

# Droxy's Folly

*by TeddyRadiator*

In a world where Lord Voldemort defeated Harry Potter and the Order, the Minister for Magic makes Hermione Granger an offer she cannot refuse - become a spokesperson for the new regime, or rot in prison. But Hermione has her own, dangerous agenda. Can she complete her appointed task without running afoul of the law, or the man she despises most - Severus Snape?

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## Prologue

*Chapter 1 of 14*

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Authors' Notes: We would like to thank Droxy for her great prompt, her infinite patience, and her friendship. We would also like to thank toblass for her great beta work throughout - We couldn't have done it without you!

This story was originally bought by Droxy in the 2009 Winter TPP Every Flavour Auction. As always, these characters belong to JK Rowling and Warner Bros. Neither stgulik nor I make any money from this work.

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### Prologue

Minister for Magic Lucius Malfoy sat stiffly at attention. His chair, an ostentatious black plush throne, had been transformed for comfort, but he could not seem to bring himself to sit back and relax. His fingers ran along the creases on his black wool trousers before rising to settle the snowy-white cuffs that peeked out from under his black coat sleeves and ministerial robes.

He was seated before a shabby wooden table in the hearing room at Azkaban, members of his staff arrayed behind. It had been an automatic gesture to Transfigure one of the chairs into a seat befitting his station, but sitting taller than anyone else in the room could not begin to ease his mind.

Although the prison was perpetually cold, the living rock walls sweated with condensation that made the rooms strangely humid. Beyond the walls, shouts of anger or fear punctured every single thought Lucius tried to finish. Occasional screams of agony sent a cold spike of dread through his abdomen. And then there was the smell...the stench of unwashed bodies, feces and terror that had permeated the ancient stone over the centuries, causing a sense of despair to creep into his lungs, even sitting so

many levels below the cell blocks.

Azkaban was a hideous place. The very walls were infused with the most desolate, soul-destroying magic that could be found this side of the Dark. For thousands of years this fortress of rock and despair had taken in both guilty and innocent alike, and returned them as shades of their former selves - simply because it could. It took no pleasure in their pain; it seemed to derive no power from their hopelessness. It greedily absorbed and stored each prisoner's anguish until he left, or died, and another came to take his place. Dementors meticulously gathered and cultivated stores of despair within its honeycomb passageways like bees in some hideous hive.

When Lucius Malfoy was sentenced to Azkaban, he had believed himself to be a strong wizard. Strong, resolute, clever, capable of resisting being beaten by prison. The scion of a peerless lineage. But the day he sat, knees pressed together, in a boat being rowed over the choppy ocean, the day he first laid eyes on the fortress and realised he was about to be swallowed whole, body and soul, something within him crumbled. In that moment, he knew his confidence and his lineage meant absolutely nothing before the power of Azkaban and would never protect him, so he panicked and flung himself across the boat, trying to throw himself into the water, only to be Stunned.

They dumped him in a cell, trussed like a Christmas goose. The Malfoy dignity completely deserted him, and that night, he wept like the motherless child he was.

Nearly a year later, Lucius had escaped in the mass breakout orchestrated by Voldemort and had returned to his former life of privilege and influence. He had donned posh dress robes that seemed too big for his emaciated body, and he had slept in a soft bed too slickly clean to be believed. He left Azkaban behind. But sitting here now, it was easy to imagine that his subsequent life...the war, the final battle, the Dark Lord's victory, a life of power and privilege...was nothing but a long, fevered dream, and that he would wake in his stinking cell to remember his sentence was going to stretch on and on until he went mad.

Lucius swallowed convulsively. Irrationally, he wondered if Azkaban thought it wasn't done with him. For all he knew, the prison believed him a fugitive and would catch him in its cold clutches when he finally rose to try and leave here today. A cold sweat broke out under his layers of elegant clothing and robes. Stone walls began to close in around him...

*Get a grip, old man,* he told himself firmly. He repressed a shudder and forced himself to settle in his chair, lest the staff he had brought with him notice his discomfort. Azkaban, like all aspects of the government, answered to the Dark Lord; the prison would not restrain Lucius today. He was here to interview a prisoner, someone he did not want to bring back to the Ministry unless a deal was struck. That was the only order of business this day.

Following the war, a new regime had taken shape in Wizarding Britain...a governing body that was everything Lucius had ever envisioned. But then, the Dark Lord had done something unanticipated. Declaring all other potential candidates for the position either dead or incompetent, Lord Voldemort had installed Lucius Malfoy himself as Minister for Magic.

This had been the absolute last thing Lucius wanted. It was one thing to sit on the board at Hogwarts, but quite another to be the head of a government. His talents had always lent themselves to being the power behind the throne. The financier. It was second nature with him to gain influence over others and then use that influence to see that his vision was enforced. After that, he was always free to leave the Ministry. While others toiled of an evening, Lucius spent his own evenings relaxing among his favorite amusements.

But of course, nobody said no to the Dark Lord.

How ironic that, just as he achieved everything he had always wanted for himself and his kind, he was not permitted to relax and enjoy it.

As Minister, Lucius was subject to enormous pressure from above and below. He was unused to it; the life of a Death Eater had been nothing compared to this. The Dark Lord placed demands on him that he himself used to exert on the Minister, with an additional element of a threat of death if Lucius ever failed his master.

So Lucius devised a plan. If it worked, it might help him reach his goals. If it did not work ... well, there would be a person to blame, a scapegoat, to keep Lucius from being in the line of wand fire. That person was the one he was here to see...a prisoner of Azkaban.

He had a long history with this particular prisoner. Once, he knew, an offer like the one he was about to make would have been thrown back in his face with a sneer. But Azkaban had a way of grinding down even the most spirited. In fact, he thought, it might be the spirited ones who broke the fastest. They came in with something to care about; consequently, there was more for the Dementors to take away. Lucius felt confident that, considering how long this prisoner had been in residence, his little proposition would be quite well received today. Still, his fingers worried his trouser creases as he waited.

At last, the door opened. Two guards filed in, flanking a figure between them.

"Prisoner Gebo-Seven-Seven-Isa-Nine-Six-Kenaz-Dagaz-Berkano," announced the first guard. "Granger, Hermione Jean."

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She was nudged forward until she stood before the long table, where she was made to wait with her feet in heavy ankle chains attached to manacles at the wrists. Her eyes were blank as they moved listlessly over the row of staff members. When they briefly touched his face, Lucius repressed a shudder. He saw no interest or intelligence in that gaze.

Lucius gestured behind to one of his assistants. A chair scraped and a parchment was noisily unrolled as the man stood and cleared his throat fussily. Her eyes passed again over the assistant and then locked onto him when he spoke.

"Prisoner Gebo 77," the man began, "you have been summoned to appear before the Minister for Magic on an administrative matter. You are required to pay attention, speak only when spoken to. You will truthfully answer all questions put to you. If you do not follow these instructions, you will be taken back to your cell and denied all privileges for a period of no less than thirty days. Do you understand these instructions as I have read them?"

The prisoner nodded, casting her eyes downward. Lucius gestured to another clerk, who stood up, unrolled another parchment, and read out a long record of the prisoner's crimes, omitting nothing.

Lucius feigned boredom while he inspected the prisoner under hooded eyes. She was skinny to the point of emaciation. Her hair, once curly and lustrous, was now matted and stuck out at all angles. He knew from first-hand experience she was crawling with lice. He spotted fresh bruises on the length of arm and leg he could see under her shapeless grey prison smock and above her canvas shoe-clad feet.

He could well imagine what horrors she had been enduring. Lucius had learned from his time here that the innocent and the unloved suffer more, even if they believed they were guilty. Azkaban could tell the difference, and it drew on their innocence like a greedy child sucking on a sugar quill.

It had taken Azkaban only nine months to break him. Granger had been here two years. What would she be like? Had she already broken? Would she be of any use to him at all? He laced his cold fingers together to keep them from fussing with his cuffs again.

After the record was read, it was his turn to speak. "Miss Granger." Lucius waited until her eyes wandered back to his face. "As a war criminal, a Mudblood, and a prisoner with no family influence or patronage, you face a life sentence in Azkaban. You will live out your days within these walls. However, by the grace of our Lord, an opportunity to be granted parole may be afforded you, if the circumstances are right and you agree to the terms. Do you understand?"

"Parole?" she repeated hazily, her voice rusty from lack of use. "Did you say parole?" Lucius inclined his head. "Someone already tried." She seemed to have difficulty concentrating. "Someone ... they tried to petition for my parole. It was never approved."

"Be that as it may, I have taken *personal* interest in your ... dreadful predicament, and I believe I have an offer to make which will both serve our Lord and improve your circumstances.

"The new administration at the Ministry has experienced a smooth transition...better than we had hoped, frankly," he began. "Wizarding Britain is enjoying a modest resurgence. Even your old school reopened, quite a few months ahead of schedule, and is a much better-run institution than ever before. I am sure you are pleased to hear that."

He rose from his throne and began to pace as he warmed to his tale. "But our Lord has felt that something is missing from the heart of our community. Those whose blood status is less than pure are still, however indirectly, a part of us. Our Lord has decided that half-bloods and Muggleborn ought to be brought into the fold and permitted to become...well, if not full citizens, then at least community members in good standing. A kinder regime. A fresh start for all."

Lucius paused while several of the young staff members murmured their approval amongst themselves. He made an idle note to himself to find out how thoroughly their genealogies had been researched.

The prisoner frowned in confusion. "What does this have to do with me?"

He hid his impatience. "You are being offered a chance to help us welcome back the disenfranchised with open arms. As someone who had been close to the famous Harry Potter, you are the most recognisable Muggleborn in Great Britain." Lucius turned with studied casualness to look her fully in the eye. If she still carried untenable feelings about the death of Harry Potter or the tragic events surrounding the Weasley boy, he wanted to know now. But her face betrayed nothing.

Dissatisfied, he resumed pacing. "That fame will benefit the cause. You will become the face of the Ministry's new policy of tolerance. Even some of the worst offenders in prison may be given a fresh start, their records expunged...provided they agree to assume the same responsibilities we all have."

Lucius forced a chuckle. "And you will be their role model. You will participate in media events, give speeches and interviews, that sort of thing. In exchange, you will live in London in a well-appointed flat, and be given a comfortable job at the Ministry.

"But if you fail to perform...adequately, Miss Granger, you will be delivered back to Azkaban immediately and administered the Dementor's Kiss." She shuddered at that last. Good. His next chuckle was more genuine. "Do you understand the terms?"

Slowly, she nodded her head. "And what if I say no?" she asked.

"Then I'm afraid we have no use for you," replied Lucius, resuming his seat. "Your name will go to the bottom of the parole list." He sighed with mock regret. "Many other, lesser offenders will soon be up for parole themselves. It's difficult to say when your name would ever come up to the top again. With any number ahead of you, who knows? It could be years."

The prisoner gave no further sign of paying attention; in fact, she seemed to have withdrawn into herself completely. There seemed no point in continuing. At a sign from Lucius, his staff began to shuffle together their parchments and quills. He made to rise from his comfortable chair, feeling a prick of disappointment. Despite his hopes, he thought she might just be too brain-damaged now to be convincing in front of the cameras.

"Do think about it, Miss Granger," he drawled. "The offer of parole shall remain open until three days hence, after which time--"

"I don't need three days," she blurted. "I accept."

The room went still again. Lucius carefully hid his surprise. "Very well. A wise choice." He stood, picking up his black cane. "Tomorrow, you will be released into the recognizance of the parole board. This ought to give you time to say your fond farewells."

Suddenly, her eyes snapped to attention and focused on a point behind Lucius. "I have no one to say good-bye to, at least not anymore," she replied with new steel in her voice. "Arthur is dead."

Someone behind him made a strangled noise. Surprised, Lucius turned his head to see his assistant's arms open convulsively, spilling rolls of parchment onto the floor. It was only then that Lucius remembered the man's name...Percy Weasley, Arthur Weasley's son, the one who had left the family fold and allied himself with the Ministry. It was a common tale amongst his ambitious staff. A few weeks after he took office, Lucius had honestly forgotten all about it.

But the prisoner obviously remembered him, and had something to say. "Yes," she continued in a firm voice, "Arthur Weasley died of a heart attack this week. He spent two years in prison with no visits from family. I sat with him until the end, Percy. He asked me to tell--"

"My condolences, Miss Granger," interrupted Lucius smoothly. He had come too far to let this interview be derailed by cheap theatrics. "If only Arthur Weasley had been sensible, he could have spared himself and his family so much trouble. But I remember his hearing." He turned, speaking as much to young Weasley as to the prisoner. "He seemed to think it beneath him to renounce his work with the rebellion and join his fellow Purebloods in the rebuilding of our society." With a swirl of Lucius's black cane, the hearing room doors banged open. "Until tomorrow, Miss Granger."

The guards tugged roughly on the prisoner's shackles as they moved to flank her once again, barking orders for her to obey. Percy Weasley shook himself and flicked his wand at the scattered parchments, which floated in the air and followed along as he exited the room without a backward glance, trailed by the rest of the murmuring throng.

Amidst the hubbub, Lucius managed to catch one last glimpse of the prisoner's face. The apathetic demeanour she'd walked in with was completely absent now. So, she did have spirit left, in spite of all she'd been through. The Dementors had not yet destroyed her will to live. When she'd turned her attention to Weasley, there had been a spark of the old righteous indignation he used to find so irksome when he'd catch sight of her during her school days.

On the ship back to the mainland, Lucius' busy thoughts turned to the weeks ahead. His earlier fear of Azkaban's retribution for his escape seemed like nothing more than superstitious nonsense to him now; he wondered how he could have indulged such ridiculous fantasies even for a moment. Soon his apprehensions faded from his memory. He was a Malfoy; he was Minister; all carefully-laid plans must surely come to fruition in the face of his formidable resources.

His confidence surged. How could he have ever doubted his plans would be set into motion? Within weeks there would be press conferences, public events...perhaps even a Ministry-sponsored ball. He had just the dress robes to wear to a ball. After Granger cleaned up, and perhaps fleshed out a bit, she would become a real asset. It didn't matter how she felt about it. As long as she still had brains in her head, Lucius was sure he could manipulate her. It was his one true talent. And she would do as she was told. The motive to stay out of Azkaban was a powerful one. He knew this from experience.

## Chapter One

### *Chapter 2 of 14*

In a world where Lord Voldemort defeated Harry Potter and the Order, the Minister for Magic makes Hermione Granger an offer she cannot refuse - become a spokesperson for the new regime, or rot in prison. But Hermione has her own, dangerous agenda. Can she complete her appointed task without running afoul of the law, or the man she despises

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## Chapter One

The little flat felt as huge as a cave. Hermione's stiff new shoes echoed on the bare wood floors like thunder. She felt incredibly small in the space, even though it was barely larger than her old Prefect's room at Hogwarts. When she looked to her left, she could see the door to the loo. To her right, a galley kitchen shone with appliances so white they hurt her eyes.

Compared to the huge house her parents had owned in the Cotswolds, it was far too little. After the last two drab, grey years in Azkaban, it was entirely too much.

She unhooked the small bag from over her shoulder and let it fall to the floor with a hollow splatting sound. In that bag, smaller than the one that had once held her schoolbooks, was every sodding thing she possessed. It certainly made unpacking a snap.

She made a huge production of stowing away her things: five pairs of knickers, two bras, four shirts, two pairs of trousers and one book. She folded the underclothes carefully, as small as she could make them, squirrelling them away in the very back corner of the dresser drawer. She stowed the shirts and trousers at the back of the wardrobe, hiding everything away from prying eyes. The wardrobe was dark and deep, and for a moment she thought about grabbing her pillow and sleeping in there. It was just about the same size as her cot ...

She shook her head angrily. She hadn't completely lost her shit in Azkaban...why was she acting like she was one Sickie short of a Knut here, miles away from that cursed rock, and in relative safety?

*Hermione Granger*, she told herself. *I'm Hermione fucking Granger*, the last of the Golden Trio. Well, the last lucid member, if you counted Ron. She tried very hard not to think about Ron. Or Harry, or Ginny, or Neville or-

She closed the wardrobe. She was a Ministry employee now, living in Ministry-provided accommodations with Ministry-provided security at all exits. She was as safe as houses.

She looked around the magnolia-white walls of her latest gaol cell. It was much prettier and more spacious, this was true, but no less a cell than the one she'd walked out of three hours before. The windows were even warded, just like prison. She would be escorted to and from the Ministry every day by a Probation Officer.

Same cage; different smell.

It had been easy to accentuate the positives when Lucius Malfoy had been smarming on about her 'new position' with the Ministry, not to mention her last chance to get away from her hell-away-from-home for the past two years. But standing here now, Hermione found herself almost wishing she'd said no. It was all too different; it was too clean, too nice, too *normal*, compared to what she'd grown used to, and that depressed her.

She had been so sure Harry would win. She had been convinced that the light would defeat the darkness, that somehow all the horrors they had endured had bought them a slice of luck. That somehow they *deserved* to win. How stupidly naive that sounded now, but at the time, in her heart of hearts, she had believed, right up until the moment that everything fell apart, and her world had been reduced to that four-by-eight-foot home.

She had been horrified, but she fought on, even as she saw her comrades and friends fall. The first was Tonks, followed by her husband Remus, who collapsed beside her on the ground with a cry of despair, just as Hermione ran past, ducking and dodging the flying curses and hexes. She had watched in horror as her roommate Lavender Brown was torn to pieces by a pack of werewolves. The girl's high-pitched screams had rent the air like a siren, then stopped abruptly, as if someone had flipped a switch. It wasn't Lavender's screams that haunted Hermione's dreams; it was the sudden, instant silence that kept her awake at night.

No, she'd still been sure they stood chance to win, even as the Weasleys' cries of grief tore open the fabric of the infirmary, as Mrs. Weasley clutched the lifeless body of Fred. Hermione had felt the first real hammer blow when Ron was struck down, foaming at the mouth from a dreadful curse and screaming in some sort of garbled version of English. But Hermione had grimly thrown everything she could at anyone who looked like the enemy. By then, death was barely registering. All she could think about was staying alive.

And then, her world ended.

