wildly, fiercely, brutal

Truths of her and others:

I, she planted in the desert, swathed her,

Windlike, with my sands.

Lady Geraldine's Courtship

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Normally, Hermione Granger was never reckless, but lately, overloaded with 'too much' of everything... too much time on her hands, too much monotony, too much sameness, too much idle, caused her to feel a sort of recklessness, which, in turn, made her want to seek out him.

That night in the alley, he told her that if she 'needed' him, he would come. She knew she would never 'need' him in the full content of the word, yet here she was in a Muggle diner in the middle of the afternoon, her scarf in one hand (not wrapped around her neck), her wand in a hidden holster on her leg, and she was waiting for him to appear. That wasn't need that was lunacy.

While Harry, Ron, and she were busy trying to discover a way inside the Ministry so they could steal the locket from Umbridge, they had been doing things on their own during the last few weeks. Harry had been exploring more of number twelve Grimmauld Place, forever searching for his past. Ron had been listening daily on his radio for news of his family, and she had been hidden away in an old guestroom on the third floor and had studied this scarf.

And found out that it wasn't really just a scarf, was it?

She'd studied the scarf for weeks before she decided on this course of action. Detecting no dark curses on the scarf, no true tracking device, no black magic, she thought she finally understood the magic he placed on it and she wanted to see if she were right. If she were right in her assumption about the scarf, then 'need' had nothing to do with the scarf. Want... Wish... Desire... Longing... Those were better words in which to describe the spell that Scabior had placed on the simple wool article of clothing.

So, this morning, while Harry and Ron went over their plans for retrieving the locket for the umpteenth time and the Polyjuice Potion Hermione was making was still far from ready, Hermione pulled Harry's invisibility cloak out of his rucksack, told the boys she was going out for awhile, and before they could protest, she did just that.

Now she waited. In addition, it was the 19th of September no less - her birthday. And neither Harry nor Ron noticed this morning, but then again, they never really noticed any other year. Why should this year, a year that was so very different, be any different? She could scarcely believe they had been gone from their families and friends for six weeks already. In her mind, it was very apropos that she should discover the hidden magic behind the scarf on the cusp of her 18th birthday, a day that was traditional for Muggle-borns, if not for wizards, finally to feel like an adult.

Staring out the diner window, she saw that it was beginning to rain. She checked her watch again; another half an hour gone. He wasn't coming. Could she have been wrong after all? Was the scarf's magic more of a 'locator' spell, which only he could enact, not the true 'desire' or 'honing' spell that she felt had to be two way?

The waitress pulled her from her thoughts and asked her if she wanted another cup of coffee. She ordered another cup along with a chocolate cupcake so she could

celebrate her birthday, even if by herself. Expelling a long, jagged sigh, she sipped the hot liquid, her eyes darting back and forth from her place at the last booth, at the back of the diner. He wasn't coming, but it was reckless for her to want him to, and it was reckless to be here, and it was reckless to have come alone, and it was reckless to have exposed her self to danger, and someone might have followed her... and... and... damn.

Placing some Muggle money on the table, she unwrapped the long tartan scarf from around her wrist, letting it glide off her arm, where it then slipped onto the red leather seat of the booth down to the dirty green tiles of the floor. She would let it stay there on the dirty floor. If he came now, he could see that she didn't care, not one bit, not one iota.

Swiping at the frosting on the cupcake before she stood to leave, she started to put her finger to her mouth, but before she could place it there, someone grabbed her wrist, startling her. He pulled her body flush against his, smiled at her, and then brought her finger up to his lips before he placed it right into his mouth.

He sucked on it hard, his tongue swirling around the frosting on the tip. She felt the action all the way down to her toes, between her legs, through her breasts, and down to the split ends of her hair.

Pulling her finger slowly from his mouth while still holding it captive in his, he said, "Hmm, chocolate. It was good, but I personally prefer vanilla. Come to think of it, you taste a bit like vanilla, too."

She swallowed so hard she was sure he could hear it, along with her rapid pulse. Giving her a half smile, he pushed her back into the booth, none to gently, and then sat beside her, not opposite her, in the booth that looked out toward the diner.