There was a hideous screaming roar in the air, and Hermione looked to her right just in time to see Voldemort, in the middle of the Hogwarts courtyard, holding a red banner. Everyone around him froze, and the world tilted for Hermione as she realised what she was seeing. It was not something being held up by a scarlet cloth. It was the head of Ginny Weasley, neatly severed at the neck, held aloft in his taloned fingers by her own long, flaming red hair.

Harry's anguished cry had pierced the night, and he'd charged Voldemort like a rugby player on a tackle. Wild with grief, driven over the edge by the guilt of so many dying, Harry had run into the last battle like a martyr, and Voldemort had fucking made him one. When she closed her eyes, she could still remember the smell of burning flesh.

She felt a sharp pain in her knees; her legs had buckled. *Harry is dead*, she thought numbly. *Everyone I love is dead. We've lost. We've lost.*

That thought, that one thought, ended her world. Not with a bang, but with a whimper.

The final charge had been little more than a massacre, as the Death Eaters raced over the school like army ants, leaving a trail of bloodied and broken people in their wake. But then, just as the victory cry rose in the air from a thousand dark-smoked throats, some nameless, faceless someone pulled her to her feet and dragged her like a sack of potatoes through the halls of Hogwarts. She had no idea who had gotten her there; even years later she could not recall anything about her saviour.

Hermione found herself at the entrance to the headmaster's study. She ran up the spiral staircase on shaking legs and into the room, where she found Minerva McGonagall, covered in ash, her hair hanging in loose strands from its bun. Her pale face was grim as she stood by the fireplace, stuffing first- and second-year students through the Floo network to fuck knows where. Some were protesting; they wanted to stay and fight. Others were crying for their mothers. The most pathetic ones were silent, their huge, frightened eyes mutely beseeching Professor McGonagall to please make things better, please.

Hermione waited until the last of the youngsters disappeared into the Floo before making her presence known. From down below, she could hear the sounds of the conquerors pillaging the interior of the castle. The screams of the injured and dying rose and fell, like great waves beneath them.

When Professor McGonagall finally laid eyes on Hermione, she froze. Hermione knew she must look like hell, because her former professor grew so pale she seemed on the verge of fainting.

"Harry's dead, Professor," she told McGonagall.

There was a chorus of mourning voices from the wall of portraits. Albus Dumbledore's likeness stood and drew nearer the edge of the painting. "Are you sure, Miss Granger?"

Hermione nodded, tears cleaning tracks down her dirty face. "I saw him burned to death."

McGonagall closed her eyes and sagged against the mantle. She inhaled a sharp sob, and replied, "Then all is lost, Miss Granger."

The sudden realisation that all was lost made her feel sick to her stomach. "What do we do?"

McGonagall was efficient to the last. Hermione was to Floo to a Secret-kept place. McGonagall even gave her some Muggle money and a rucksack of provisions. The two witches hardly looked at one another as Hermione prepared to leave. It always bothered her nowadays; she wished she would have taken the time to say things to her former mentor. Important things. But she had looked away, knowing that, should she catch McGonagall's eye, she would start blubbering and crying for her mum like those hapless first years.

As she stepped to the fireplace, she felt McGonagall open the rucksack on Hermione's back and insert one more thing. Dumbledore spoke to her directly. "Miss Granger," he called, "the password is pumpkin pasties. Pumpkin pasties."

She glanced at his portrait, confused, but he only laid a finger aside his nose and winked soberly.

Then Hermione felt McGonagall's hand on her arm: it was time to depart. McGonagall threw every protective charm she could cast over Hermione, her voice shaking with emotion but her wand as steady as a rock.

"Stay alive, Miss Granger," McGonagall had whispered fiercely, before embracing her and sending her through the Floo. "You are all that's left."

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And so, Hermione Granger had gone on the run. She'd had no immediate plan to leave England; she knew no one on the continent except Viktor Krum, and who knew where his sympathies laid. Every friend she'd ever made was dead. Her parents...Merlin, even now she couldn't think about them.

It was her intention to go Muggle and hide out. She changed her name. She stole when she had to. She changed her hair colour and her clothes.

She had stuck almost exclusively to the Muggle towns, only venturing to the Wizarding areas to cover up any complicated magic she was forced to perform. McGonagall had given her a new wand, but she used it sparingly, only when absolutely necessary. Even with a borrowed wand, she wasn't sure she wasn't being Traced somehow.

It had been surprisingly easy to get along, even though she'd done things she really didn't want to think about to keep herself sheltered and fed. She hadn't resorted to prostitution, but she really didn't think she was all that far away from it.

A few months passed. She stole the occasional *Daily Prophet* to see if she was still on the 'Ten Most Wanted Magicals' list. She was Number One.

The news in the paper was confusing, disjointed; the print was often smeared and garbled, as if it were being printed clandestinely. Little of it made sense, but it was a tiny, tenuous link to her former life, and she would often sleep with the latest edition under her pillow, like some sort of talisman.

But she got too comfortable, and in the end it had been her downfall. Inertia kept her in the same place for too long; she was starting to leave magical signatures that could be easily recognised. She'd yearned too much for the normality of her former life. All she wanted was to be plain old Hermione Granger: Nobody.

She had been camping on a hillside near Muggle Brighton when her time on the run came to an end. It was the dead of winter. Stupid, stupid, stupid. No one strolled on the piers in the winter; Brighton was a summer seaside town. The Muggle police had stopped her, wondering why a lone young woman in a shabby coat was wandering around on a freezing esplanade in the middle of December. They had taken her details...false, of course...but something about her made them antsy, so they made her wait by the blues and twos while they ran a CRIMINT check on her.

The minute she spotted the two goons rounding the corner, Hermione knew they were magicals. Their sneers of satisfaction made her heart skid sickeningly around in her chest. Panic made her forget to Apparate. Frantically, she turned to the Muggle PC. "You rumbled me, Constable. I'm trying to pick up men. I'm soliciting! Arrest me!"

He stared at her as if she were mad. "Here now, what's your game, love? Nobody said anything about solicit."

"Thank you, Constable, we'll take it from here," the older one said, and then Hermione did turn on the spot just as she heard the hapless PC shout.

"Ere, now, what do you think you're-!"

She Apparated blindly, feeling heavy and clumsy, wondering why she couldn't move very far and why she was in such pain. Three sickening jumps later, she was being hauled into Azkaban by one of the Snatchers who had grabbed her arms just as she'd tried to leave Brighton. His partner left their side and returned seconds later with three of her fingers. She had Splinched herself.

A prison Healer hastily restored her missing digits; it was the last act of kindness she would receive from her captors.

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When she woke up on the seventh day, she was no longer in a holding cage, but in a prison cell on a cot that was slimy with mold and stank of every bodily fluid known to man. "Drink some water," a startlingly familiar voice said, and Hermione looked up to see-

"Neville?" Tears choked her throat. He held a clay cup to her lips. Lukewarm, brackish water was poured into her mouth, and she managed to swallow some of it as she spluttered and coughed.

When she at last caught her breath, she took a good look at her old schoolmate. There was nothing of that sweet hapless boy anymore. Neville was thin to the point of emaciation; gentle eyes stared out of a gaunt face almost as grey as his prison uniform.

"Neville," she croaked, cleared her throat, and tried again. "Neville, how long have you been here?"

He coughed into his hand, a dry sound like a wand tapping against a desk. "Since the battle. I was knocked out by a Stunning spell after I killed Voldemort's pet snake." He shrugged. "Stupid, really. I should've looked where I was going." He tried to smile. His voice sounded hollow and distant. "Death Eaters brought me here that night. My trial was two days later, if you can call it that. If I can be killed for it, they've charged me with it. Treason, Resisting Arrest, Assaulting a Ministry Official." He tried another bleak smile. "You name it, really. I'm under a sentence of slow execution now."

Her heart cramped in her chest. "But when, Neville? When will you..."

"Does it matter?" He looked at her pityingly. "If I'm lucky, sooner rather than later." He closed his eyes.

"I don't even know how long I'm supposed to be here," she said. "I haven't had a trial."

"Oh, you've been tried already, Hermione. If you're in this part of the prison, you've been handed your sentence."

She stared at him in horror. "But- but, I haven't been given a chance to defend myself."

Neville looked away and coughed again. "Hermione, people are sent to Azkaban to be forgotten." His face was full of sympathy. "We're here because we're never going anywhere else again." His breath hitched, and he coughed so hard he retched. She could see the red in his spittle.

"You need a Healer," she blurted. "They can't just leave you here like this!"

He closed his eyes and shook his head. "You're missing the point. They can, and they have, and they will. The good guys have lost. Voldemort won, and you and me, well,

we're the traitors now, the rebels. From what I hear they did to the Order, we're lucky to be here."

She thought back to McGonagall, and their last meeting. She had promised the older witch to stay safe, that nothing was more important. She had failed.

As if he read her thoughts, he patted her shoulder comfortingly. "The best we can do is hope that we can survive long enough for someone to rescue us." He held up the cup of water. "Now drink up. The food's awful, but at least we have as much water as we can drink. Here," he said, putting the cup into her shaking hands. "You need to take care of yourself."

She slumped. "What for?" she asked bitterly. "So I can be nice and healthy for the Dementor's Kiss?"

He put a gentle hand on her shoulder. "So you can avoid the Dementor's Kiss. There's always hope."

Soon after, she was given her number, and soon she didn't even think of herself as Hermione Granger anymore. She was just Prisoner Gebo77Isa96KenazDagazBerkano.

Neville's information had been accurate but useless. Prisoners were plentiful in Azkaban. Most of them were people Hermione knew, people who had fought alongside her. Their screams became the backdrop of her tenuous hold on her sanity. Death Eaters, bored without anything to do, used the female prisoners abominably; some of them with proclivities so deviant they made Hermione feel ill thinking about them.

The Lestrange brothers were especially interested in her. After one afternoon alone in a cell with them, Hermione tried to hang herself with her own prison uniform. Neville found her and managed to stop her. Then he convinced the guards that Hermione should sleep in his cell because she was his doxy. He also managed to make the others leave her alone. She never discovered how, but she had her suspicions.

She would have never survived but for Neville. Neville, who stole extra food for her and made her eat. Neville, who held her close at night, and never asked for anything in return.

Neville, who seemed to disappear right before her eyes.

She pleaded for a Healer...for anyone who would be willing to help. She even went so far as to spend another afternoon with the Lestranges in exchange for assistance. They did unspeakable things to her, in turn and together, but afterward, when she mentioned helping Neville, they simply laughed at her.

"What do we care about a dying blood traitor?" laughed one of them. Hermione didn't know which; they were just a hideous double act in her world.

But a month into her sentence, visits from the Lestrange brothers suddenly ceased. Transferred out of the prison, Neville had overheard. Hermione shuddered with relief, then felt a temporary pity for their fresh victims.

Sometime around her one-year anniversary in Azkaban, she and Neville awoke one morning to find a new inmate with them...Arthur Weasley. Hermione had thrown her arms around him, and he sobbed unabashedly when he realised the filthy, lice-ridden scrap of girl was the young witch he'd once hoped would one day become his daughter-in-law.

Typically, he tried to downplay the reasons he had been thrown into prison, but like Hermione and Neville before her, he was told it was a life sentence. Like Neville, he didn't really seem to mind.

Hermione had wanted to mind. She wanted to fight, to live. And with typical Gryffindor determination, she was going to fight for Neville and Arthur to want to live as well. But they woke one morning to find Neville stiff and cold, a thin trickle of pale blood coming from his grey mouth. Hermione had screamed and screamed, until a guard came and threatened to beat her. Arthur told the guard that he had been raping Hermione, and that was why she was carrying on. The guard had sneeringly asked to watch, but Arthur told him he was finished.

The guard jeered at Arthur. "Oh, you noble types are all alike! You try to act better than us miring in the mud, but take away your family and your wand, and you're just as dirty a fucker as the rest of us."

"Yes, well, this one's mine, so bugger off," Arthur had retorted, pulling Hermione close. Helpless, she had clung to him, broken by Neville's death and the sordid lie they had to perpetuate.

The guard left, grumbling, and his footsteps had barely faded when Arthur turned away from Hermione and vomited in the bucket that doubled as their toilet. That shameful lie would eventually take Arthur from Hermione as well. He could not live knowing others thought him a rapist, as inhuman as they. And so, not long after Neville's body had been dragged from the cell like so much garbage, Hermione awoke to the sound of Arthur gasping, a look of horrific pain on his face.

"I'll call the guards-"

"No!" Even in pain and dying, Arthur Weasley's eyes were mild. "They won't be able to stop this, dear, and ... quite frankly, I don't want them to."

She held her friend's hand as the spasms of pain sent his heart into a tailspin from which there was only one inevitable conclusion. He tried to smile with his blue lips, but it came out as a grimace of pain. "It's alright, dying," he assured her. "It's the living I've hated, well, since" he coughed, and his spittle was flecked with blood, reminding her of Neville. "-since they're all gone. Bill and Charlie, and the twins, my pretty Ginny." His hand clamped down on hers. "And Molly. I'll be with her soon."

Her tears spilled unchecked down onto her grimy shirt, and she pleaded silently to the unfeeling gods to spare Arthur. It was a selfish prayer, but she couldn't bear the thoughts of a life alone in Azkaban.

"If I have one regret," said Arthur, as if reading her thoughts, "it's that there's no one here to help you. I tried to protect you, dear. Those things I told the guards," he added, breathless, "I would never...I could never-"

"Of course not! Please, Arthur, please don't die." She held him close.

He reached up to touch her cheek. "My poor little Hermione. I'm not afraid. I'll be with my Mollywobbles soon." He gasped, then a short spasm rolled through him, and then he was still. His expression looked like one of gratitude.

The guards came round the next morning to find Arthur lying still and cold, a look of relief on his homely face. Hermione hadn't screamed. She just sat down to await her turn.

Two days later, Lucius Malfoy showed up and offered her a new gaol cell.

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Sitting in the kitchenette, Hermione wiped her eyes. Arthur and Neville were with their families now, surrounded by love and light, if you believed that sort of thing. It comforted Hermione to think that death was like a huge family reunion, where it was always sunny, and all the food tasted wonderful and there were no ants to ruin the picnic and no midges to ruin the day and you could bask in the light and never get sunburned.

Sometimes she wished she were at that picnic, instead of here on Earth. Even now, released from prison, life wouldn't be easier. It would be different stresses, with different parameters to learn, different obstacles to negotiate, different guards to fuck to get what you needed. And at the end, would the picnic be more enjoyable for all the pain you endured to get there?

Thoughts of picnics absurdly made Hermione aware of her present physical needs. She could ponder and philosophise the mysteries of death all day, but the bottom line

was a growling belly, and the sudden reminder that, in her own flat, she didn't have to wait for the dinner hour or the guard's lax timetables.

With a sigh, she slapped her hands on her knees and stood. Hopefully somewhere in this blindingly white kitchenette there was a kettle of some sort, and possibly some tea bags. Hell, she might be really lucky and locate some biscuits. Making her way into the little galley, Hermione tried to divert her memories and concentrate on the present.

A knock on the door made her freeze in her tracks. She glanced longingly at the wardrobe. She could jump in there and no one would even know she was there... She cursed under her breath, then forced herself to walk across the room and open the door.

A tall woman stood before her, with a black pageboy haircut. Her form-fitting, black designer robes, made of what looked like fine leather, hugged her lean curves and accentuated her long legs. Her eyes were the brilliant cold blue of sapphires, and her smirk was Pureblood Slytherin smugness. She looked Hermione up and down as if inspecting a less-than-inspiring piece of sculpture. "Well, well, well. I didn't believe it when they told me, but it looks like the Princess of Gryffindor took up the Minister's offer after all."

Hermione sighed as the witch strode into the room; she knew things had been going too good to last. "Hello, Pansy. Fancy you stopping by for a visit. I take it this isn't a social call."

Pansy Parkinson had always swanned around Hogwarts like she owned it. Now she sauntered around Hermione's little flat like she was the landlady. For all Hermione knew, she was. Pansy turned and gave Hermione a hard smile. "Well, that depends on your definition of social, you see. You could say I'm here to lend a hand." She looked around. "Nice digs. I told them to at least paint the walls." She teetered into Hermione's bedroom on gravity-defying stilettos that clacked on the lacquered hardwood, a look of faint distaste on her angled face. "My father spent five years in Azkaban, you know. He craves colour now. Our home looks like it was painted by a blind artist with a paisley fetish."

Hermione silently made her way to the kitchen and brewed two cups of tea. She would not ask; she would wait all day for Pansy to tell her what she was doing here. Without a word, she handed one of the cups to Pansy, who still seemed in no hurry to tell her exactly why she'd barged into her flat.

They sat and sipped their obligatory cups of tea in silence. At last, Pansy started in. "So. In case you haven't sussed it out, I will be your Probation Officer for the foreseeable and indefinite future." She smiled mirthlessly. "Are you settling in okay? Do you have everything you need? Is the flat sufficient?"

Hermione's confusion must have been apparent, because her Probation Officer rolled her eyes. "Look. I know what you've been going through, and I know why you took this job. And frankly, you haven't traded up all that much, Granger. The Malfoys may be our First Family, but Lucius was born a prick and took extra lessons to enhance his proficiency. Whatever he offered you, it will be a fraction of what he expects of you in return."

"This sounds like the voice of experience," Hermione replied, unsure what else to say. She certainly wasn't going to spill her guts to Pansy bloody Parkinson over how frightened she was of the other shoe dropping. The other woman's insufferable confidence made it all worse. Hermione cast around for something else to say, anything that might bring the two of them back on an even level. "Are you still seeing Draco Malfoy?" she finally asked.

Pansy rolled her eyes and affected a sneer, but Hermione's eyes had sharpened from too many days of fear-induced observation. Hermione's shot in the dark had been hard, flat, and on the button.

"Yes, well," Pansy began with practiced diffidence, "We were, until I stopped by his flat unexpectedly and caught him snogging Blaise Zabini's face off."

Hermione didn't react. She'd learned a good eighteen months before that the best reaction was none at all; it confused your enemy and gave you something to smile about later. "I wasn't aware Blaise was gay," she replied evenly.

"Neither did Draco, apparently, until they were in a clinch and trying to give one another tonsillectomies with their lying tongues," Pansy grumbled.