Nodding toward the waitress, he said, "Another cup, sweets, for me and the pretty lady." He still had Hermione's hand in his, but he had moved his hand slightly so that his thumb was pressing on her pulse point as he held her hand tightly in his grasp. The woman brought their coffee, Scabior winked at her, and then after she left, he said in a low voice, "This place is chock full of Muggles. Gives me the willies, it does. Why are we here today, beautiful?"

Hermione tried to pull her hand from his, but he held on tight. Using his left hand to pick up his cup of coffee, he didn't look at her. His eyes continued to scan the diner. Hermione finally said, "Are you that offended by being here among Muggles?"

"It's not that, love," he said steadily, placing his cup back down. He let go of her hand, then moved to the seat opposite of her so that his back faced the restaurant. Placing his booted foot on the booth next to her, (to keep her from escaping?) he said, "I'm merely looking out for your friends. Where are they today?"

"You think I'd lay a trap for them by inviting you anywhere where they might be, ha!" Hermione asked, anger on her face.

He smiled again and said, "Ah, then it's just you and me here today. Is this a date? How sweet. Did you bring me flowers? Candy?" He picked up the cupcake, placed it back down, and then said, "I have to warn you, I don't snog a girl on the first date."

"You're reprehensible," she leveled with a look of disgust.

"Yet you called me here, so what does that make you?" He pointed at her and said, "By the way, I came here at your beck and call, so to speak, which begs me to ask how you discover the magic of the scarf?"

"You mean the little magical two-way honing device charm you put on it? A honing charm was a perfect thing for this, but that's the only compliment I'll give you. It's hard to imagine you were smart enough to come up with such a thing," she accused.

Scabior made a funny face. "Are you calling me dense? I'll have you know I'm quite bright. Not as smart as you're known for being, but smart as a Snatcher as you'll ever encounter, I dare say." He took another drink of coffee and added, "Or at least I hope you'll never encounter another one, but let's not go down that avenue. Tell me, lovely girl, what do you think you know about the scarf."

Hermione couldn't help but smile as she explained, "In a metaphorical extension of the idea of a honing device, 'honing' has such a complex meaning in that it means to guide toward, or move toward something, but the word 'hone' also means to single out an enemy's weaknesses. Likewise, the word 'hone' means to want very much: to long for somebody or something. The honing charm can be placed on anything mundane, and an unsuspecting person would merely have to think of someone or something that they want or desire, and it would come to them. Yes, a nice little charm if one thinks about it." Folding her arms in front of her, she gave him a 'so there' glare.

"I don't understand a blimey thing you just said to me, sweetness," he said with a grin. "Talk English please, even the Queen's English will do. Speaking of the scarf, where is it?"

Hermione glanced under the table. "On the floor."

He merely nodded. "So, now that you understand the charm on it and that it can work both ways, what do you intend to do about it?"

"I plan to leave it here so you can't follow us," she accused.

He pointed his finger at her. "I don't think so, and let me tell you why." He took the toe of his other boot (the one not beside her on the booth seat) and he brought the scarf closer to him on the floor, then he leaned down and picked it up. "I don't think you went to all this trouble to find out how this thing worked, then went to all this, I don't know, call it adventurous dangerousness today to meet me here, just to tell me to take a flying leap off a bridge somewhere. You don't want to bid me farewell, lovely girl. You want something else from me today. Spill it, what is it you want?"

"Nothing." She pushed on the foot on the seat beside her and demanded, "Now remove your foot so I can leave."

"No, no, no, not so fast, lovely girl." He threw the scarf back to her. She didn't even attempt to catch it. She let it hit her on the shoulder, and slip down to the seat beside her. "I think you came here for something else. Might as well tell me what you came for."

"Remove your foot," she ordered, trying once more to push it out of the way. He quickly reached across the yellowed Formica tabletop and grabbed her wrist.

"Remove the wand from your arse, and tell me why you called me here today, sweetness, because..." But he stopped. His thumb could across her pulse point again. She reached up with her other hand to remove his, but he grabbed that one, too. Now he had both her wrists in his hands, and he removed his foot from beside her to join his other one on the floor.

Continuing his thought while she grimaced, he said, "Because that's what you did, isn't it. You called me here today. Before, I was in perfect control of the magic of the scarf, but now that you know all about the charm, I'm at a mild disadvantage, but a disadvantage all the same."

"What do you mean?" she asked, trying in vain to pull her wrists free.

"Stop fussing so and I'll explain," he clarified. "Before, I came to you when you wanted me."