Hermione hastily took a gulp of her weak tea to cover a laugh. "I'm really sorry, Pansy," she said, trying to sound sincere. "I would think Lucius and Narcissa were less than thrilled."

"Oh, Narcissa didn't really care. Draco's her baby, and she thinks every time he farts it sounds like Celestina Warbeck anyway," Pansy replied breezily. "Lucius, on the other hand," she rolled her eyes. "Not so much."

"No, he doesn't strike me as the kind of man who takes kindly with having his royal bloodline grinding to a halt."

"That's not the grinding he was upset about," Pansy sniped. "Look. Can we just stick to the subject?"

Hermione hastily took another sip of tea. "Of course."

The dark-haired woman was silent for a moment. "Actually, I really shouldn't speak ill of Minister Malfoy," Pansy said, somewhat reluctantly. "He got me a nice job in the Ministry. And let's face it, he saved your bony arse."

Hermione dropped her eyes. "I am very grateful," she said dutifully. *Toe the party line, Hermione*, she told herself. *You can say a lot of things before you stop being able to look at yourself in the mirror.*

"And so you should be, Miss Granger," Pansy retorted, all business again. "You have a very important position in the Ministry, and our Lord is putting a lot of faith in you. Just remember this; he rewards well those who serve well. I mean, look at Severus Snape. All is forgiven; he's a big shot in the Ministry now. Nice, cushy job."

"W-what?" Hermione's heart stuttered in her chest. "Severus Snape? As in Professor Snape?"

Pansy rolled her eyes. "How many Severus Snapes do you know? Of course, Professor Snape."

"I thought he'd been killed."

Pansy smirked. "Miraculous recovery. I always knew the old bat was too mardy to die. No, he's Foreign Secretary now." She raised a meticulously-sculpted eyebrow. "That's 'Your Excellency' to the great unwashed like you and me, Granger. Though how someone like Snape would ever be considered diplomatic, I'll never know."

Hermione tried to keep the surprise from showing. "So he decided not to return to Hogwarts?"

"Merlin, you *have* been buried, haven't you? There is no 'Hogwarts' anymore. It has been renamed the Voldemort Academy of Arts and Sciences. Very chichi. One can only attend by appointment from our Lord himself. Kids either attend local, smaller schools, or they're homeschooled now." Her expression darkened. "Of course, many families have been sneaking their brats out of the country to the Salem Institute in the States, or Beauxbatons or Durmstrang." She gave Hermione a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "That's where you come in, you see. Your job is to stop the hemorrhage of Wizarding families from the country and encourage them to stay home, where they can embody proper Wizarding values."

Hermione nodded. "The magical folk of Wizarding Britain are fortunate that we have so much to offer here. I'm grateful for the opportunity to help."

Pansy looked at her dryly. "You are to be escorted everywhere. I'll be here to take you to the Ministry first thing in the morning, I'll pick you up at the end of the day, and I'll accompany you whenever you have to go anywhere else. Don't take it personally, but the Minister for Magic wants to make sure his performing monkey is well cared for at all times." She placed her mug on the table and rose, her leather robes creaking as she smoothed them in place. "You'll be allowed to live here alone, but there will be

guards posted in the building at all hours. The building is heavily warded against Apparating...not that you would get very far, even if you did Apparate; you have a Trace on you now. And finally, there'll be no Muggle telephone or post. Anybody who wants to write to you will need to send their letters to me. No owl post except from Ministry owls."

"Not so much as an owl?" Hermione asked, incensed. "Why the hell not?"

"Use your head, Granger," Pansy replied. "The Ministry doesn't want you corresponding with any of your little friends from the Order. And owls can't be tracked once they're in flight everyone knows that. The Ministry won't take a chance with you."

At the mention of the Order, Hermione looked away, afraid her face would betray her feelings. Feigning indifference, she asked, "Are there still members of the Order at large?" She listened carefully.

"No," replied Pansy brusquely. "No one's at large." Had Pansy hesitated? Hermione was almost sure she had.

"Now," Pansy went on, "Tomorrow I'll be by around 9 a.m. You have a hair appointment at Twiddle's Tonsorial Parlour. The Minister wants you looking smart. We'll have to do something about that Azkaban pallor as well. You look like death on toast. In the meantime, get some rest. Get used to sleeping on clean sheets again. The pantry is fairly well stocked, so you should have everything you need to eat. I've also made sure there are some basic toiletries so you can bathe and look presentable. Anything else we can get in Diagon Alley tomorrow after your hair appointment. And wear comfortable shoes. We'll be doing a lot of walking around."

She sauntered toward the front door, then looked back at Hermione with something like understanding and pity. "You'll have to be tough, Granger. Azkaban is good at breaking witches and wizards. If you aren't broken, and you keep your mouth shut and your eyes open, you can make a decent life for yourself. Maybe not the one you wanted, maybe not the one you planned, but you can stay out of Azkaban if you just remember one thing."

Hermione stood and followed Pansy to the door. "And what is that?" she asked.

"Remember who lost, Granger. You'll be reminded who won on a daily, sometimes hourly basis. Remember who and what you are. A Muggleborn witch who fought with the rebels and who isn't rotting in Azkaban solely because the Minister had a whim to get her released. Remember who isn't here anymore, and remember why you lived. If you can do that and not get crushed under the weight of it, you'll survive. And there's no sin in wanting to live. Remember that, too.

"Rest up. I'll be here at nine o'clock sharp in the morning, Granger. I despise being late." Pansy turned. "Oh, shit, I forgot." She drew out a small parcel and enlarged it to the size of a large travel trunk. "A little pressie from your new boss."

"What's in it?"

"How the hell should I know?" Pansy shot back. "Whatever it is, I wouldn't think of it so much as a gift as an incentive, if I were you. One way or another, you'll pay for it. Just remember to thank him the next time you see him. That might be enough to cover your first installment." Hermione nodded as Pansy left, shutting the door of the flat behind her quietly.

Hermione set the trunk on the cheap flatpacked coffee table. With a wary shrug, she opened the trunk and gasped. There were at least five new sets of robes, nice ones, in various colours. They were Madam Malkin's finest, and trimmed with stylish accents and obviously quality fabrics. Blue, maroon, hunter green, peach and black. Matching shoes were tucked in the bottom, along with ten pairs of knickers and matching bras. There were expensive toiletries in pleasant scent combinations, perfumes, even products for her hair. A silver hairbrush and comb set nestled in their own box.

At the bottom of the trunk was a slim, oblong box. As Hermione untied the satin ribbon that held it together, her hands shook, and she could scarcely make herself open it, for fear that whatever was inside would disappoint.

It did.

It was a wand, of course, but unlike any wand Hermione had ever seen before. It was short and stubby...probably eight inches in length...made of plain, undecorated cedar and containing a core that felt to her rusty touch like nothing more exotic than unicorn hair. Apparently, she had been given some kind of training wand...perhaps the sort of thing children receive as a Christmas gift, to pretend they could do magic. That told her two things: one, that someone wanted to remind her precisely who was in charge, and two, someone still considered her a formidable enough witch not to trust her with a real wand. That thought alone should have made her feel better.

It didn't.

She stared at the wand for ages, almost afraid to pick it up after two horrific, wandless years. Although she had seen it manifested everyday in Azkaban, magic had become the enemy, the Judas, and after two years without it, she was no longer sure she fully trusted it.

And following close on the heel of that thought was another, more insidious realisation: If she accepted this new wand, even limited as it was, there would be no turning back. She could no longer claim innocence; she would no longer be merely prisoner G77I96KDB. She would be a witch again; she would consciously cast her lot with Minister Malfoy and the Dark Lord. She would be a part of the new Wizarding world, instead of a conquered rebel from the old one.

She swallowed, her throat dry as dust. *It's just a stick of wood. It's a wand, and a baby wand at that. Pick it up and be a witch again.*

Lifting it from the box, she tested its heft and magical potential. She tried *Wingardium Leviosa*, with the perfect amount of swish and flick. The wand box rose in the air a few feet before it trembled and clattered to the floor.

She turned to the front door. "*Alohamora!*" The door obligingly unlocked, but further experimentation revealed that the wards surrounding her flat remained untouched.

It was not the effortless magic she remembered before Azkaban, and she knew the wand was less than ideal, but it was a start. Hermione closed her eyes and wept.

She was, in that moment, a creature of magic again.

## Chapter Two

### Chapter 3 of 14

In a world where Lord Voldemort defeated Harry Potter and the Order, the Minister for Magic makes Hermione Granger an offer she cannot refuse - become a spokesperson for the new regime, or rot in prison. But Hermione has her own, dangerous agenda. Can she complete her appointed task without running afoul of the law, or the man she despises



Written by stgulik and Teddy Radiator for Droxy. This story was originally commissioned as a TPP Every Flavour Auction gift, but was actually written for the 2012 Summer LJ het\_bigbang fest.

Severus Snape stepped off the lift at the level of the executive offices. He strolled down the polished black marble hall, the heels of his boots ringing purposefully on the stone floor. Golden torches illuminated the hall, throwing glittering reflections off the black tile walls and ceiling. The effect was the sense of perpetual night. Time had no meaning in the Ministry of Magic. One might emerge from the vast underground building to find it was the mid-afternoon or three in the morning. Severus never got used to it.

The double doors to his office suite opened silently ahead of him. The desk in the outer office was empty; his secretary was away. She was an elderly woman who had served the previous administration. Severus knew she would return according to some arcane schedule only she knew. Not that there was a lot here to keep her busy. Whatever work she did to occupy her time in this office, very little of it stemmed from his own responsibilities.

Another set of gleaming doors opened in response to his touch and led to his inner office. He shed his ceremonial robes and draped them carelessly on a nearby chaise. For a second, he weighed the merits of four or five expensive-looking bottles ranged on a sideboard before rejecting them all. He made his way instead to his ornate desk, pulling a bottle of Ogden's and a tumbler out of the bottom drawer. He took a healthy belt of whisky, then poured himself a second shot, put back the bottle and sat down behind the desk. Kicking back, Severus carefully loosened his cravat and starched collar.

He caught a glimpse of himself, mirrored in the false window of his office. Same face; same harsh, severe lines, same large black eyes, same scimitar of a nose, same inscrutable expression, which everyone assumed was one of utter nonchalance. In reality, it was abject emptiness.

He took a smaller drink from the second glassful, and wondered what had happened to the man he had been for most of his life. Severus had never been stupid; he knew he was generally disliked, and he'd gone out of his way to cultivate a manner both unapproachable and avoidable. Getting close to others could hurt; getting close to others got people killed.

He wondered when it had gotten easier to take the path of least resistance; he wondered when all the colour had gone out of his personality. Yes, he'd been a right bastard to friend and foe alike, but at least he'd been awake. Now, he felt like he was sleepwalking, dreaming in black and white.

He had once been a man of great passion and emotion and energy; now it all seemed like too much effort. What was the purpose anymore? Everyone he'd ever felt any passion and emotion and energy *for* was gone. Severus had been alone for most of his life, but this was a loneliness of self he never quite got used to.

He gently touched the scar tissue on his neck, which still ached after a long day in dress robes. He never quite got used to that, either.

By all rights, he should not have even survived with an injury like this. After Voldemort set the snake Nagini on him, and Severus had done his final duty by Lily Potter's boy, he had lain on the dusty floor of the shack and welcomed the end. But minutes later, he was discovered, purely by chance, and effectively rescued. He had awoken to a new world, one in which the Dark Lord had triumphed over the light.

Severus was not sure who found the fact of his miraculous survival more inconvenient...himself, or the Dark Lord. For Voldemort now considered Severus somewhat of a public embarrassment: the faithful lieutenant who was sacrificed to turn the battle's tide, yet who did not have the good sense to die on command.

However, having won the war anyway, Voldemort seemed to feel he could afford to be generous. Smiling benevolently from atop his new throne, he had sketched an obscene parody of an apology and then blighted Severus's second chance at life.

Lucius and Draco had been at his bedside when he awoke, and he'd struggled to conceal the overwhelming feeling of loss and guilt as Lucius bragged on the victory as if he'd orchestrated it single-handedly. Severus glanced at Draco while the boy's father droned on about a new era dawning in the Wizarding world, but the younger man had looked away, unable to meet his stare.

Severus had felt so heartsick and defeated he had seriously considered ending his own life, but then Lucius said something that snagged deep within him.

*"I'm sorry, Lucius, could you repeat that?"*

*Lucius sighed, heaving his shoulders in that supercilious way that made Severus want to punch his face in, and said, "I'm offering you the moon, Severus, and all you can do is stare at me blankly?" He rolled his eyes and leaned toward the bed. "Our Lord has granted you a very high position within his new Ministry. You are to be Foreign Minister, Your Excellency," he added smugly. When Severus didn't react, he scoffed, "Oh, don't tell me you'd rather spend the most pivotal moments in this or any lifetime buried up in that school in Scotland, Severus! Merlin's sake, man! We are making history here!"*

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"Your Excellency?"

Severus lifted his eyes to the painted countenance of Foreign Minister A.K. Lugubrious (1872-1997), his predecessor, now a portrait above the mantle.

"What is it, Alfred?" he asked wearily.

"The Minister for Magic would like a word with you. He will be here shortly," the portrait replied. Sure enough, before Severus could finish his last swallow, the fireplace flames turned green and Lucius Malfoy stepped through.

"Bugger the fucking Ukraine," remarked Lucius by way of greeting.

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Obviously I should have read my job description more carefully, Minister. I wasn't aware sodomy was part of my formal duties as Ambassador. Would that be a literal or figurative requirement, sir?"

Lucius headed to the sideboard. "That little troll Lazarov packed up this morning before sunrise and Apparated with his entire bloody diplomatic contingent, leaving behind a letter of regret. A letter." He sat in a chair across from Severus' desk, glass in hand.

"I'll wager it was diplomatically worded, though," replied Severus. "So, if the Ukraine said no to an exploratory diplomatic exchange, then Poland and Romania will no doubt follow suit."

"No doubt." Lucius agreed and began to apply himself to his drink.

"I can see I'll have to get in better shape physically. Although Poland and Romania are used to being reamed on a frequent basis by now."

"I ignored the first tawdry reference, Severus," Lucius remarked, giving his glass its own seeing-to. "I'm disinclined to humour you any further."

"Alright, seeing as you're disinclined toward any humour, I will simply remark that Lazarov's note was not exactly the response we were hoping for," said Severus laconically.

Lucius leveled a stare at him. "By 'we,' you mean me," he said bluntly.

Severus sighed. "Lucius-"

"You yourself are not invested, Severus. You never have been. You're supposed to be our Foreign Secretary. But this-" he waved his hand carelessly to take in the posh office, the secretary, the job title- "doesn't seem to interest you."

He rose to fix himself another drink. "Severus, when our Lord won and we took control, it was a new opportunity for us all. But for some reason, you have never had any real-"

"How did the subject turn to my inadequacies?" asked Severus testily. "We were talking about the fractious Eastern Europe."

"-any real interest in power," continued Lucius, sitting back down. "As your oldest living friend, it doesn't concern me. But our Lord has heard a rumor that you are not happy or productive in your post." He held up his hand peremptorily. "Not from me. I don't discuss administrative matters with our Lord; therein lies the way to madness."

"But Severus, our Lord is watching, regardless. He *wanted* you in this position. It was his way of thanking you for services rendered before the war. And he wants to see you take a greater interest than you have been in building the new regime." Lucius leaned back and stared absently at his glass as he twirled it with his long fingers. "You were rescued from certain death. You were pardoned by our Lord for your breach of loyalty."

"Loyalty?" Severus cut him off. "Don't recite the party line to me, Lucius. Not here." He stood and placed his hands on the desk, staring at Lucius intently. "Dumbledore did own a very old wand, this is true. He never told me where it came from. But the idea that it was the Elder Wand, and that it possessed some sort of moral code, was the stuff of legend and conjecture. It was a fairy tale. No man in this day and age could believe such a thing. No one could have stated with authority that the wand's loyalties had shifted to someone else after Dumbledore died."

"But even if that wand *had* somehow allied itself to me...or to anyone...that is no kind of breach of loyalty on my part, and you know it." He paused, breathing hard *The* hell with it. "Let's be clear between us, Lucius. I never betrayed Volde..."

"Enough." Lucius's authoritative tone pierced like a knife. He sat forward, graceful even in his anger, and his grey eyes flashed red with reflected light from the fire. Severus wondered if he'd finally gone too far. "The 'party line' saves freethinkers and agnostics from an early grave.....or an overdue one. Pray you do not forget it. Severus, all that is important is the present day. Our Lord, in his indulgence, has forgotten that business with the so-called Elder Wand. He has forgotten the past entirely, in fact, and I suggest you do the same. You were rewarded handsomely for your part in the war effort with a position in our Lord's cabinet. You continue to have his favour." He fixed Severus with a stare. "But now, you arrogant arse, he requires your tremendous intellect to help us expand our influence into Europe." Lucius smirked suddenly. It was an obvious effort to break the tension. "So do try and make more of an effort, old chap."

Severus looked away as he took his seat again. He forced himself to relax. "Why, Lucius. I didn't know you cared."

"Sarcasm, after everything I've done for you. You're as bad as my son." Lucius rolled his eyes. "Now, I'm actually here to discuss the little public relations campaign we are launching. If you'll remember, I mentioned the particulars over dinner last month."

Lucius stood and began to pace. "A few speeches carried on the wireless, a few interviews in the *Daily Prophet*, and our new representative will have our half-bloods and Mudbloods eager to return to the fold. We weren't sure she would take to the task, but so far..."

"She?"

"Oh, yes, didn't I mention? I've selected the perfect parolee. None other than the Granger girl."

"No, you didn't mention," replied Severus evenly. "Fascinating choice."

"Wasn't it? I must say, I'm rather proud to have brought it off. Harry Potter's closest friend. A crowd favorite. And it could have gone either way, frankly, but as it turns out, she was most eager to assume all of her duties." Lucius smirked. "Of course, if you had seen her, it would have been obvious she had no choice. You may not know, but the Lestranges had a bit of sport with her early on when they used to visit the prison to see about releasing all our brethren."

"Did they? I hadn't heard." His eyes flicked to the bottom drawer.

"I understand she sought protection for a time by giving herself to other males. Pitted them against one another. Several even managed to keep other would-be suitors disinterested. But the last of her protectors...Arthur Weasley, in fact...died recently. Without them, she promptly became fair game again. She leaped at the chance for parole, and no wonder."

"You're a veritable Fairy Godmother," drawled Severus.

Lucius glared at Severus without heat. He clearly did not understand the reference but would not admit it. "So, to business. And do pay attention this time." He resumed his seat. "Once this campaign launches, everything must be in place on the international front..."

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Hermione entered her tiny office at the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, slinging her coat onto one of the wooden visitor's chair of the type so beloved in government buildings. She sat down immediately at her desk and leafed through the incoming post, just as the inter-departmental parchments arrived, fluttering through the door like paper birds.

She was just settling in to read when her secretary, a short, dumpty witch with a wide smile, bustled into the office and handed her a steaming mug. "Good morning, Hermione. Here we are, my dear," the little witch chirped.

Hermione looked down at the iridescent oil slick floating on the top. She already knew the coffee would be so wretchedly strong it would practically crawl out of the mug of its own accord. Perfect. She'd taken to coffee immediately upon her return to civilization...the stronger, the better. In the last two years, her tastes had become quite coarse in some respects.

Taking her first sip and grimacing, Hermione cast her eye on a letter in her secretary's hand. "What's on deck for today, Mrs. Grovertree?"

"Just the usual things. The Jarvey survey is nearly complete, and, oh, there's a report of a lovely new nest of Griffins on the Isle of Man. Davies is going to fly up and check on them..."

June Grovertree was a bit of a bonus as a secretary. She was efficient, fairly intelligent and, to Hermione's surprise, very kind toward her. Hermione had steeled herself for ostracism in her new post; instead, she had found a fair amount of acceptance, particularly among the rank and file who toiled in the Ministry vineyards for mere Sickles.

June, for instance, always seemed to want to loiter about and chat a bit longer than was strictly necessary from a work colleague, filling her in on gossip, relaying the exploits of her former boss, regaling her with tales from the weekend. "Perry and I listened to your speech Saturday on the wireless," she informed Hermione, smiling approvingly. "I must say, your technique is much improved from that first time, my girl. Hardly a quaver. We were so impressed. Sitting down with the Minister himself! And won't you just be a sensation at the Ministry ball come Friday? I should say! You've taken to your work like a shrike to water. I was only saying to Perry last night, I said, 'Our girl Hermione has taken to her work like...'"

"Thank you so much for your vote of confidence, Mrs. Grovertree. I can't tell you what it means to me." She indicated the pile of parchment on her desk. "Well, I'll just get on with these, then. Please let me know when Mr. Malfoy arrives."

"Mr. Malfoy *has* arrived."

Hermione looked up at the sound of his voice. Draco Malfoy was lounging in the door frame in immaculate robes, looking every bit as smugly pleased with himself as he had at Hogwarts. His silver-blond hair gleamed in the overhead lighting like a cap, and he preened like the peacock he was.

"Draco." Hermione frowned and greeted him with the same flat inflection with which she would have pronounced "dragon shit."

"Hermione," he drawled, "I was just telling Father this morning, I don't feel my day has truly begun until I see your smiling face." Hermione answered with a cheerful laugh and a two-fingered gesture. "Yes, I will have two sugars with my coffee, thank you."

Draco had been one of the strangest and best things to happen to her in this whole benighted situation. A high-level bureaucrat and rising star in his own right, Draco had been ordered by his father to come around periodically and keep a stern eye on Hermione. But what started as perfunctory check-ins had turned into companionable visits, and finally, a burgeoning friendship. They were both amazed that, after seven years of unrelieved distrust and hatred, followed by fighting on different sides of the war, she and Draco had found common ground down in the unfashionable end of the Ministry of Magic.

Well, it was a fucked-up world. Why not make friends with your sworn enemy?

Hermione sometimes wondered if Draco's new, mellower side might have to do with his recent bout of self-discovery. After his turbulent youth, when he had finally settled down into the quiet life of adulthood, he finally uncovered his true sexuality and became, in his words, "screamingly camp as a row of tents." His best friend, Blaise Zabini, had been delighted by the change. His fiancée, Pansy Parkinson, had not. And Lucius ... well, Malfoy the elder had eventually done the expeditious thing and learned to ignore the entire matter.

Hermione peered closely at Draco's face. "Are you wearing makeup?"

He looked away, nonplussed. "Of course not."

"You are! I see eyeliner."

He pursed his lips. "I think you'll find that's guyliner."

Hermione smirked. "Oh, and I suppose that's *manscara* on your lashes as well?"

June gave a little chuckle and headed for the door. Draco plopped unceremoniously in a wooden chair, wincing at the unyielding seat. "Merlin's nads, Granger, why don't you ask your supervisor for some decent chairs? It's devilishly difficult to seduce you when I can hardly sit still in one of these for more than five minutes."

"I think you answered your own question," she smiled. "If you got comfortable and hung around a while, I might take you up on it, and poor Lucius would expire with shame at the thought of the august Malfoy lineage being sullied by muddy blood."

"Oh yes. The august Malfoy lineage. Some would say I've sullied it enough on my own." His gaze seemed to turn inward for a moment, as if recalling an old argument. "But the truth is, I couldn't do better than you, my girl." Then his face cleared again and he smirked. "If I swung that way, which I *don't*, ever since a certain party in Chelsea, so dry your bitter tears and use your shiny new powers of persuasion to requisition me a comfy visitor's chair."

Hermione returned his smirk. She enjoyed their banter when he dropped by every morning, and she knew he did, too. It limbered up their wits, loosened the brain for storming; it was the verbal stretching of muscles to prepare them for the real business of the day. Hermione was amazed how much she had come to rely on it.

"My shiny new powers of persuasion, is it?" She shook her head. "Do you know I've given five speeches in two weeks? I've lost count of how many interviews with the press. I feel like I've been given a crash course in how to win wizards and influence witches, but I'm not sure what my grades are yet. Have you heard anything?"

Draco smoothed a crease from his immaculate cuffs. "Exceeds Expectations. Granger. Father is pleased, I can tell. Not that he'll come right out and say it."

"Oh, that's a relief." She turned her eyes up to his. "Draco, what do you know about Romania?"

Draco reached for her coffee mug, but when he spied what was in it, he delicately put it back, a faint expression of distaste on his aristocratic features. "What do you know about it, Granger?" His voice carried a note of studied diffidence. Hermione wondered what secret she might be close to.

"Oh, just, after the interview, the Minister spoke to the editor off the record, and said something about Romania." She grinned. "Will we be taking our show on the road?"

Draco laughed, clearly relieved. "You never know. But between you and me, Father hopes that, if it looks as though things have returned to normal here, it will be time to show our united front to other countries."

Hermione frowned. "Are you talking about Vol..." Draco shook his head warningly. "Our...our Lord expanding his influence abroad?"

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Of all the people who could have clued Hermione in on the real reason she'd been chosen for the job, Draco had been the most honest and the least politically correct. On her first day, he'd sat with her and laid down some home truths. "Granger, do you really want to know why you're here?"

At her uncertain nod, he had continued. "Good. Here is the situation: it's all about appearances, innit? The Wizarding world flourished without a central government for many long centuries before Merlin; what's to stop them from doing it again? There are those in Wizarding Britain who are expending a lot of time and energy finding ways to live apart from the influence of the Ministry."

Hermione chewed her bottom lip thoughtfully. "And a government without the support of its people may as well not exist."

Draco smiled mirthlessly. "In one. I'm not going to whitewash it: the Dark Lord's policy of subjugating half-bloods and Muggleborns had a greater impact than was previously anticipated." A tiny frown of unease had flitted across his smooth face. "Whole swaths of the Wizarding community have gone underground rather than bend to the will of authority. More and more are passively slipping away. Beyond that, the populace has begun to reject the authority of the Ministry. Wizarding Britain is becoming fractious."

But telling this to Lord Voldemort and his consort, Bellatrix Lestrange, was tantamount to suicide. Even in near-seclusion as he was now, the Dark Lord still possessed prodigious skill and strengths. Failing him was a death sentence no one could appeal.

So in desperation, Lucius devised a plan. He would entice people back by improving the public face of the Ministry, showing them that his was a system of government that truly represented Wizarding Britain. A new world order, embodying tolerance and diversity.

"And that's where you come in, Hermione," Draco concluded. "You will be the face of the new world order. A figurehead. I mean, short of launching a long and potentially fruitless manhunt for his own subjects, Father doesn't have much choice."

Hermione had understood all too well. Lucius had his figurehead, and if the initiative failed, hers would be the head that rolled, not his. She was well-known, but expendable. And if she couldn't pull this off, he could accuse her of treason, throw her back in Azkaban and be home in time for tea. It was all so civilised.

Hermione sometimes wondered if Draco was as much on her side as his father's. Telling her the truth so baldly had predictably gotten her dander up and called on every insecurity and inferiority complex she'd nursed since her first year at Hogwarts. Draco had seen it enough to know; perhaps he had deliberately challenged her into keeping

herself alive.

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"Abroad? That's for the fat cat ambassadors to work out. We're backing Britain here, Granger. You just keep the hoi polloi at home, and let the real crooks deal with Romania."

"But you just said..."

He smoothly changed the subject. "So, all ready for the ball, Cinderella?"

Hermione shot him a wary look. "Maybe. Are you and Blaise coming as the ugly stepsisters?"

Draco affected a pained expression. "You need to show more respect for your older sister, my dear," he lisped, in a credible imitation of June.

Hermione grimaced as she took a sip of coffee. "To be honest, the idea of this ball is scaring the pants off me. I've not exactly been in a social whirl for the past two years." She looked up, letting her concern show. "Draco, I have to get a new set of dress robes, and I haven't been to Diagon Alley in years. I don't know what's in fashion anymore. Pansy is supposed to go with me, but..."

"But you want a man's opinion, and you know I have perfect taste, is that it?" He smiled, all Malfoy charm and smug confidence. "Want me to take you shopping, Granger?"

"Oh, would you?" she asked, relieved. "That would be lovely. If you're not too busy, that is."

"Never too busy for you. Besides, Pansy's taste is decidedly on the Dom side. You need the considered opinion of a genuine gay man if you're going to shine." Draco unfolded himself from the chair and stretched until his spine cracked. "I'll be here tomorrow around two o'clock, yeah? And don't worry. I'll square it with Pansy." He smirked in that insufferable way that used to make Hermione want to hex his bits off. Now that they were friends, it just made her wistful. "She might pretend differently, but deep down, she still loves me."

Hermione didn't bother repressing a snort. "Yeah, way deep down. Somewhere down around China, I think."

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The Minister for Magic left an hour later, having secured a series of promises of a diplomatic nature that the Foreign Minister forgot the moment the green flames died down.

Severus sat quietly for a long while, staring at the dying embers of the fire, lost in thought. Then he stood up and strode to the door to see if his secretary had made it back. She had. "Mrs. Bulstrode?"

She looked up from her copy of *Witch Weekly*. Marion Bulstrode, mother of one of his former Hogwarts students, had looks that did nothing to dispel the rumor that there was troll blood somewhere in the family line.

"Yes, sir?"

"Bring me the *Printsesa* file, please."

Back in his office, Severus renewed the fire with a wave of his wand and then knelt before the fireplace, hefting the fat file in his hands. The charms he'd set on the file were subtle, but he knew they had not been broken in the last few months.

He waved his wand again to open the file. One by one, he removed crisp white Ministry forms with their gleaming, blood-red seals. In the middle of each seal was stamped one word, described in runes: "Denied." Carefully, Severus laid each form on the flames and watched them burn. They would serve no purpose now, not that they ever had. He threw the file in last, for good measure.

When it was done, Severus returned to his desk, gave up abstinence as a bad job and pulled out the whisky bottle.

"Alfred." He stood, waited to be sure he had the portrait's full attention, then raised his glass in salute. "Arthur Weasley." He took a swig and then toasted the portrait once more. "Neville Longbottom."

## Chapter Three

*Chapter 4 of 14*

In a world where Lord Voldemort defeated Harry Potter and the Order, the Minister for Magic makes Hermione Granger an offer she cannot refuse - become a spokesperson for the new regime, or rot in prison. But Hermione has her own, dangerous agenda. Can she complete her appointed task without running afoul of the law, or the man she despises most - Severus Snape?

Written by stgulik and Teddy Radiator for Droxy. This story was originally commissioned as a TPP Every Flavour Auction gift, but was actually written for the 2012 Summer LJ het\_bigbang fest.

"They've *what*?" Hermione screeched.

The goblin who had just delivered bad news to Hermione now stared at her from his perch at the long, gleaming marble desk at Gringotts. His face was inscrutable, but his long fingers had begun to pick the barbs from a white quill. "A manager will be here in a moment," he said in a low croak. "If the Miss could just lower her voice..."

"No, the Miss will *not* lower her sodding voice!" Hermione yelled. "Gringotts had no right to close my account and turn over my assets to anyone!" She turned for support to Draco, who had edged over to the adjoining queue in order to look as if he wasn't with her. "Did you hear what they did?"

"Everyone heard, Granger," he replied with asperity.

"They had no right to take my money, Draco. As a prisoner, my assets should have been frozen, not taken away! I know my rights! Except in instances where fair

compensation for damages to persons or property is ordered by the court..."

"Okay, um, here's the manager," Draco interrupted. Several people had begun to edge nearer, either to lend support or listen more closely.

A second goblin joined them. "If the Miss would accompany me, we can discuss the matter confidentially." He gestured toward an office on the far side of the lobby, clearly anxious to limit the potential noise level.

"Listen, Granger," said Draco, "I'm sure you can handle this alone, but if you need me to come in and help, I will."

She patted his arm distractedly. "Thank you for the offer, Draco, but you go ahead and get your banking done here. I'll catch up with you when I'm finished."

Draco nodded with relief, and Hermione watched as he joined a group of friends. They were soon chatting away in the crowded lobby.

She followed the goblin down toward his office, but at the door she pressed a hand to her forehead. "I suddenly feel quite faint," she said to him, putting a quaver in her voice. "Your blatant flouting of domestic banking laws has upset me greatly. I need to go outside and get some air. But when I come back, I shall want a full accounting..."

"Certainly, Miss. Say no more." The manager gratefully bustled her over to a side door Hermione had never noticed before, and unlocked it with a touch of a long, claw-like fingernail. The door swung open, letting in the afternoon sun. After a hasty glance back, Hermione slipped out the door. She quickly made her way back to Diagon Alley and headed away from the bank without looking back.

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"Hello, Madam, welcome to Borgin & Burkes. May I help you?"

Mr. Borgin was a thin, weasely oik with thinning grey hair and a voice that seemed to float into her ears from the nasal depths of his deviated septum.

She gave a disdainful sniff. "No, thank you. I'm browsing."

He tittered quietly, setting Hermione's teeth on edge. "Hmm, an aficionado, I see. It's very rare that someone visits us merely to 'browse.'" The oily tone changed, and took on a harder edge. "Most of my customers have a very exact idea of what they are looking for, Miss Granger."

Hermione shot him a look, then glanced about. They were alone in the shop. "Well, then, I'm looking for something to decorate my wall.....a landscape, or a portrait, perhaps."

A languid hand gestured toward her left. "We have a fine selection of wall art in the next room."

Hermione gave him a smile so frosty, he faltered. "I'll just have a look, shall I?" she said, her tone marginally colder than her smile. "Won't be a sec."

The shopkeeper frowned in distaste as Hermione sauntered into the little anteroom. When Borgin was out of sight, she cast a Silencing charm and hurried over to a stack of dusty paintings propped against the far wall. She flipped through them, starting from the back.

"Please be here," she muttered. A portrait of an old witch with the most fascinating wart glanced up at her words.

"Looking for me, dearie?" she cackled.

Hermione immediately pushed the next painting back, covering the witch, who made a muffled sound of protest. Frolicking nymphs in an idyllic landscape waved and giggled at her from the next canvas, and a sleeping boy with what looked like a cluster of broccoli growing out of his ear came after that. At last, she found the one she was seeking.

"Well, now, here's a familiar face," drawled the figure of an elderly man. "Little Miss Granger. I knew it would be only a matter of time before you came calling. Out doing a bit of shopping, eh? How did you find me?"

Hermione looked into the gaunt, aristocratic face of Phineas Nigellus Black. She'd carted him around in her beaded bag the entire time she, Harry and Ron had been searching for Horcruxes throughout England. At the thought of that time, tears came to her eyes. Phineas was her final link to those days, her last days with Harry and Ron.

"I was told you might be here, Headmaster Black. I would have come sooner, but...but I've been..." She tried to swallow a sudden lump in her throat. "I've been... unable to come."

Phineas avoided her eye, making a show of smoothing the front of his dress robes. "Yes, well," he said gruffly, "some plug ugly troll of a man sold me to this establishment. Most undignified. I've been forced to loiter about in the company of broccoli-eared children all this time. Mind you," he added archly, "at least it's been quiet; no bouncing around in that infernal hold-all of yours."

Hermione could not repress a smile. In spite of his biting words, he sounded almost wistful.

"I'm very sorry you had to be bounced around, sir, but I wouldn't have taken you with us if you hadn't been of such importance to us."

"Of course, Miss Granger," he replied with a heaviness to his voice. He waved his languid hand dismissively. "No matter. I already know the whole, terrible tale. Mr. Potter lost the battle, and you were taken to Azkaban. It was all the talk in here for months." He looked up at her with something like pity. "You mustn't blame yourself, child. You were a boon to the cause. Clever, resourceful, intelligent. Particularly cunning for a Mud..."

"Professor," she interrupted, "can we dispense with the prejudices just this once? I didn't come to take a stroll down inferiority lane."

The portrait looked at her with narrowed, shrewd eyes. "No. You came here for a different matter entirely, didn't you, my girl?"

She stood up and pulled the portrait out of the stack. Looking around, she spied a small spindle table against the wall. She propped the portrait on the table and drew up a chair so she could speak to Phineas more comfortably.

"Headmaster," she whispered, "you're my only hope. I have no idea where to start. I have one piece, but I don't know where the other pieces are, or even how many there are altogether."