She started to protest, but he shook his head, spoke over her words, and said, "Just listen to me, sweetness, listen to me, bloody hell." He laughed, let go of her wrists, and sat back and took a long drink of his coffee. "You might think you didn't want me, but you did, but now that you know about the honing charm, you've changed things, haven't you. You've changed the magic a bit, somehow, you drew me here tonight under false pretences, such as it is."

"What?" Hermione shook her head, slightly confused.

He leaned forward, brought his hand up to her cheek, and drew a line down her face with one finger. "You've changed the game, haven't you? You said it yourself; it's a honing charm, a two-way honing charm. Meaning, it works both ways. I can find you, but bloody hell, beautiful, if I take that scarf back, you can find me too, and I can't have that, can I?"

"Why would I want to find you?" she asked with a deep breath.

"Why did you want me to come here today?" he asked softly. They sat in silence, staring at each other. His hand moved slowly back over toward hers. His thumb rubbed over her palm. "Don't fret so, you don't have to say, but you do have to take the scarf back."

"If you're afraid I'll find you, or something, throw it in the rubbish bin, but I'll leave here today without it," Hermione vowed.

He raised his brows and brought her hand up to his mouth again. The memory of how he licked the frosting from her fingertips moments ago fresh in her mind, she blushed, although this time he merely kissed her knuckles. "I'm afraid I must insist you take it. I have to know where you are now. I'm a bit obsessed with you, you see. I told you I won't hurt Potter, or your other boyfriend, not as long as you're with them and I can help it, but... well, call me sentimental, but I'm getting attached to you. Anyway, as I said, you've changed the magic a bit already, without realizing it, hence the reason I'm here today. I'm already afraid you can force me to come when I want you, too. Bloody hell, but what am I to do with you? Take the scarf back."

Still slightly wary of his meaning, she regarded him quietly for a few minutes more before she said a resounding, "No." She stood to leave. He stood as well and blocked her way.

"Aren't you afraid of being here alone? What if there were Death Eaters here?" he asked.

She looked around his body slightly and then said, "I'm not easily scared and I can take care of myself."

Bringing the back of his hand down her face, he said, "Sweetness, why should you have to, that's the question, isn't it? You should have gone wherever you sent your parents."

Hermione's eyes grew wide and she pushed him slightly. "What do you know about my parents?" she hissed. "Leave them out of it!"

"I know the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement personally searched your parents' house, but they couldn't find any sign of where they went," he leveled.

Hermione tried to quell the panic that was rising in her chest. She wouldn't show this man fear. Still, she said, "You'd better never hurt my parents."

"Still, no sign of trust. I swear. Don't have parents myself, so I don't see what all the fuss is about, but they aren't going to be touched by me, love. No worries there." He smiled again and then motioned toward a hallway near the back of the diner. It led toward the bathrooms and the back door. "Still, make old Scabior feel better about things and go out the back way, won't you, just in case the silly old Death Eaters are hanging out around front, 'right?"

Hermione started walking ahead of Scabior, feeling in her holster for her wand. She could feel his breath upon her neck; he was walking that closely to her, one hand on her shoulder. She could see that the scarf was wrapped around the hand on her shoulder. Once in the dark, narrow hallway, she turned to him and said, "I'll take the scarf back, but now that I know how to use it, I also know how not to use it, so don't expect for me to call you again."

"You never told me why you called me this time," he asked easily, pressing her body against the dark paneling near the door of the women's toilet.

Hermione wanted to tell him that it was her birthday. She wanted someone to wish her a 'happy birthday', to make her feel special, to tell you that they were sorry that she was by herself, alone, unloved, sad, lonely...yet she knew she shouldn't romanticize this man. He was dangerous. He was borderline psychotic. He was...reckless. Wait so was she.

"It doesn't matter," she offered.

Smoothing his hand down her hair, leaning closer, he said in her ear, "I bet it really does, but fine, keep your secrets. I know I plan to keep mine." He pointed toward the back door and said, "There's the back door. There really are Death Eaters on the street out front. Disapparate away after you leave the building."

She shivered slightly, then pushed away from him and nodded. Starting back down the hallway, he grabbed for her again, his hand snaking once more around her wrist.