His eyes widened in surprise. "You still have the piece McGonagall gave you? Well, good for you." He leaned forward, his expression intense. "Is it safe?"

"It's hidden," she replied cagily. "Well hidden."

He nodded, pleased. "I'm glad to hear it. Now, I have much to tell you. First of all, you should know ..." he stared at her grimly. "There are five pieces altogether."

She tried to hide her dismay. Five pieces. Four pieces left to find, and she was just one paroled and hobbled witch, all alone.

As if he could read her thoughts, Phineas went on. "But I know where there's a second piece, and I believe I can help you find more, if they haven't been moved, or given to someone else." His tone was disapproving. "McGonagall and Dumbledore played their last, most desperate game very close to the chest, those two. I doubt if even Headmaster Snape knew."

"Merlin, I hope not," she grumbled. "If that traitor knew, no doubt he'd have found all the pieces and destroyed them."

Phineas looked at her keenly. "Traitor? That's quite a new tune for you. After the Forest of Dean, I gathered you two were rather..."

"Well, not anymore," she hissed. "Not since he's become the Dark Lord's fair-haired boy. You may not know, but he has a very prestigious position at the Ministry now."

"So do you, Miss Granger. Yes, I keep my ears open," he added, when she gaped in surprise. "One hears many things about the new spokeswitch for the Ministry. It begs the question: whose side are *you* on?"

She gasped. "The same side I was always on! The side of the light!" She clutched the edges of the portrait so hard, her knuckles were white. "Snape betrayed us! He took sides..."

"Enough, girl! You're working yourself into a state. Can't abide a woman in a state," Phineas muttered. "Remember, not everyone is as they appear, Miss Granger. Not you.....not anybody."

"Sound advice, sir," she snorted. "That and two Knuts will buy you a cup of tea."

"Impertinent chit!" He glared at her, and she glared back. Then suddenly they relaxed and smirked at the same time.

"You know, I rather miss our adventures, Miss Granger," he said.

It was Hermione's turn to be wistful. "I don't. But do I miss the company, Headmaster."

His face softened. "I know, child. I know you did all you could to protect them. It's not your fault that it wasn't enough." Suddenly, he brightened. "But we can have more adventures, can't we? Buy me, my dear. Take me home with you. Along with the piece that's landed in this very shop."

Hermione felt her lips go numb. "What?" she replied stupidly. "There's one here?"

Phineas smiled. "Indeed. And further, I have a rather good idea who may know where at least two other pieces are." To her surprise, he winked. "I'm not the only former headmaster with a portrait in more than one place. There aren't many of us, mind," he added, lowering his brows, "which leads me to suspect Albus decided to use his more mobile colleagues..."

"Yes!" she exclaimed. "In case Hogwarts became compromised, he needed conspirators who could leave!"

Phineas looked irked at being interrupted in the middle of his revelatory moment. "Yes. Some of us have the dubious fortune to be mobile. Dual portraits. As for the rest: destroyed. Every headmaster and headmistress whose only portrait resided at Hogwarts is gone." He slapped the arm of his chair in impotent anger. "What a waste! What a loss of knowledge and counsel. Madness, sheer madness."

Hermione thought of Dumbledore's anxious face as she stood in the Headmaster's study. "Pumpkin pasties," she murmured. "He meant it as a password when I meet other headmasters' portraits."

He eyed her keenly. "Yes, that's right. Now, there's an unusual item on a shelf in the back room...brass, with black vines on its face, very distinctive. You're sure to recognise it," he remarked, a sly smirk on his thin lips. "Shall we?"

Cancelling the Silencing charm, she leaped out of her chair, the portrait still clutched in her hands, and nearly collided with Borgin, who was just walking into the anteroom.

"Ah, lovely craftsmanship," the shopkeeper said, hooking a pair of spectacles over his jug ears. "This is a portrait of Bertram Nobulous Styles, the famous cauldron maker."

"Why, you ignorant peasant!" Phineas spluttered, rising from his painted chair.

There was a crash within the painting as Hermione tilted it sideways, spilling Phineas and his chair out of the picture. "I recognised it instantly," she said with a gleam in her eye. "I'm a huge fan. I own one of his, er, cauldrons." She handed Borgin the painting. "I'll take it. Will you please have it wrapped and shrunk for me? And I'll want to look around a bit before I finish up here."

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Severus walked soundlessly down the corridor of the Janus Thickey Ward, a silent, slim shadow amongst the lurid painted ramblings of its inmates. In spite of the many times he had come to this ward, he never got over the feeling that the paintings somehow watched his passing, and knew he was no threat to the damaged and vulnerable residents of the floor. He imagined them shouting and screaming otherwise.

The Healers' station was deserted, as it always was at this time. Three o'clock in the afternoon, he knew from his own experience, was a time for stretching tired limbs, grabbing a cuppa, sneaking out on the fire escape for a crafty fag. It was the moment between the body's blood sugar dropping and tea time; and even the most stalwart found the urge for a catnap at its most irresistible at three. Second winds only happened between four and five o'clock.

As a teacher at Hogwarts, Severus had hated three o'clock. Dinner was hours away, the students were lethargic and irritable, and he himself always longed for a nap. His frequent bouts of insomnia meant that late afternoons were particularly tortuous. Sometimes he thought he would sell his miserable excuse for a soul to have those dozy afternoon hours back; he often longed for those uneventful days when he had nothing to face but the hope the house elves would have fixed Spotted Dick for dessert.

It occurred to Severus that he had often been awake while the world around him slept. He had prowled the halls at Hogwarts in the wee hours, long past the time when anyone else would be awake. He paced his quarters during those awful early days, restlessly hoping for a solution to his ever increasing burdens. He lay awake, staring at his ceiling, wishing to fall asleep and just not wake up. For a man who had always thought of himself as a creature of the night, he had spent far too many dark hours longing for dawn.

The Healers and Medi-witches were no doubt on coffee or fag or loo breaks, desperately trying to buy a little slice of alert to get them through the last couple of hours of their shifts, which meant that Severus could make his regular visit unnoticed by many people on the ward...anyone lucid, that is.

He paused at the door and knocked quietly. "Hallo?" came the husky answer within.

Severus opened the door and said softly, "Good afternoon, Mr. Weasley. I trust you are well?"

Ron Weasley stood. "Hello, Professor. What brings you back to London so soon? Another Order meeting?" The faintest look of confusion settled in his expression. "I think Dad mentioned there would be one when I saw him yesterday."

He replied, "I had some business in town, Mr. Weasley, and I thought I would stop by for a visit." Inwardly, Severus sighed in relief. Sometimes Ron mistook him for Harry Potter, and even during one regrettably unforgettable visit, Sirius Black.

Ron merely continued smiling at him. His hair was cropped short, and his genial, open face pleasant as always. It was tragic to look into the mobile, expressive face and see so little of the boy he had known as a student. His condition, according to Medi-witch Tickle, was similar to being subjected to a very powerful *Confundus* spell. Counter-curse after counter-curse, potions to regenerate brain function, mental and physical and psychological therapy.....all had been tried in a myriad of variations and potencies. The only results they produced were roomfuls of Healers shaking their heads regretfully.

The damage had been devastating and extensive, but Arthur had been determined to keep his last remaining son (he had given up on Percy) from a lifetime at St. Mungo's.

The wizard had foolishly thought his son would be safe at the Burrow, and he had been right, after a fashion...until Arthur was arrested. The boy had practically set Ottery St. Catchpole aflame before being brought here.

"When you see Dad, tell him to remind Mum that Harry's coming to the Burrow next week." Ron beamed, obviously pleased at the thought. "I think he's bringing his gear for school, and I'm dying to try this move I saw at the Quidditch World Cup." He jumped up on his chair and crouched, his arms out, his brow furrowed in concentration. "You sit very low on the broom, you see, then you bank to the left..."

"I thought you might fancy a game of chess this afternoon, Mr. Weasley. I'd like to have a chance to redeem myself."

Instantly, Ron leapt down from his chair, the Quidditch move forgotten. "Sure, Professor." He laughed shortly. "I'll give you another chance to let me beat you."

He turned toward the desk and his smile faded. His chessboard was empty. He frowned, looking around the room uneasily. A look of panicked confusion flickered over his eyes. With an embarrassed shrug, he said, "I...I'm sorry, Professor, but I seem to have misplaced my men..."

Obliquely, Severus passed a hand over the board, and a ghostly set of chess pieces appeared. "No matter, Mr. Weasley. I thought I might have more luck with my own set. Would you like red or black?"

"I think red, sir," Ron answered respectfully, already drawing up to the board.

For the next hour they played cutthroat chess, both saying little, both throwing everything they had at the board. Severus, who considered himself a consummate chess player, was delightfully impressed with the young man's ability. Mentally damaged as he was, he was a better chess player than most. In fact, only Lucius or Draco ever challenged him to a game anymore. Lucius never managed to finish a game, as affairs of state or otherwise always took precedent, especially if he was losing. Draco was an indifferent player, usually manning the board more to be polite than out of any real interest. Ron, however, was skilled, imaginative and bold, even in his madness.

Severus was convinced he had Ron, but at the last minute the boy used his clever knights to take down Severus' bloodthirsty bishop, checkmating him and winning the game.

As Severus' king threw down his sword in sullen, sore defeat, Ron looked up from the board, a genuine smile of joy on his earnest face. "Well done, sir."

Severus didn't want to feel disgruntled at the thought of being soundly trounced by a mental patient, but found himself grumbling, "Not well enough to beat you yet, Mr. Weasley."

"It's alright, sir. What else do I have to do here all day but play chess?" He gave Severus a sly look. "But seeing as I have won, sir, I believe the old saying is 'to the victor belongs...'"

"...the spoils, yes, I'm familiar with the phrase as well, Mr. Weasley," he shot back, unable to prevent his own lips from twitching. He reached into his pocket and removed a small wrapped box. "I believe this will suffice for now."

Ron's eyes lit up, and he opened the present with the single-minded thoughtlessness of a child. Within was a blue, pentagon-shaped box. Ron shook it, and to his delight, a soft croak answered from within.

"Excellent! I love chocolate frogs! I've been collecting them for years!" He opened the packet and the spell-infused amphibian immediately leapt from its confines into the air. Severus watched in bemusement as Ron tracked the frog's apogee, ducked until he was directly under the frog's trajectory of descent, and caught it expertly in his mouth.

Ron smiled at Severus, then hastily turned the card over to open the back. "I've got about a thousand of these now," he said, carefully peeling the back from the Famous Wizards/ Witches card. He froze, his eyes growing wide and fully of joy. "Blimey, I don't believe it! Look, Professor!" He thrust the card into Severus' hand.

"Whom did you get this week? Morgana? Armando Dippet?" From the card's frame, a haughty wizard with a nose to rival his own sneered disdainfully out at Severus, then, to his surprise, blew a raspberry at him.

Ron's face broke into a smile that rivaled the sun. He crowed, "It's only Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim!" He leapt out of his seat as if he were planning to do a backflip. "Do you know how long I've been trying to get Agrippa? Only since I was about eight years old!"

Severus returned the card. "Well, this is a piece of luck, Mr. Weasley."

"I'll tell you what it is...it's brilliant, that's what it is!" Ron exclaimed, his eyes glowing as he looked at the card. "It's the only one I could never get, other than Claudius Ptolemy. I can't wait to add it to my collection." He turned toward his desk again. "Wait 'til Harry sees this..."

He grew still, and the animation and pleasure drained from his face. He took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. "Harry is dead," he said, dully. He looked at the card, and placed it reverently on the table. He cast his eyes about the room, as reality bled back into his tattered mind. "They're all dead." Looking over at Severus, Ron slowly sat down in his chair, and stroked the card gently. Tears welled in his eyes. "I don't have a collection anymore. I burned it down at the Burrow."

Severus stood, and placed his hand on the boy's shoulder. Ron trembled as he wept. "Then start another collection, Ronald. I will help you."

Ron looked up at Severus, his eyes full of grief. "What's the fun of collecting something if you don't have anyone to show it to?"

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Draco accepted Hermione's story that she had simply gone ahead to the dress shop after her failed business transaction at Gringott's. "Just put all that banking rubbish out of your mind for now, Granger," he told her reassuringly. "Besides, your money's no good at Madame Malkin's anyway. This frock is going to be charged to the Minister's Office." He winked. "I can't wait to see the look on His Excellency's face when he gets the bill."

He set to work immediately. Snapping his fingers, Draco set the entire staff to work, hauling out a rack of expensive dress robes with the help of Madame Malkin herself. Before long, he found her a stunning robe in a deep rose shade, which made her skin glow. The cut of the empire waist accented the gentle swell of her breasts, and gave her the illusion of height. Pretty dancing shoes completed the ensemble.

Finally, he pulled a slim box out of his breast pocket to reveal a garnet pendant set in heavy gold, with matching earrings. They were Goblin-made and very beautiful.

"My mother said she would love for you to borrow these," he murmured, shifting behind her to fasten the clasp around her neck. Hermione shivered at the touch of his fingers as they brushed the cold length of golden chain. Together, Draco and Hermione gazed at her reflection in the mirror, admiring the effect. "I think I've hit the mark on this one," he murmured.

"Thank you, Draco. For everything." She met his eyes in the mirror and tried to smile, but her throat suddenly constricted with emotion. For a stupid moment, she was tempted to tell him the truth, but then remembered the portrait, shrunken and hidden in her cloak. "You're a good friend," she managed. He looked pleased, even touched.

"I'm not spelled to pay empty compliments, dear," croaked the old mirror pleasantly. "But I think you look like a queen."

Hermione straightened her shoulders and looked again at her reflection. *A queen. I must act like a queen.* But the haunted look in her own eyes told her the truth.

*I am the Queen of the Lost,* she thought.

# Chapter Four

Chapter 5 of 14

In a world where Lord Voldemort defeated Harry Potter and the Order, the Minister for Magic makes Hermione Granger an offer she cannot refuse - become a spokesperson for the new regime, or rot in prison. But Hermione has her own, dangerous agenda. Can she complete her appointed task without running afoul of the law, or the man she despises most - Severus Snape?

Written by stgulik and Teddy Radiator for Droxy. This story was originally commissioned as a TPP Every Flavour Auction gift, but was actually written for the 2012 Summer LJ het\_bigbang fest.

The Cushioning Charm was not as good as the one she had cast the night of the Yule Ball, the last time she had worn really high heels. Hermione bit her lip and adjusted the grip on her wand. She pointed at her feet once more, tracing the symbols with mind-crunching intent. The charm strengthened, and her feet rode a little easier in the strappy five-inchers.

She sighed in relief and wriggled her toes. The shoes Draco had chosen to go with her dress robes looked wonderful, but after two years in canvas prison shoes, Hermione found the stilettos were sadistically painful, and impossible to get used to, even with a Cushioning charm. She had already turned her ankle once while in her flat; she couldn't afford a *faux pas* like that in public.

Regarding herself in the floor-length mirror, Hermione adjusted her bra strap, applied another layer of lip gloss, and left the women's washroom. As she made her way back to the main staging area for the evening's ball, she longed for the safe haven of her broom cupboard or an office. Alas, that was not to be; according to the Minister, she had a lot of schmoozing to do.

She entered the main area of Shacklebolt Hall, the seat of Kingsley Shacklebolt's family since the mid-nineteenth century, when his family fled the Caribbean and its superstitions and persecutions to make their way in England. Judging from the manor, they had succeeded and thrived here, until the final war destroyed the family and ended the Shacklebolt family line.

It was a modest, but very tasteful house. With a pang of sorrow, Hermione pictured Kingsley here, hands on hips, looking tall and imposing and regal. He had been a true warrior, but now all the warriors were gone. In their place were these shift-eyed politicians, diplomats and sycophants. With a bitter smile, she realised she was in the latter category. Lovely.

Fairy lights hung over every doorway, corner and table. They festooned the ceiling and even looped around the portraits and fireplaces. Hermione's nose wrinkled in distaste. *Dolores Umbridge*, she thought. *Only Umbridge would take a simple, elegant space and turn it into a fraternity common room. Gods, the woman was the scourge of good taste.*

"Feeling better?" A familiar voice asked from behind. Hermione turned with a smile. Draco and Blaise were returning from the loo as well, and judging from the hazy look in Draco's eyes, they had been using a Cushioning Charm as well, for a rather more enjoyable reason.

Hermione smiled at the couple. They looked like they should be on some illustration for Pureblood perfection; two demi-gods who'd decided to go slumming for the evening. "I'm hanging in there," she said, trying not to shout over the music and din of voices.

Hanging in there was about right. The music was overly loud, which meant the hosts were trying to kill conversation and encourage the guests to drink and eat more, but the combination of music, liquor, lights and rich food made Hermione feel a little queasy.

"Well, you look absolutely beautiful," Blaise said, saluting her with his champagne flute.

Hermione beamed at him. Blaise was rather beautiful himself, now that she took a closer look. Six foot one, built like a brick shithouse, he had the wide shoulders and trim hips of a Quidditch player, but the rugged good looks of a movie star. He pampered Draco shamelessly. It was small wonder Draco adored him.

"I agree," Draco said, clinking his glass with his partner's. "Lovely frock, by the way. You must give us the name of your fashion consultant," he added with a devilish little smile.

"If I do, will you hex him for suggesting these shoes? I'm going to be limping around like a gnome by the end of the evening. And don't tell me to use Cushioning Charms because I already have," she added warningly.

Draco cast a surreptitious spell toward Hermione's feet. Instantly they felt a hundred percent better. "Thanks," she replied gratefully. Gods, it would be a great day indeed when she could rid herself of this wand and get one that actually worked properly.

"Don't mention it," Draco answered with a smile. He stiffened slightly, and unconsciously stepped back toward Blaise. "Are you enjoying your evening, Father?"

Hermione turned to see a flute of champagne being offered to her from Lucius' outstretched hand. "Very much, Draco." His smile never quite made it to his eyes. "Your mother has been asking for you. Why don't you and Mr. Zabini take her a glass of champagne?" He turned to Hermione and his eyes briefly flicked over her in a way that made her wish she'd bought dress robes with a more modest neckline. "She's been cornered by Madame Umbridge, and I'm sure she'd appreciate being rescued, don't you think?"