Hermione's mouth opened, she stared at him, but no words came out. He pulled her toward him and then pushed her into the small bathroom behind him. Whipping her around quickly, confusing her, disorienting her, he practically slammed her against the fake wood of the bathroom's door. Reaching out, he took her chin in his hand, pointing her face upwards to his, and said, "Oh, and beautiful, by the way, have a very happy birthday."

Hermione stiffened, defiantly, as she gazed up at him. Then she turned her head to the right side to stare at the small frosted window high above the commode, which was broken in the corner. A tear crept down the side of her face, and she squeezed her eyes closed so that no more would escape.

Damn this man. Damn his black soul to hell and back again.

She moved her chin from his hand, so he moved his hand from her chin, down her shoulder, to her arm, and then down to her hand. Opening her eyes, she pulled her gaze from the broken, frosted window back to his eyes, and they stared at each other for many long moments. He had as much tension in his long body as she did in her agile form, and she saw heat, desire, and something foreign flicker in his gaze.

His other hand went to the pulse on her neck. "Are you going to have a happy birthday, Hermione?"

Hermione closed her eyes again at the sound of her name on his tongue. This man didn't love her. He didn't even like her, and she didn't know what she felt for him. They felt desire for each other, nothing more, and that wasn't enough, was it? Was it?

"You don't have to answer me, but you do have to open your eyes," he said against her cheek, "and well, yes, answer my question." When she looked up into his face, his eyes darkened, and she knew that if she let him kiss her again, she would be lost to him forever. If she let desire overtake her this time, she would be a slave to him the next time. It didn't matter that he didn't even respect her because she wouldn't respect herself any longer.

He pulled her closer and said, "Cat got your tongue? If not, may I have it?" Then he bent his head more and placed his hot mouth over hers. She pressed her hands on his chest to push him away, really she did, but ended up pushing her hands under his coat, then through the layers of his clothing instead.

His arms tightened around her like bands of steel. She wasn't in control, she wasn't calm, and she wasn't collected. SHE WAS RECKLESS. Her pulse was dancing wildly as her blood danced through her veins.

He shook her shoulders, and she blinked and then fully opened her eyes. She almost said she was sorry, but then he moaned, pulled her back, moved his hands down her back over her bum, and pulled her up against him as his hands went down her sides in even, full strokes. The intimate movement of his hands, his caresses, shocked her, and she knew it was wrong, but for once, she didn't care. Convinced it would be the last time she would see him, she would give herself this one last moment of freedom, and then she would throw away the scarf and make a vow never to think of the man again.

Knowing that she should feel repulsed, appalled, because he was doing things that no one had ever done to her before, she wondered what she would do if he touched her breasts. She no sooner thought it then he reached up and placed a hot, heavy palm on her left breast, this thumb pushing hard on the centre, causing an ache to form in every fibre of her being.

Even as his thumb continued to circle her nipple, his mouth moved from hers down to her neck. He pulled her jacket and shirt up and exposed her bare stomach; then his hand went under her clothing and pushed aside the scrap of silk that was her bra. He touched the bare skin of her breasts. She gasped louder.

Her head fell back and hit the door hard, eyes closed, blinding desire blossoming deep within her. Hermione felt his lips and tongue wet on the skin on her bare stomach and looked back down, and for the first time, she saw a bright red streak in his hair. She thought it was an odd time to notice such a thing. Then his lips went around her nipple and he sucked hard and her legs gave out and she moaned.

He held her up, one arm around her hips, his mouth moving across her flat stomach, his other hand moving aside her clothing to accommodate his lips.

With her head moving side to side, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror to the left of her, and the image shocked her. Closing her eyes tight once more, she grabbed a handful of his hair, yanked hard, and forced his head back.

He looked up at her from his place on the floor.

She said one word. "No."

So, he stopped.

Then he closed his eyes, but he managed to stand. Leaning against her, dropping his face into the crook of her neck, he said, "Hell, passion is highly overrated anyway, and it's your birthday, so I guess you get what you want, if you're sure stopping is what you want."

When she didn't say another word, he adjusted his long leather coat to cover his lower body, then he helped her straighten her clothing, and she let him. Shaking all over, in embarrassment, fury, and other emotions unknown, Hermione turned her head first toward the left, but she couldn't bear to look at the mirror again, so she turned it back toward the right and looked at the broken window even as he wrapped the scarf around her neck. He pulled her away from the door.

Then he did what she thought was the oddest thing of all. He embraced her. A small embrace, hardly a hug, but an embrace all the same, and he was out the door before her.

She turned, locked the bathroom door, sank to the floor, cried for ten minutes, then pulled the invisibility cloak out of her bag, placed it over her, and Disapparated back to number twelve Grimmauld Place.

Chapter 5 - Tremble Because He's Near

Chapter 5 of 5

Hermione stands guard the first night by the tent and Scabior 'smells' her.

Chapter 5 Tremble Because He's Near

Unless he gives me all in change,

I forfeit all things by him:

The risk is terrible and strange

I tremble, doubt... deny him.

Verse 9 - Amy's Cruelty

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Sitting alone by the mouth of the tent, she heard every noise magnified tenfold. Every rustling of leaves made her tremble with fear and trepidation. Every whisper of the wind through the trees made her quiver with unease.

It was all such a mess. Things happened so fast today. Things didn't go as they had planned, and now Ron was hurt his arm nearly severed from a Disapparition that had gone wrong and somehow she felt it was all her fault.

At least they'd managed to find the locket, along with Professor Moody's eye, although she found the fact that Harry took the eye rather morbid. After she had managed to Apparate them to these woods, she healed Ron the best that she could. Harry and she set up the tent and put up protection spells, and then they tried every spell they could to destroy the Horcrux.

Yet, it remained intact.

Since Ron was still very ill and Harry was very depressed (because why hadn't Dumbledore told him how to destroy the locket?), she decided to take the first watch on this, the very first night of their journey.

Shivering in the chilly autumn air of the early evening, she couldn't help but wonder if Scabior was nearby. She hated thinking of that man at such times as these, but she couldn't control her thoughts anymore than she could control the sun, the moon, the stars, or the rotation of the earth.

She saw him today at the Ministry while she was under disguise of the Polyjuice Potion. Walking down to the courtrooms beside Umbridge, she walked right by him as he and some other Snatchers were escorting two men throughout the Atrium. It almost sickened her to see him like as she did... One of the men they were escorting looked bruised and battered, and Scabior looked pleased as punch.

The strangest thing happened, too. Although Hermione was under the magic of Polyjuice Potion, and there was no way he could have recognized her, when she walked by him, he actually turned and looked right at her stared right in her eyes. She stared at him in return, for the briefest second, and then swiftly turned away.

She couldn't let her slight obsession with that man sway her from her task. He was scum, a malefactor, nothing short of reprobate who preyed on those who had no one to

fight for them. The man his fellow Snatchers and he were escorting was a Muggle-born. He was begging them to let him go... saying that he was a wizard just like them, he had done nothing wrong, he had a family, a wife and children.

One of the Snatchers used physical force on the man and hit him on the back of the head. Hermione heard him scream right as she entered the lift. She kept her gaze on the floor so she wouldn't betray her reason for being there.

What if that had been her? Would he have pulled her through the atrium of the Ministry, wrists bound, beaten and battered as she begged for mercy? Would he have smiled with that same smug expression on his face? Was that his game? Was that what he wanted with her? Was that his final goal?

Hermione had to use her brain. She couldn't let this man get to her, Harry, or Ron. She couldn't be stupid any longer. Even though she wore his scarf around her neck, she knew that she would not, could not, let him manipulate her ever again.

Another rustling in the trees nearby caused her to turn her head to the side, stop thinking of things, right or wrong, and grip her wand tightly. She stood to investigate the sound, praying that her wards and protection spells would hold.

She walked to the very edge of her wards and then froze. She knew her charms and spells should block sounds as well as her, her friends, and their tent, but still, she practically held her breath when she saw people approach the thicket of trees. Holding as immobile as she could, she couldn't help but quaver slightly when she watched the werewolf Greyback, carrying a young woman, walk by her, followed by two of the Snatchers she had seen at the Ministry earlier, pulling a man whose hands were bound magically. Bringing up the rear was Scabior.

She froze in abject horror and fright.

He walked directly in front of her, close enough that she could touch him if she had wanted.

Then, inexplicably, he stopped, took a step back, and turned to face her. He had the strangest look on his face. She could almost swear that he 'knew' she was there, yet she knew there was no way he did. One of his fellow malcontents called out for him to hurry. He ignored them. Inhaling deeply, he frowned.

"Hurry up, Scabior, we don't have all evening. We have to get this lot to the Ministry!"