Draco and Blaise took the hint, after giving Hermione sympathetic looks. Draco's was particularly pensive, and Hermione felt even more exposed after the two younger men left.

She turned back to her benefactor and gave him her practiced, winning smile. Minister Malfoy had been treating her differently all night: friendlier, more familiar, less the Minister and more the man. It made Hermione uneasy. Ever since the speeches and the congratulations and toasts made and drunk, the Minister had been looking at her strangely, as if he'd never quite seen her before.

Her speech had gone extremely well...her best yet, she thought. Talking to people had never been much of a hardship for her, but then again, knowing failure meant a one-way ticket back to prison was a hell of an incentive to perform well.

"As I look out onto this sea of people this evening, do you know what I see?" She had begun. "I see the greatest Wizarding nation on this planet," she answered, her voice powerful and passionate. Many had looked at her obliquely, as if unsure they should agree with her or not. "Ours is the nation of Merlin, of Nimue, of Morgana. We are the



nation of Lord Voldemort!"

The crowd applauded. She waited as they watched her, wondering if she believed what she was saying, or was just mouthing the party line. For her sake, she hoped that they thought she was sincere. She changed her stance, and lowered her voice, so that they leaned in closer to hear. "I know that I was not born into the history that many families here tonight share. I realise that the great and powerful Pureblood families of Wizarding Britain represent the world's finest.

"Isn't it fitting then, the Nation that gave the world Merlin and Lord Voldemort should encourage its citizens to embrace all that Wizarding Britain has to offer, by urging them to remain here, for their children and their children's children to enjoy the finest Magical education that our civilisation has to offer? Isn't it fitting, that the greatest Nation on earth is the vanguard for the world in Wizarding values and harmony between all its Magical citizens?"

"I urge you to speak to your families, your friends, your loved ones, and reassure them: we are here for you. Wizarding Britain is never going to let you down, never going to forget how important you are, never going to take you for granted." She raised a glass to the assembled. "Welcome home, Wizarding Britain, welcome home!"

As the applause died down, Lucius posed with her for the *Prophet*, telling anyone who would listen how pleased he was that Draco and Hermione's generation had set the standard for the future of their kind by ushering in a new dawn of enlightenment. Hermione had stood there, smiling, being passed around like one of Lucius' trinkets, feeling soiled by his implications that she had somehow helped the Dark Lord win the war. At least he was not mentioning Harry's name.

And it helped that Voldemort himself was not at the ball. Locked away in his massive mansion, the Dark Lord and conqueror surrounded himself with his favourites. He had finally stretched forth his hand and made Bellatrix Lestrange his consort, thus freeing her and her husband from one another. Now, they ruled together from afar, rarely seeing anyone, but rather relaying the Dark Lord's edicts through go-betweens and other drones like Percy Weasley. Rumours spoken in very quiet conversations hinted at Bellatrix's worsening psychosis, and the Dark Lord's increasing paranoia. Voldemort, like Alexander the Great, seemed at a loss now that he had no more worlds to conquer. *The gods sometimes punish us by answering our prayers*, Arthur used to say, when referring to Percy.

And so Hermione had smiled and blushed prettily at his side as Lucius preened during the evening, and had dutifully joined him on the dance floor as his second dance partner...after his lovely wife, of course.

"So, Miss Granger, another triumph. You should be very pleased," he had drawled, moving with her gracefully across the floor.

"I am, sir," she replied demurely, her eyes locked on the silver buttons of his immaculate robes. "I'm particularly glad to have pleased you."

"Of course you have, dear girl," he purred, and the hand on her waist changed position imperceptibly. Suddenly she could feel his entire palm pressing against her ribs. "I couldn't be happier. Well, I could, but," he rewarded her with a lazy smirk, "perhaps that is for a more private conversation."

Hermione's face grew numb. She had been expecting something like this, had probably unconsciously wondered why it hadn't happened sooner. It was one thing, though, to think your boss might make a play, it was quite another to hear the national anthem just before the kickoff.

Lucius lowered his head until his lips practically grazed her ear. She shuddered, which only seemed to amuse him. "Remember, you have complete run of the Ministry office. My staff requested it to expedite working with you on your speeches. But if you should ever feel the desire to speak to me about anything, you have only to drop by, my dear. Anytime."

He gave her one last squeeze before releasing her. "Ah, there's the Polish Ambassador for the Wizarding Court of St. James. I must have a quick word with him." Lucius smiled down at her, ever the opportunist. "We've had a large contingent of families move to Poland in the last few months. I've been working to find a way to encourage him to persuade our people to return to Britain." He became all business. "Why don't you use that considerable charm and ask him to dance, my dear? I'm sure your powers of persuasion could be used to aid us in our cause."

Receiving the message loud and clear, Hermione nodded, and the Minister escorted her from the dance floor to the Ambassador's side. He was a short, balding man who seemed thrilled to dance with the young lady who was the talk of the evening. He'd eaten a great deal of garlic prawns at the buffet.

After extricating herself, Hermione danced with Draco and then Blaise, and was just settling in with an a minor dignitary of some note when she heard a familiar voice.

"Excuse me. May I cut in, Mr. Rotherhyde?"

Her partner, who'd been a lovely conversationalist, looked up in annoyance, a refusal on his lips. When he saw his rival, however, he blanched and relinquished Hermione with all the charm of a hot potato. Hermione turned to face the newcomer, ready to do battle.

"Well, well, well. Severus Snape."

"I see your powers of observation are still as sharp as ever," he drawled, and held out his arms in the attitude of the dance. She hesitated, wanting more than anything to say no, to feel some deep satisfaction of denying him, of all wizards. One silken eyebrow rose; it was a blatant challenge to her, and she wished she had the luxury of spitting in his face and stamping on his feet to show him what she thought of his arrogance. Instead, she pasted on her practiced smile, and allowed herself to be drawn into his arms.

The music was slow and dreamy, and they floated together effortlessly. The hand that held hers was large and warm, and the one gripping her waist strong and confident, knowing and proprietary.

They danced in silence, even as the tension between them ratcheted skyward. "Why aren't you dead?" she said finally, as the slow dance propelled them into the middle of the dance floor. "How is it that so many good people have died and you aren't one of them?"

"Am I to take from that question that you consider me one of those 'good people,' Miss Granger? In that case, I thank you for your compliment."

"It wasn't a compliment and you know it," she bit back, looking around for someone, anyone, to cut in and rid her of his presence.

Snape, on the other hand, seemed to enjoy her discomfort. "Well, I will say, the Ministry does make for some interesting bedfellows," he drawled, and Hermione looked up into the eyes of the man she swore she never wanted to see again.

He looked better dressed and groomed than his Hogwarts days, when she had last seen him. His dress robes were beautifully tailored, setting off his slender figure. A deep midnight blue, they were topped with a stunning silk sash as wide as her hand, brocaded in the same colour thread. She risked a look at his face, falling into those black, black eyes, so deep and luminous they seem to engulf whole worlds within. They had always mesmerised her, those dark eyes; they were at once incredibly expressive, and maddeningly unreadable.

His hair was longer than she remembered; it spilled down from his widow's peak and over his shoulders like black rain, shiny and iridescent in the multi-coloured fairy lights. His large, hooked nose and thin-lipped, sardonic mouth looked the same, however; and for a moment, she was little Hermione Granger again, desperately wanting his approval.

"Turning your coat obviously becomes you," she quipped, hating the nasty tone in her voice. "It's given you a cushy job in the Diplomatic service, not to mention all the prestige and power you ever wanted." She cast a glance over at the lovely blonde witch she'd seen on his arm earlier. "I see it's even bought you a trophy date for the evening."

Snape followed her gaze over to the edge of the dance floor, then nodded to the blonde, who sketched her perfectly manicured lips into a slight pout. It was clearly a parody of a kiss, and Severus turned back to Hermione, a secret smile on his lips. "Yes, Diana is quite lovely, isn't she?"

"At least she looks old enough not to be taken advantage of by predators like you."

Her words wiped the smile from his face. He sneered, "You knew what you were doing."

Hermione hated him in that moment. She wanted to hex him, flatten him to the ground and dig her impossibly high heels right into his...

"Oh, yes, that's why I let you..." Hermione forced her temper down, swallowing it like bile. "So am I to take it that this is love?"

His eyes grew brightly malicious. "Of course it's not love, but," he looked down at Hermione and purred, "it doesn't have to be. Two consenting adults can have a physical relationship without going through a charade of pretending unending devotion, or even trust. Perhaps one day you'll be old enough to understand that."

"That must be a relief for you, I'm sure. Seeing as love is something you've shown to be incapable of giving or receiving. I'm sure when I'm as old as you, I will have had many years to practice lying about it," she replied, her voice level and measured. He shot her a strange look, which she couldn't quite define, then looked back over her shoulder toward the Minister's table.

"Your speech was quite stirring," he said, his rich voice reverberating between them. "One would almost believe you meant every word you said."

Unable to meet his eye, she stared down at an ornate silver pin on his breast. It was a head of Medusa cameo, wrought in silver and obviously very old and very valuable. She idly wondered which dead wizard's spoils had yielded that trinket to the victors. Stubbornly, she willed herself to say the words. "Of course. I mean every word I say." She made herself look up again. "I have always meant every word I say, Snape."

He sneered faintly. "Of course. A paragon of Gryffindor integrity. Some might say the very last."

Hermione felt a great lump of ice form in the pit of her stomach. She had never been able to match his callous cruelty. "Why are you doing this?" she whispered, and to her surprise, he pulled her closer, his warmth enclosing her, protecting and smothering her at once.

"Doing what? I'm merely stating that you seem to be singing a different tune than the one you sang with me," he hissed, his lips close to her ear. His body was warm against hers, a deep, familiar weight that pressed against her heart.

"I'm not the one who lied to everyone about his loyalties," she shot back, trying to pull away. He denied her, and held her fast against him, as if it were a punishment.

He chuckled in her ear, a low, dangerous sound that made her shiver. "I'm not the one who was sleeping with the enemy, my dear."

She began to breathe hard, trying to stem the tears that threatened to spill. She had to get away from him or she would make a fool of herself. Once again, she tried to push him away, but he was too strong. "Careful, Miss Granger! All eyes are upon you tonight. Is this really the time to make a scene?"

Suddenly, it was all too much. The speech, the overly-rich food, her aching feet, and now this contempt. "Do we have to do this, Severus?" When he did not reply, she added, "To be perfectly honest, I'm tired, my feet hurt and I'm a little overwhelmed. Hearing you gloat over my misfortunes and foolish choices is just one step too far."

"It's going to take a little more begging than that to convince me of your sincerity, Hermione," he intoned, his voice angry and cutting. "Where is that oh-so-famous Gryffindor sense of honor? Why would you do such a Slytherin thing and bargain your way out of Azkaban just to become a whore for the Ministry? Did prison change you that much?"

"Prison changed *everything*," she hissed with sudden venom. "If the war had gone the other way, you might know that first-hand, Snape." When he didn't reply, she closed her eyes. "Whatever. Just let me go, please."

"Can't wait to get back to your generous benefactor, eh?" He stepped back, and led her off the dance floor, his fingers on the small of her back. As his hand fell away, he turned to her, his dark eyes hard and pitiless. "Go ahead, then, Hermione. Run back to Lucius. But I warn you, he gets bored very easily." His black gaze swept over her body, his mouth twisted in contempt. "Today, you're his golden girl. One little slip, and you're the Prophet at the bottom of a birdcage."

Hermione turned, feeling as if she were drowning. She had to get out of the room. She needed air. As she moved away, she heard Diana's plaintive voice. "Oh, Severus, you promised to introduce me! I thought you said you knew her." Hermione glanced over to see Diana possessively clutch Snape's arm. Even her pout was gorgeous.

Snape looked up and met Hermione's eyes. He turned his attention back to his companion, and put his arm around her tiny waist. "I'm sorry, pet. I was mistaken."

Hermione started for the exit. She was fucked if she was going to stay another minute.

"Ah, Miss Granger, there you are!" She turned to find the Minister beckoning to her. He and a portly wizard were standing by the door. "Fancy old Severus monopolising your time, when the Editor of the *Daily Prophet* is pining to speak with you," Lucius remarked. He was looking at her with a mixture of suspicion and cool disapproval that made Hermione's already-churning stomach cramp. She had the overwhelming feeling he had missed nothing of the encounter between her and Snape.

The other wizard, however, was beaming at her, and Hermione rewarded him with the smile she'd been coached to produce on command. It was cheery and warm and fooled almost everyone except herself. "How do you do, Mr. Postlethwaite. Are you enjoying the evening?"

"Indubitably, my dear, indubitably!" The wizard enthused.

"Excuse me, won't you, Miss Granger?" Lucius interrupted smoothly. "I think one of my deputies is trying to get my attention." He left them alone, and Mr. Postlethwaite and Hermione exchanged a self-conscious glance.

"It was a lovely speech," he said, trying to fill the uncomfortable silence.

"Thank you," she said, her smile firmly plastered in place.

Another moment drifted by. Dancers glided by like swans, and Hermione stared longingly at the bar, wanting something hard but not daring to. If she was going to have to deal with this...

"I understand that you saw Arthur Weasley in his last days."

Her eyes snapped back to Mr. Postlethwaite. There was none of the jolly fat man about him now. He was all business. Uncertain, she looked around.

"This is entirely off the record, my dear. Arthur was a good friend of mine," he said, lips barely moving behind his raised glass. "How badly was he treated...as a blood traitor?"

She stiffened. This was the editor-in-chief of the *Daily Prophet*. "Mr. Postlethwaite, if I were to be quoted, it could cost more than just my job."

He looked upset. "This isn't about the paper, dear girl! This is about a friend of mine who was jailed for being...why hello, Mr. Brewster! Have you met the Witch of the Hour?"

Hermione smiled at yet another wizard who had spoken to her earlier in the evening. Troubled by Mr. Postlethwaite's remarks, she turned back as Mr. Brewster nodded, spoke a few words and moved on. She saw the Minister talking to Snape, and as if they sensed her, both men looked up at her almost at the same time. Hastily she turned back to her companion.

"Look, I'm not sure I can tell you anything new, but he died of a heart attack. It was a couple of days before the Minister approached me."

Postlethwaite looked pensive. "His poor wife had died right before he went to prison...of a broken heart, if you ask me. And he was survived by two sons, I believe: Percy ... and Ronald."

Hermione felt the last vestiges of her self-control fracturing. In a moment, her shredded nerves would snap and she would do something from which she could not recover. Her voice shook as she replied, "I'm sorry, I don't know what you're trying to do but I really don't want to talk about Ronald Weasley to anyone. He's with relatives now, which is all anybody can do for him."

Shaking, she placed her hand on the door handle and made to leave.

"No, Miss Granger," Postlethwaite replied, surprise in his voice. "Ronald Weasley is in St. Mungo's."

Hermione stared at him. "What? I thought he was at the Burrow with his father before Arthur was incarcerated."

His voice was warm with concern. "Oh, my dear Miss Granger, *it* has been too long since you have heard news of your friend. As you remember, he received an unknown, very serious hex during the quashed rebellion."

Hermione made herself nod. She hated the way the Order was referred to as 'the rebellion.' Postlethwaite continued, "His mental instability steadily deteriorated over time, but Arthur refused to have him committed. Well, when Arthur was sent to Azkaban, the poor boy completely fell apart. Finally, he ... he burned down the family home."

Hermione felt the floor tilt beneath her feet, and she grabbed Mr. Postlethwaite's arm for support. She closed her eyes, praying for just one more minute of strength. The Burrow had been her home away from home. She had hoped to return to it one day. And now it was gone.

The editor nodded. "He was committed soon after, of course, so as not to be a danger to himself or others. The poor boy," he murmured. "He doesn't even know where or who he is most of the time. A sad, sad thing. A waste of fine old Wizarding stock, even if he was part of the rebel..."

"Thank you, Mr. Postlethwaite. Thank you for telling me," she said brokenly.

He looked very concerned. "Of course my dear," he said kindly. "Although I'm surprised you didn't know. Of course, we at the Prophet don't print these sad stories very often. It's not our place to benefit from others' misfortune, you know."

She swallowed back a sound of derision. Postlethwaite patted her arm. "I'm told he is greatly cheered by visitors, although he receives very few now. Only family and friends are allowed on his ward, and since Percy Weasley is the only living relative, well..." He gave a little shrug, as if the sentence finished itself.

Her heart felt heavy, but she hitched up her smile again. "I'll go see him first thing tomorrow. I appreciate you trying to help me."

He waved a chubby hand in the air dismissively. "Think nothing of it. Happy to help one of my oldest friend's few remaining children." He smiled, then made a gesture, as if suddenly receiving an idea. "Oh, and if you *do* decide to go and visit him, my dear, would you be willing to grant the Prophet an exclusive interview afterward?"

Hermione froze and looked at him stupidly. He nodded enthusiastically. "I mean, can you imagine how much our readers would love to be a fly on that wall, the poignant, tearful reunion of the last living members of the Golden Trio? I can see the headlines now!" He swept his arm from one side of his fat body to the other, as if spelling out his front page story. "The Golden Girl and the Lost Boy...two sides of the war! Your popularity would rise into the stratosphere!"

She turned on her heel and strode out of the ballroom. Let the fucking Minister ride her for walking out early. If she had to stay in the same room as Postlethwaite, Malfoy and Snape one more moment, she was sure she was going to rupture something.

Pansy was outside, smoking a fag while chatting up a large black wizard with a green mohawk.

"Did you know Ronald Weasley was in St. Mungo's?" Hermione demanded without preamble.

Pansy took a deep drag of her cigarette and blew a plume of grey smoke into the air. She shrugged indifferently. "Yes. I heard he was taken there after his dad was shipped off to Azkaban and he burnt down that hovel of theirs."

Hermione stared at her, too stunned to speak. Finally, she found her voice. "Why didn't you tell me? You said I was the last Order member."

Pansy rolled her eyes. "No, I said no Order members were at large. They're all either dead ... or they don't have all their Gobstones in one pouch."

She turned back to her companion, who seemed to be weighing the possibilities of getting Pansy on his flying carpet. "Now, pretty lady," he said, his voice like dark rum. He smiled, flashing impossibly white teeth against his blue-black skin. "Allow me to take you on a ride. I can show you the rings around the moon."

"Take me home," Hermione said, interrupting Pansy in mid-pull. The dark-haired girl looked at Hermione with narrowed eyes.

"It's too early," she retorted. "Go back and have some more champagne." She dismissed Hermione and turned back to the green-haired wizard.

Hermione immediately threw up her hand, and a three-decker, purple bus shrieked to a halt in front of the mansion. She gave Pansy a threatening look. "Either take me home or explain to the Minister why I went home on the bloody Knight Bus."

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After Hermione left his side, Severus felt capable of breathing easier. Seeing her here was bad enough, but he'd steeled himself for that. Then, he had gone and destroyed everything he'd prepared himself over by cutting in and dancing with her. That had been an exercise in the type of masochism he'd thought himself long past indulging.

It hadn't helped that Lucius, sniffing out weakness like a shark smelling blood in water, had cornered him shortly afterward.

"So, the former professor dancing with the former student," he drawled, and together they looked up to see Hermione watching them carefully. "The rose has bloomed, hasn't she?" Lucius murmured in his ear. Severus made himself turn away and face his old colleague.

"It seemed the correct thing to do, as we are both working on the same Ministry-sanctioned initiative," Severus replied neutrally, trying to force himself to look at something, anything but her. "I'll admit that, amazingly, she hasn't changed that much. Azkaban didn't seem to leave any lasting impressions."

Lucius snorted. "Believe me, it left an impression. She's surprisingly vulnerable. My sources tell me of nightmares she suffers. The occasional panic attacks that she tries to hide in the female lav." He smiled possessively. "But she is a beauty, you cannot deny it, Severus. You, who observes everything, must have noticed how lovely she has become."

"I noticed her," he replied, stonily, wondering where this conversation was leading. If Lucius suspected...

"And simply begging for attention. She's obviously looking for someone to take her firmly in hand. A father figure, perhaps. A daddy, even." Severus casually followed the line of Lucius' gaze. Hermione was engaged in a very intense conversation with that man from the *Prophet*. That talentless hack, Pritchard Postlethwaite. "I've been working very hard with Miss Granger to help her express herself in the manner befitting a rising star of the Ministry. She's a very, very quick learner."

Severus looked at Lucius, hating his smug smile, the way his eyes roamed over Hermione. It sickened him, mainly because he, too, had looked at her with covetous eyes.

Seeing the familiar look of conquest in his eyes made Severus want to smash his handsome face in.

He kept his voice deceptively casual. "A quick learner, eh? Have you taught her how to duck Narcissa's hexes when she finds out?" Severus asked. "Because you'll be the one seeing rising stars if she learns about all these so-called 'private lessons.'"

Lucius looked at him, genuine surprise in his eyes. "Why Severus, you sound positively concerned over my welfare. Haven't I told you time and again that the mark of a good politician is knowing how to cover one's tracks?"

Severus looked toward where Hermione was standing, trying to ascertain for himself if Lucius had just been baiting him, or if he really had gotten his leg over. Somehow, he knew he'd be able to read it in her stance, her eyes. But she had quit the ballroom.

Telling himself he was relieved, Severus looked around for his escort, who was chatting with a group of harpies in the guise of wives of several Ministry officials. She caught his eye, extricated herself from the crones and approached him, a smile of invitation on her perfect lips.

"You look a little tense, Your Excellency," she purred playfully, her long-nailed finger toying with the ornate pin at his breast. "Why don't we go to your place for a little relaxation therapy, hmm?"

Severus regarded her. She was a lovely witch: tall, leggy, built for speed, and she looked like she wanted it. But behind those eyes were things he didn't like; avarice, shallow calculation. She was in it for what Snape could do for her, not what they could share.

She was a dead cert as far as the sex was concerned. It might even be good. Some of the things she'd whispered in his ear on the dance floor had made him grateful for his voluminous dress robes, but still...

"Perhaps some other night, my dear. I am swamped with work, and the Minister will have my head if I don't get my reports in tomorrow. Please forgive me." He sketched a bow, kissed her hand, and left her, ignoring her look of disappointment as he strode toward the front doors.

## Chapter Five

*Chapter 6 of 14*

In a world where Lord Voldemort defeated Harry Potter and the Order, the Minister for Magic makes Hermione Granger an offer she cannot refuse - become a spokesperson for the new regime, or rot in prison. But Hermione has her own, dangerous agenda. Can she complete her appointed task without running afoul of the law, or the man she despises most - Severus Snape?

Written by stgulik and Teddy Radiator for Droxy. This story was originally commissioned as a TPP Every Flavour Auction gift, but was actually written for the 2012 Summer LJ het\_bigbang fest.

*Stgulik and I cannot thank you enough for the amazing comments you've given us for Droxy's Folly. We hope you will continue to enjoy the story.*

*Please note this chapter contains explicit sexual content.*

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After he abandoned his disappointed escort at the ball, Severus returned to his spacious London flat. It was another gift from a grateful leader, and reflected cold good taste and quality. To Severus, it was the place he slept, showered, shaved, moped. He poured himself a tall glass of firewhisky, downing half the contents in one gulp. He grimaced as the fire spread throughout his body, and he flopped down in his favourite chair, loosening the dress robes. He winced as he pulled the collar aside. The scar felt raw, exposed; a fitting commentary on his life if he'd ever heard one.

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Severus looked back on his stint as Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry as one long, continuous, streaming nightmare, more painful even than Nagini's wound. He had been reviled so thoroughly it was like a pall in the air. The living energy of students and faculty alike had been so negative that he nearly crumpled from it on a daily basis. He had always declared himself a loner and proud of it, but this was a loneliness that bore weight and heft, and like a slow poison, it was killing him by inches in a hundred insidious ways.

On the night that Phineas Black's portrait had informed him Potter was with his friends in the Forest of Dean, he had felt it was a night like any other...one where he was forced to do things for reasons unknown. The resentment of constantly being someone's puppet was as crushing as the hatred he was exposed to, and he thought of the endgame not as his death, but as his escape. It was a notion that grew sweeter with every passing day.

He performed Dumbledore's bidding with the sword, and as he prepared to return to the school, something literally stopped him in his tracks. It was deep, strong magic, as solid as stone, as clean as mountain water. He stilled, frowning. This was no ordinary repelling charm.

It was powerful enough to discourage any wizard in the country; he could sense Notice-Me-Not, Muggle Repellent, traces of Fearful Fog, and a tried-and-true Silencing Charm. No one, Muggle or Magical, should be able to get within ten feet of this blanket of wards before remembering a prior engagement, looking right through it, and having a sudden urge to go to the toilet.

Why could he sense this powerful cocktail as if he were the one who cast it?

Cautiously, he pressed against it. He was flooded with sensation; it carried a complexity and skill almost equal to his own. There was an irresistible protectiveness about it that felt holy and pure, like a mother's love. Severus closed his eyes as it washed over him. Lily's magic had been like this, strong and sure, with firm pliability, and it had always accepted him, until that horrible, life-destroying day.

Unable to help himself, Severus stepped closer, until the magic stung his nose like bleach. He leaned against it, mesmerised at how it supported and embraced his weight. This was no ordinary repellent charm. This was a charm that recognised emotion and feeling and kinship, and it felt as sweet and comforting as lying down on a feather bed...

He was too enthralled at her wards, and did not react quickly enough. He froze when the tip of a wand glowed hot against his jugular. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't kill you right now," a low voice growled menacingly.

Severus forced himself to be calm. "Because you couldn't cast an Unforgivable, Miss Granger. It isn't in you."

"You might be surprised," she snarled.

He swallowed, and the wand slid along his Adam's apple. "Perhaps, but you won't do it. I'm not your enemy, Miss Granger. Your wards would have repelled me."

There was the slightest of hesitations. "Didn't they?"

He turned to look at Hermione Granger for the first time. There was nothing of the irritating swot about her now. She was a warrior, hair-trigger alert, dressed in shabby Muggle clothes. Her large amber eyes flashing with suspicion and anger.

He thought she looked beautiful.

Before he said anything stupid, he turned to Disapparate. At the last second, she threw her arms around him. They both gasped in panic as they flew through the nothingness at odd angles and crooked circles, until they landed in a heap in his kitchen at Spinner's End.

Severus was the first to gather his wits, and he launched himself ponderously to his feet. Hermione was only marginally slower, and much, much angrier. "You bloody idiot! Why did you do that?" she shouted at him, listing slightly as she tried to regain her balance.

Severus caught her arm to steady her. "I'm not the one who wrapped around someone attempting to Apparate, am I?" he shot back, frantically checking her arms and legs for any signs of Splinching. Satisfied that they both were unharmed, he released her, and she staggered back slightly, watching him silently as he rummaged in one of the kitchen cupboards. He found a single, dusty glass and blew into it to clean it.

"Where are we?" she said, defensively wrapping her arms around herself.

He sneered in her general direction. "Buckingham Palace. Where do you think, Granger? You're in my home." He found his bottle of firewhisky, and miracle of miracles, there was still a finger or two left swilling around at the bottom. He emptied the contents in the glass and took a warming gulp, welcoming its raw burn. He held out the glass to her. "Drink."

Hesitantly, she took the glass from him, took a cautious sip, then grimaced as she passed it back. "Gods, I don't know how you can make that look remotely appetising."

"Because it's the only thing in this house right now that makes sense. Talk to me, Granger. What the fuck did you think you were doing, hanging on to me like that?" He sounded his usual belligerent self, in spite of his jangled nerves. "I could have been heading straight for a meeting with the Dark Lord."

She looked at him blankly, then grew still. "Why did you say my wards would have repelled you?" Her eyes were distrustful. "Didn't they?"

Severus took another drink and passed the glass back to her. "They engulfed me."

This time, she took a larger gulp, grimacing at the heat searing her lungs. "How?"

He studied her. "Are your defensive spells and wards set to recognise certain magical signatures?" When she did not answer, he nodded. "No. They allow those you care about to penetrate them. Those you love."

Oh, that made her turn away. Fortified with just enough firewhisky to throw a little caution to the winds, Severus moved closer to increase the intimidation factor. In his most persuasive, velvety tone, he purred, "Tell me, Miss Granger, why did your wards... caress me?"

"Why did you come to the Forest of Dean?" she hissed, unable to meet his eyes.

Severus took a deep breath. Did he really want the answer to his question? Perhaps it was for the best.

He put her out of her misery by explaining how he came to know where to meet Harry Potter to ensure he found the Sword of Gryffindor. Hermione was not impressed. In fact, she was incensed. "That snake, Phineas Black!" she muttered, shaking her head in anger. "Fucking Slytherins. Can't trust them as far as you can throw them." She looked back at Severus. "Gods, I'm such an idiot." She stood. "I'll be going now."

"You're going nowhere, Granger. Tit for tat," he replied. "I tell you what I was doing, you tell me why I was doing it."

Hermione turned to him, her eyes reproachful. "I've defended you, you know. Ever since I was a first year. I've stood up for you, had points away from my own house by arguing when someone called you names, I've told Harry and Ron and anyone who would listen that you were Dumbledore's man." She looked away. "I believed in you, right up until you blew him off that tower." She shook her head. "Why did it have to be you? Why couldn't it have been anyone else?"

Severus looked at her, his heart pounding. Merlin help him. He knew. He'd heard her; even as he laughed at her behind her back for the last six years, he'd known she championed him. Let Potter say and do his worst; this little witch would defend the defenseless. No matter how harsh his detractors had been, Hermione Granger looked upon him with respect and recognition of his proficiency and skill. She had admired him.

The sadness, the loss of regard for him in her voice hurt worse than all the cuts and hatred he'd experienced at Hogwarts that year...more than he'd ever felt in his lifetime, and something broke. His anger, fueled by his own hurt and frustration, flared.

"Why me? Why has Dumbledore always chosen me, Granger? Why do you think? Because I promised I'd do anything for that meddling bastard, and I have! Do you honestly think I killed him because I hated him! I loved that old man!"

The words flew from him before he could pull the drawbridge down. "I brought St. Potter the Sword of Gryffindor because Albus told me to. Do you know why? I fucking don't! I was just following orders!" He grabbed the glass and threw it into the fire, watching as amber droplets flew from the edges of the broken glass. Hermione jumped but held firm. "I'm sick of it, Granger! I'm sick of taking orders that lead to nothing but pain and being vilified for it. I'm sick of being everyone's puppet and punching bag and sacrificial goat and being spat on for the privilege. But most of all, I'm sick of people thinking I'm something I'm not!"

"Professor..."

"Don't call me that! I'm not your professor anymore and I never will be!" He was breathing hard, near tears, and his heart felt as if it were going to burst. "It kills me that I've broken your faith. I have done and will do anything I'm told to keep this sorry mess going until Potter is ready, but it's killing me. And do you know what kills me more than anything?"

She shook her head, clearly convinced he had gone mad. "What, S-Severus?"

At the sound of his name, coming from her throat, Severus felt his rage and fear leave him. He slumped, and closed his eyes. He was tired, so tired. Brokenly, he said, "It kills me that you cared enough to allow your wards to touch me and protect me, and now they never will again."

For a moment, the room was quiet, except for his harsh breathing. Then her arms went around his neck, and she held him close. He felt her lips upon his cheek, soft, caring. The simple act of affection shocked and staggered him, and confused him to the point of pushing her away.

"Miss Granger, please. Don't unman me even further with your pity. This is ... unseemly."

She looked up at him, puzzled. "Unseemly to comfort someone I care about? Unseemly to reassure you of my respect? Unseemly to tell you how brave you are, and how

sorry I am that you're all alone? That's not unseemly, Severus. And it's not pity." She touched his face with the tips of her fingers. "It's deciding to believe in you again."

The retort died in his throat. His own expression froze as he looked down into her trusting face, and before he could help himself, his erection stirred and hardened. Hermione held him, and pressed her cool little cheek to his. Without conscious thought, his arms stole around her slender waist, and Merlin help him, he pulled her into his embrace. She relaxed against him, and they stood, silent and still, for a moment.

At last, she leaned back and looked up at him. Something shifted between them; something raw and elemental, and her body melted against him. Her budding breasts pressed against his chest, and his erection nestled against her belly. "You're a fine woman, Hermione Granger," he said, his normally silken voice hoarse and low.

She smiled shyly. In a soft, husky voice, she replied, "My wards will always recognise you, Severus."

His mouth was on hers before he could think, before he could stop himself, and she was open and willing and so sweet he pulled her closer and clasped the back of her head in his hand to drink from her lusciously soft lips. She pressed closer and her tongue snaked out to battle his, and with a ragged moan he forced his tongue between her teeth, and drained her dizzily wet mouth.

His cock pulsed painfully, and he kissed her over and over again, wanting more than he could ask for, more than she could give. Duty, honour, loyalty: all forgotten as he gave himself up to her, unable to pull away from the lure of her warmth, her fire.

He didn't remember how they found themselves on his bed, only that he undressed her with desperate haste, pulling her jumper over her head and all but tearing the bra from her shoulders. She was panting and flushed and unbuttoning her own jeans with shaking, impatient fingers. He yanked the jeans down her lush hips, raining kisses on her body, moaning helplessly at the silken feel of her skin, the soft, clean scent of her flesh.

He didn't bother undressing; all he could see was her, all he could feel was her. Her eyes were glazed with arousal and heavy-lidded, and her body was slender and pale, with a soft pink blush of desire. She was perfect, all tender curves and lush round breasts, capped with small, tight rosy nipples. His eyes roamed over her hungrily, and lingered on the small patch of curls at the apex of her thighs.

As his eyes flicked back to her face, her expression was unreadable. "I want this," she whispered, her breathing harsh and fast. "Please don't stop."

She held out her arms to him, and he surrendered without a struggle.

He pressed her down on the bed, suffocating her with his desperate kisses, his hands stroking everywhere he could reach. His tongue licked a trail down the fine column of her throat, and he felt her fingers twining through his hair to pull him closer. His hand closed over her soft, round breast, her nipple digging into his palm, and he lowered his body until he was sucking on that rosy little tit, hearing her cry out in pleasure. He licked and suckled and tugged, and when she whispered shyly, "Bite it a little," he whimpered helplessly and almost came like a randy teenager.

As he obediently nipped at the delicious nipple, she mewled and writhed beneath him. He wanted to take his time and explore her, but his libido would not allow it. He was aching for her now, ready to plunge into her sweet heat, and he paused only to lick two fingers and ease them into her labia. She was heart-stoppingly wet already. He swirled his fingers through the slick honey, and pulled away from her tender nipple with a little pop.

"Is this for me, Hermione?" he growled, sliding the pad of his index finger over her swollen and distended clitoris. She shivered as he circled the little bundle of nerves. "Are you wet for me?"

"Yes!" she cried, arching her hips to urge his finger to that place she needed him to be. "Oh, gods, it feels so good it almost hurts," she moaned, her face tense with arousal.

He managed to kiss her gently, their tongues battling against one another. "I'll soothe that ache, I promise." He eased in, teasing her clit with all the skill he could claim, and felt her shudder. "That's it," he soothed, so ready he could feel the orgasm burning his cock. "Let's see you come."

Watching the young, beautiful witch come apart around his fingers was one of the most erotic moments of his life. Even as she was crying out his name, pulsing against his fingers, he opened his robes and pushed his cock into her tight, hot passage. He could feel her body trembling in its orgasm, and he wanted to be gentle with her, wanted to ease his body into hers and not be an animal with her. She was so virgin-tender and sweet and blissfully responsive, but the moment his cock entered that hot, sweet slit, her little petals melted around him and he slid home with a helpless bellow of ecstasy.

The pleasure of sheathing himself within her almost blinded him, and he sobbed as he drew back and slammed against her, praying the gods and this witch forgive him for being so rough. It was too exquisitely good; he could not help but pound into her, and she grabbed his shoulders and reared up to meet his pistoning hips.

He didn't last. He knew he wouldn't. Looking down into her face, at once trusting and enraptured, he thrust five, six, seven times before his orgasm flayed him open. He howled his release, his awful cry of completion muffled against her downy breasts. Even as he dragged air into his straining lungs, he wanted to weep, knowing that in that short, frantic time of their joining, his life had changed.