Turning his head toward the speaker, he said, "Go on without me. I'll catch up eventually, or perhaps I won't."

Hermione remained quiet and still, her heart beating an irregular cadence, her breath coming out in short little bursts. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the others walk away while he remained. On his face was the same bemused, anxious, almost angry look in his eyes that he had the last time she'd seen him.

Then he inhaled again, deeper this time. He reached out his hand she took a step back. Breathing harder yet, but trying to remain quiet, she gripped her wand so hard that the wood dug into the tender flesh of her hand.

Finally, with an annoyed look in his eyes, he turned to leave, looking back only once before he gave up and walked away.

Hermione exhaled the breath she was holding, loosening the tight grip on her wand. Harry walked up behind her. She felt his presence, but didn't turn to face him. Instead, she continued to stare at the empty place in the woods where Scabior had stood in the ever-darkening forest.

"Hermione?"

"Harry."

"At least now you know your wards hold," he assured her. He gave her shoulder a pat.

"But he knew I was here." She inhaled a quiet sob. "He smelled my perfume," she revealed.

"Who knew you were here? That man?" Harry grabbed her hand and held it in his.

Turning her gaze to his, she wondered if she had revealed too much. "Yes. I'm wearing a perfume that reminds me of my mother, called Beautiful. It makes me feel close to her. I think he smelled it."

Harry brought her hand up to his mouth and gave it a simple kiss. "I'm sure he didn't smell your perfume. I can't smell it. You're just on edge. Let me wear the locket now and stand guard."

Shaking her head no, she did, however, pull the locket over her head and hand it to him. "Here, you can wear it, or at least keep it safe for the night, but I'll continue to stand guard. I'm not sleepy at all. Go on, get in there and check on Ron before you go to sleep."

"Are you sure? I am tired," Harry replied.

Smiling a sad smile, her hand still entwined in his, she nodded. "Yes, go on; I'm fine."

"Wake me around three in the morning, and I'll take over," he pledged. With a sigh, he placed the locket in the front pocket of his jeans and walked inside the tent, pulling the flap shut behind him.

Hermione pulled the scarf tighter around her neck and then sat down near a tree, a slight distance from the tent, but still close by. The sky was almost completely dark now. There was a definite nip in the air. She wished she had asked Harry for a blanket, or had gotten her heavier sweater, but perhaps the cold would keep her awake.

With her back to a tree, her wand on her lap, she pulled the book Dumbledore had given her out of the back pocket of her jeans and opened it to read. She'd already cast a charm on it so that it could be read in the dark, so reading it tonight proved no effort.

Reading a story she had already read a few times, she was startled when she heard a sound behind the very tree on which she propped her back. Placing the book on the ground beside her slowly while holding her wand tight, she waited to hear the sound again.

And she did.

"Did you think to hide from me, my girl?"

From the sound of his voice, Hermione judged him to be standing right behind the tree where she sat. That didn't mean he knew she was near this tree, but yet knowing him, he probably did.

She looked up, and sure enough, he was standing next to the tree, propped against it as if he hadn't a care in the world. Hermione hated him for that. Standing quietly, still frightened, she faced him. She wouldn't speak, even though she was certain there was no real way he knew she was there.

However, he showed no such restraint. Continuing to speak, as if he knew she was nearby, he said, "I know you're there, sweetness. I smell you, but more than that, I feel you." His hand went to his chest, and he thumped it twice. "Right here, I do."

Swallowing hard, she took a step backwards.

"Did you think you could escape me? Did you think I'd let you?" he asked, pushing away from the tree. Walking back and forth in front of her, he said, "Caused quite the ruckus at the Ministry, you three did. Polyjuice Potion, huh? Who would have thought it? They won't underestimate you again, that's for certain. And you stole a certain something from the Undersecretary, didn't you?"

Hermione knew he didn't mean for her to answer, not that he could hear her if she did; still, she wondered what else this man knew. She wished she could ask him a few questions, but that would be foolhardy, and she wouldn't make that mistake again. Clutching the scarf tightly in one hand, her wand in the other, she steadied her breathing, blinked slowly, and sat back down to listen to him speak. If nothing else, it would entertain her, keep her awake, and inform her of what he knew.

He remained standing, but it was uncanny how he seemed to direct his conversation toward her, even though she knew he couldn't see her. "Everyone was talking about how Potter broke into the Ministry, right under everyone's bloody noses, and how smart and brave he was, but I know better. That whole scheme smelled of my girl, didn't it?"

Suddenly, he squatted down on his haunches and reached out his hand, scaring her into thinking that he could see her, sense her, so she scrambled backwards. There was no reason for her to do so because he reached for blank air. He sat down on the ground and she remained a good distance away.

"Some say that a couple of you were hurt while escaping." He scooted backwards until his back was against a tree, his long legs in front of him, feet crossed at the ankle. "I have to admit, I'm glad to know it wasn't you. Do you want to know how I know you weren't the one that was hurt? The scarf, of course. It still connects us whether you want it to or not. I can sense you. You, my girl, are connected to me, just as I am to you, and that's how I know you're fine."

Hermione looked down at the scarf in her hand. The Merino wool was as soft as ever against her skin. She almost wanted to cry. What was she doing? If what he said was true, she had to burn it, bury it, destroy it... before it destroyed her.

Perhaps he was playing with her head. He probably didn't even really know she was here. Leaning over, she picked up the discarded book of children's stories and then decided to go sit back beside the mouth of the tent. He could continue to talk to the trees and the empty air.

Standing to take her leave, she stopped when he said, "Hey, darling, wait a moment before you leave."

With a breath and a sob mingled together caught deep in her throat, she turned around slowly to look at him. How did he know she had started to walk away?

"Just give me a sign to let me know you weren't hurt. Call me sentimental, but I'd sleep better if I knew these things for certain."

If she walked beyond her wards, or lifted her protection spells, he'd take her into custody, just as surely as those people he had with him earlier in the woods, or the man he had with him at the Ministry. She knew it. Standing motionless, hardly breathing, but absently stroking the ends of the scarf, she waited.

Then he stood once again, just as before, until he was standing before her, looking bored, indifferent, and at total ease.

This time, she experienced a sense of relief because she thought he was going to leave. Peering upon his face, she really did think he was handsome. Dark long hair, elegant fingers, beautiful eyes. Tall. He was very tall. She would guess he was about thirty years old, now that she looked at him closely, without worrying that he was looking back at her.

And she wished she could say that she was scared of him. She wished she could say truthfully that she hated him. She wished she feared him, even a little. She didn't know him, she didn't even really want to know him. She didn't trust him, she didn't even really like him, but yet there was something in his posture, his manner, his quirky way of speaking, which enticed her.

"Well, my girl, are you going to make me wait all bloody night to know if you were hurt or not? Give me some sort of sign. I don't expect you to lift your fucking wards for me, but give me credit because I already know you're here, yet I haven't told anyone, have I? So, would it hurt you to give me some sort of little sign to know you're alright?"

That one sentence gave her pause. No, he hadn't told anyone of their whereabouts. That much was true. He had already left and had returned... alone. He could have brought Death Eaters with him, but he hadn't. He could have brought more Snatchers with him, but he hadn't. He came back alone.

Hermione thought for a moment and then she remembered a spell she'd seen in a defense book that Professor Moody had given her. Thinking hard to recall the correct incantation, she closed her eyes, waved her hand, and said the spell silently.

A barrier, thin and mist like, formed between them so that they could see each other, almost as if a window had appeared between them.

"Ah, there's my girl. I knew you were there." He reached out for her, only to draw his hand back when he realized that he couldn't touch her. "What's this spell?"

"You can only see me, but you can't touch me or breach the protection wards."

"And so she speaks," he said with a smile. "But only to tell me that she doesn't trust me. Yet, at least she speaks." He walked closer, so close that they almost stood nose to nose. Lighting his wand, he moved it up and down her body. When he saw the cuts and abrasions on her face, he frowned. "Looks like you've been through the wringer, love. I hope the other bloke got it just as bad." Then, he smiled again, but this time the smile seemed forced and strained.

"You smelled my perfume earlier, didn't you?" she asked, ignoring his comments, wanting desperately to know if her suspicion was correct.

He nodded with one brief nod of his head.

"I'll make sure I don't wear it again," she added.

He made no comment to that. "Is one of your boyfriends injured badly? That's the rumour."

"I won't confirm that with you," she leveled. "In fact, I shalln't talk with you ever again. This is the last time you shall ever see me. Now, go away and leave me alone. Goodbye."

She stepped away from the small portal that she'd made, but he called out, "Now, now, now, love, let's not be too hasty or harsh. We both know that's not true, as well. And I think we also both know that you can trust me because I could have turned you in, many times over, just as you could have killed me right now, if you wanted to, so let's not talk anymore about goodbyes. There'll be no goodbyes between us, my girl. None at all."

She sighed and said, "I can't do this anymore. You don't understand. There's no cause or reason for it."

"Does there have to be a reason for it?" he asked.

"Yes, there does!" she insisted. "I don't even particularly like you!"

He laughed at that.

Hermione couldn't help herself and she laughed too. It felt good to laugh, especially after everything that she'd been through today. "Listen, I have to go. I don't know if I'll see you again or not, but it's very risky, and I can't take risks with Ron's and Harry's lives. It's not my place to do so. It's my place to take care of them, not risks their lives. Therefore, yes, I'm afraid it is goodbye."

She turned to leave.

Stunning her, he reached through the portal she'd made in her protection wards and grabbed her shoulder, pulling her through to his side.

She stumbled into him, his face hovering right above hers. She struggled for control, her eyes wide with shock (more than fear) as the heat of his body pressed upon hers, warming the chill from her that had filled her earlier, even as one of his hands tangled in her hair and the other went smoothly down her cheek.

She was rendered as mute as she was when he spoke to her earlier, but this time it was more because she felt prickles and trembles of anticipation due to the scandalous responses of being close to him again.

His breath was like a whisper of wind against her face. She closed her eyes even before the hint of intimacy came, tempted by what was to come and by the hint of shame that came with the threat of pleasure that was sure to engulf her very soul, until she smothered every last sensible thought.

Thoughts such as how much she disliked him. Or, how she knew she didn't love him because she could never love someone who didn't love her.

Nevertheless, to have one last kiss, one last hint of happiness, even if it was feigned, even if it was false, even if she did dislike this man, was too much to ignore.

His kiss felt real. It felt hot, hard, demanding, domineering, and she wanted it to continue forever and ever. Her breasts felt heavy, her head felt light, her knees felt wobbly, and she knew she was pathetic and she didn't even care.

Not knowing if she could stop it, she didn't even have to try because he stopped it this time, by drawing his head up from hers, brushing his index finger over her red, swollen, freshly kissed lips once, then twice. With the same finger, he touched a small cut on her face, then kissed the wound before he closed his eyes.

Wincing audibly, he turned her around, pushed her back through the little hole she created in her protection ward, then said, "That's how much the scarf connects us. I can even pull you through a handy little protection ward." He seemed angry again. Turning from her, he added unexpectedly, "I wish I could kill the bastard who hurt you."

"That's insane," she responded, bringing her hand up to her mouth. Then, "This is insane. All of this you and I, kissing, everything it's all insane! I don't even like you, not at all, and I know I certainly don't love you or anything! I was just thinking that I could never love someone who didn't love me, and I can't believe I keep going around risking everything for someone that I don't love!"

"And you broke through my protection ward! What was I thinking?" Waving her hand in front of her, she made the hole disappear, and she was back behind the protection of the ward. He could no longer see or hear her, although she could still see him.

His back still to her, she didn't know what he was doing at first when he reached inside his leather coat for something. As he pulled out an object while he turned to face her, she noticed he held a book in his hand. "This is your book of poetry, remember?"

She didn't answer, not that he would know if she had or not.

"I read it. Are you surprised no don't answer that. You're probably just surprised that I can read, am I right?" He laughed at his own little joke. Opening the book, he read aloud:

"Love me, sweet, with all thou art, feeling, thinking, seeing. Love me in the lightest part. Love me in full being. Love me with thine open youth, in its frank surrender; with the vowing of thy mouth, with its silence tender. Love me with thine azure eyes, made for earnest granting." Then he added, "Love me."

Closing the book again, he stuffed it back inside an inner pocket of his long duster. Only then did he start to leave. Suddenly, as if he thought of something new to say, he turned back. "Oh, sweetheart, about not liking me, that's fine because that nasty aversion toward me will pass away. You'll grow to like me more and more each time you see me. I know it. I'll come back to talk again soon."

Hermione watched as he walked away, finishing the rest of the poem that he'd started in her head as she continued her watch throughout the night.