She gave him a charmed Galleon of her own design, showed him how it worked, and promised to come to him the next night. Allowing her to return to Potter and Weasley was the hardest thing he'd ever done. Immediately after she kissed him goodbye and left, he Apparated back to Hogwarts and sequestered himself in his study, seeing no one for almost twenty-four hours.

For the next three weeks, she came to him at Spinner's End almost every night. He didn't ask how she got away, and she didn't volunteer the information. They took stupid risks. The fact of the matter was he didn't care, as long as she was in his arms and undressing him and panting in his ear.

He could think of nothing but her; during the days and nights he could not see her he would be in a state of complete misery, longing for her. Hogwarts business was forgotten; he could not function properly. He forced himself not to think about her taste, her scent, her wet, tight cunt that beckoned to him, the mad tendrils of her hair, which snaked around his waist as he drove into her, pulling him closer, deeper.

By the time she arrived each night, he would tear her clothing from her with ruthless efficiency, plundering her mouth with his, grasping her silky flesh with greedy fingers, filling her with his needy cock. He was jealous of every waking moment he could not be with her. They would fuck for hours, whispering their desire, kissing the moans and gasps from one another's lips. Every time he made her come, she cried out his name in a delirium of joyous release, and it always burned him to cinders.

She was young and inexperienced, but she was utterly fearless in telling him what she wanted, how she wanted to be pleased. She was starved for affection; he was voracious for her; and in that moment they found the perfect balance of need and care and tenderness. They talked of many things, foolish things of no consequence, like music and dreams and spells and magical lore. They refused to utter the names Potter and the Dark Lord and Hogwarts.

In between conversations they made love, rutted and fucked. They taught one another how they wanted to be touched, and being the quick learners they were, soon mapped out the passion of one another's bodies with surgical precision. She was loving and tender and greedy for his body, and he hungrily took her, reveling in her soft cries of rapture.

But it was in that final moment, when pleasure and duty and pain and longing melded together and raced down his cock into her waiting womb, that Severus felt truly, wholly, beautifully alive, right down to the tips of his fingers and toes, out of the ends of his hair. For the first time since his youth, he wanted to survive this war, so that he could make love to Hermione Granger every night until he was so old he no longer had the ability. He would never lose the inclination.

He became obsessed with impregnating her. As she dozed in his arms, he would cast silent conception charms over her flat belly, praying to the gods to leave a piece of himself behind in her. He whispered incantations against her lips as she slept, and she made sweet little noises and drew him closer.

The last time he saw her before the battle was late February. They had been unable to come together for almost a month, and he was nearly demented with need. The

Dark Lord had become obsessed with what he called 'Deathly Hallows,' and had minions scouring the countryside for evidence of their existence. Remembering that fateful night in the Forest of Dean, a night that would forever be burned in his memory, Severus became convinced taking the Sword of Gryffindor to Potter had something to do with these hallows.

He never should have called for her that night. He was exhausted, running on almost no sleep and very little to eat. He was almost dizzy from sleep deprivation and faint with hunger. He should have waited until he was stronger and could think properly. But the need to see her, to touch her overcame his good judgment. He summoned her using the galleon, praying she would come. He felt ill for want of her; it was as if she were just another deprivation he suffered from. Surely he would die if she did not come to him.

They met in a cheap Muggle hotel in Shepherd's Bush, one of the many anonymous row hotels in the area. He had got there first, and was sitting in a chair, his robes unbuttoned, stroking his cock, when she Apparated in. She took one look at him, sitting there, playing with himself, and she began to undress for him, slowly, making an erotic show of it, her eyes blazing with lust. By the time she was down to her knickers he was almost on the verge, grasping his cock painfully to stave off his imminent climax.

In a hoarse voice, he ordered, "Come here. Sit on it. Now."

She straddled him on the chair and fucked him, their mouths fused to one another's. She whimpered and shivered and shook as she moaned of her need for him, the longing, the addiction he had planted in her body for him. He understood; he, too, had gone cold turkey too long. This was a high from which he never wanted to come down.

Neither had lasted more than a few moments. As soon as they ground out their climax, they started again, too greedy to allow their bodies time to recover.

Later, they lay spent and drifting. Severus took Hermione's hand. "I need to ask you something," he began, having no idea how to say what he knew he must.

She sighed despondently. "Will it upset me? It seems everything upsets me nowadays."

He swallowed, and wound a strand of her hair through his fingers. "In all likelihood, yes."

She nodded against his chest. "Go ahead. Hurt me with it."

He turned until they were facing one another, resting their heads on their forearms. She looked so tired and careworn. He tenderly stroked her face. "Hermione, why did Dumbledore send me to your camp with the Sword of Gryffindor?" He cursed silently as she stiffened and glanced away. "Don't you realise by now you can trust me?"

She took his hand in hers but she no longer met his eyes. "Dumbledore told...told Harry not to trust anyone."

"Dumbledore is the one who sent me into the bloody woods with the sword, Hermione," he said, trying to keep his voice reasonable. "If I knew what you were doing, I could help you. I have all of Hogwarts at my disposal."

She turned back, giving him a beseeching look. "Don't ask this of me, Severus," she pleaded, in a small voice. "Don't make me do something..."

He pulled his hand from her grasp. "That might end this war sooner? Hermione, what do you take me for?"

She leaned back and looked at him uncertainly. "I take you for my lover, Severus."

"Lovers help one another," he replied, trying to keep a lid on his frustration. It would do no good to lose his temper. "What kind of future do you think we can have together if you can't trust me?"

She rose from the bed. "A future where I'm not told to keep secrets from you! I can't tell you because I can't tell you, Severus. I'm sorry, but..."

"Hermione," he said, rising as well, "don't be this way. I need you to trust me..."

"Why?" she insisted, growing angry. "Why do you need to know? In the wrong hands that information could cost the war!"

He could almost see the red mist settling over his vision. "The wrong hands? Is that what you think this is about? That I'll go running off to the Dark Lord and tell him Hermione Granger's deep, dark secret?" When she didn't answer him, he felt his blood run cold. "I see," he said, his voice flat and empty. He started to dress. "Well, at least I know where I stand with you."

Hermione grew pale. "Please don't be this way, Severus! We only have a little time..."

"I have no time, Hermione!" he shouted, anger and desperation crowding out prudence. He was too tired, too damn tired. "I'm going to be dead soon, and you won't even allow me the privilege of gaining the information needed so I won't have died in vain!"

"Please don't say that!" Now she was crying, clutching the edge of the bed sheet to her, as if ashamed to be arguing with him naked. "Please understand, Severus..."

"I understand all this has meant nothing to you but the occasional shag! You can't even show enough respect to help me!" He strode up to her so quickly she took a step back. In a low, dangerous voice, he said, "I could force it out of you, you know, Granger, but I didn't want to stoop to that."

In that instant, he was staring down the business end of her wand, and even though her hand shook, he had no doubt she would use it. In a trembling voice, she said, "If you ever think of threatening me with Legilimency again, Snape, you won't need that thing between your legs any more. Do you hear me?"

The moment the words left her mouth, she looked shocked that she'd said them. Severus looked at her, wondering how they had gone from inseparable lovers to threats in a matter of seconds.

Suddenly, it was all too much, and his hurt morphed into cold anger. "Once again, you've made it clear exactly what I mean to you." He looked away, unable to stand the stricken look in her eyes. She had hurt him, dammit, not the other way around. "I'll assure you, Miss Granger, you will never have to contemplate 'that thing between my legs' ever again."

She made a low, mournful sound, and began to cry. A demon of exhaustion and sorrow plucked at his brain, and he sneered at her. "I bid you a good life, Miss Granger. What's left of it, in any case." He turned away, pretended to consider, then turned back. "Oh, and thank you for the fucking. You were ... an adequate diversion, I suppose. But for a man, anything's better than nothing." His eyes roamed over her disdainfully. "Almost."

He Apparated, telling himself that he wasn't sorry he'd said it. He found his way back to his chambers, crawled into a bottle of firewhisky, and didn't emerge for almost three days. Only a command from the Dark Lord had been sufficient to bring him out of his hole. By then, he had reconciled himself to having played the fool over a Gryffindor witch yet again. His despondency over her self-righteous refusal to trust him had fueled his wounded pride, and by the time he faced the Dark Lord, he didn't have to pretend contempt.

Besides, it made it easier to accept his inevitable fate. He spent the remaining weeks at Hogwarts in a numb, stoic fog of bitterness, wallowing in the misery and ecstasy of being misunderstood and beneath the notice of the object of his desire. He had a duty to perform. He had allowed himself to be sidetracked by nothing more than a bout of meaningless sex. It was time to focus on what was truly important.

Any hope of reconciliation was lost on the night of the Battle. He'd pushed away yet another person he cared for. If he didn't dwell on it, he could ignore the pain of losing her. He'd been doing that long enough to know how.

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In her tiny flat, Hermione lay on her bed, curled up on her side. Her lovely rose-colored dress robes lay in a heap on the floor, her uselessly painful shoes in the rubbish bin. She closed her eyes and heard his voice, mocking her, hating her. She felt his hands, hard and joyless, grasping her waist. She saw his large, dark eyes boring into hers, accusing, cursing.

She saw him put his arm around another woman and pull her possessively to him.

In the dark, she began to tremble; she gasped over and over, trying to stem the hot, rebellious tears that streamed from her eyes.

She wanted to hate him. He had been the one who forced them apart; he had been the one who had taken something precious and killed it. He had been the one to blame.

And yet, Hermione thought of his lips on hers, and how he stole her heart right out of her chest when she wasn't looking.

Gods, she wished with all her being that he would give it back.

## Chapter Six

*Chapter 7 of 14*

In a world where Lord Voldemort defeated Harry Potter and the Order, the Minister for Magic makes Hermione Granger an offer she cannot refuse - become a spokesperson for the new regime, or rot in prison. But Hermione has her own, dangerous agenda. Can she complete her appointed task without running afoul of the law, or the man she despises most - Severus Snape?

Written by stgulik and Teddy Radiator for Droxy. This story was originally commissioned as a TPP Every Flavour Auction gift, but was actually written for the 2012 Summer LJ het\_bigbang fest.

The next day, in the late afternoon, Hermione checked her reflection in the mirror as she readied herself. Pansy Parkinson was due in twenty minutes to take her to St. Mungo's, and she would almost certainly offer up a caustic remark when she saw the pains Hermione had taken with her hair.

Out of boredom, Pansy had assigned numbers to the various hair routines Hermione indifferently employed for her public appearances. This particular look was Number One: long and loose, the dark curls slicked with just enough Sleakeasy's hair potion to set them to dancing about her face when she moved. It was her most labor-intensive hair style.

But it had always been Ron's favorite, and he deserved it.

She had time for one more cup of tea. Moving through the tiny living room, Hermione heard Phineas clear his throat in his frame, now propped against the wall.

"Don't you look nice today," he commented. "Who is the undeserving audience?"

"No audience...no speech," she replied absently, heading toward the kitchenette. "I'm going to St. Mungo's to..."

Phineas gasped. "Then you've found Dilys?"

She stopped in her tracks. "Dilys? Dilys who?"

"Dilys Derwent, you foolish girl! She is only one of the most celebrated Hogwarts heads of the eighteenth century. She was bestowed the honor of having two portraits...one in Dumbledore's study, and the other in St. Mungo's."

"I see," she replied tartly. "Thanks ever so much for telling me about her before this moment. Is her portrait still there?"

"How would I know?" he snapped. "You're the one with legs. I assume you've been tracking down dual portraits like I told you to."

"It's not as easy as opening a book," she replied angrily. "I do try and keep my ear to the ground, but you'd be surprised how hard it is to ask people whether their portraits are secretly spies."

"As a matter of fact, young lady, it is as easy as opening a book. *Hogwarts: A History*, to be exact."

Hermione grew quiet as the anger bled from her. "...I'm not allowed a copy of *Hogwarts: A History*, Headmaster. It's a banned book. In fact, many copies have been destroyed."

Phineas' reaction was nothing short of amazing. He rose from his chair and roared, "Banned! Why on earth was it banned? It's not exactly *The Magical Kama Sutra in Victorian England*, by Lord Stokenheimer."

Miserably, Hermione answered, "Why do you think? It doesn't follow the ideals of the new regime. Besides, too much of it shows Salazar Slytherin and his House in less-than-rosy light. Those in charge don't wish future generations to think of them as anything but the idea of Wizarding perfection."

"That's utter bollocks!"

She sighed. "I know, Headmaster. But the point is that I can't lay hands on that book. It's against the law to be found owning a copy now."

"Utter, profound madness," Phineas spluttered, pacing around his frame. He must have noticed Hermione's stricken expression, because he stopped and he looked at her sympathetically.

"Well, Miss Granger, it seems as it's truly you and me against the world. Alright then." He crossed his arms. "Seek out Dilys. Perhaps she can tell you more."

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When Hermione was nine years old, her father had gone into hospital for a routine tonsillectomy. As she and her mother walked into the huge, sprawling mess of St.



Helier's to visit him, she became more and more convinced that, not only would she never see her daddy again, she would also never find her way out of its rabbit run of corridors, rooms and stairs. She would forever roam the halls, trying to find her way out. She never lost her fear of hospitals; she could feel the dread and misery in the walls.

St. Mungo's was no less imposing a building as St. Helier's, and twelve years later, Hermione still hated walking into a hospital. She had been here before the war of course, but she'd resented the healers and medi-witches their cheery disposition, their disregard for her anxiety. When you grew up from birth knowing that your tonsils could be vanished with a wave of your wand and some well-pronounced words, you didn't tend to stress too much about things.

The Janus Thickey Ward was like something out of a Salvadore Dali nightmare. As she exited the lift and walked into the ward, a confusing welter of impressions assaulted her. Countless pictures graced the walls, all drawn and painted by the patients. Each one was surprisingly detailed and beautiful, frightening and painful. These were the roadmaps of madness that affected the mind of each artist. They were fresh and still writhed with the magic imbued within the artist's medium to bring the disturbing images to life. The paintings at that end of the ward were apparently the latest artistic offerings.

As she walked further down the hall she noticed that the paintings were larger, older, less mobile. These masterpieces, painted long before Hermione was born, were nightmares in oils and watercolours. They were less vivid, having faded with time, but their desperate hopelessness and sadness almost overwhelmed her, and she wondered how on earth the healers came here day after day and remained sane having to look at these illustrations of psychosis as their wallpaper.

A young Medi-witch with a friendly, elfin face walked with Hermione up to a room near the far end of the hall, her old-fashioned blue robes rustling importantly. Her name was Mariam Tickle. "He has good days and bad days," whispered Tickle confidentially, although they were the only two people in the hall. "He's just had lunch, and that usually helps. He's more lucid after a meal, I find."

She tapped on the door twice, and when a familiar voice said, "Come in," Hermione was surprised to hear how cheerful he sounded.

Tickle smiled and held open the door. "I'll be just down the hall if you need anything."

"Thanks," Hermione replied, and taking a deep, steady breath, she walked in.

Ron was sitting at a small desk, a chess board in front of him. Aside from the fact that his hair was cut very short, he looked no different from the last time she'd seen him. That relieved her. She was afraid he would be so changed she wouldn't recognise him. Then she wondered if he'd think the same about her.

"Be with you in a sec. I'm two moves away from winning," he said, his bright blue eyes focused on the board.

Hermione's heart stopped. There were no pieces on the board. Ron's eyes swept over the board like a circling hawk, looking for the next move. She'd seen him do that countless number of times in school.

"Hello, Ron," she said, trying to keep her voice steady. He looked up at her curiously. The mild, patient look in his eyes never changed. They were as calm as a mill pond; she had never seen him so still.

"Hello, Hermione," he said, as if she walked into his room every day. He turned back to the board. "I'm playing chess with Professor Dumbledore. Barmy as the day's long, but a great chess opponent."

He turned back and reached out. His fingers pinched together, as if picking up a piece, and his hand moved over two squares and lowered slightly. He parted his fingers. "Checkmate."

He turned to her with a satisfied smile. "I hardly ever lose anymore. When I first started playing I never won, but Fred's been giving me lessons." He turned to her, his eyes lighting up. For a moment, he looked like the Ron of old.

"I've been helping Fred and George at the shop. Did dad tell you?"

Hermione froze, uncertain what to say. Ron waited so patiently. He had never been patient about anything. Finally Hermione nodded. "I think I remember him saying something about it."

"Brilliant! You'll have to stop by. We've been working on some cracking good stuff." He rose from his desk, and hopped easily up on his hospital bed. "You haven't been by for ages. I've missed you."

Hermione felt as if her throat was bleeding. She swallowed. "I'm really sorry. I've been away, but now I'm back."

His eyes lit up. "Brilliant! Hey, why don't you come round to the Burrow on Sunday? Mum's doing her regular Sunday roast, so you know the table'll be groaning with food." He smiled sweetly, and for a second he looked like the eleven year-old imp that had both plagued and charmed her. "I'll tell her to make that custard you like. She always said that she didn't know how you stayed so thin, eating all that custard."

"That...that's great, Ron." Hermione sat down, feeling completely unnerved. It had been Ginny who always loved and was teased about the custard. Not only was Ron delusional, but all his facts were confused.

Ron didn't track her movements, just sat staring toward the door, as if expecting someone else. He nodded. "I was just telling Harry the other day that you haven't been around in ever so long. He said you were busy. He said you hadn't forgotten us, have you?" His eyes flicked to her, uncertainty and worry clouding them.

"Of course not!" she said, and took his hand. "I'll be around all the time, now that I'm back."

He brightened immediately. "Brilliant! Hey, I think Fred and George will be there. Maybe we can put together a three-a-side Quidditch pick-up match."

Hermione closed her eyes. She had never played Quidditch with them. Her ineptitude with a broom was such that she was always relegated to cheerleader as Harry, Ginny, Ron and the twins played. She sighed, and smiled back at him. He was looking at her, but not in any recognisable way. It was almost as if all the others in his head were real, and she the apparition. "I'd like that very much Ron." She cast about, trying to find something to say. "It will be like old times, won't it? All of us at the Burrow."

At the word Burrow, something flickered in Ron's eyes, and they fluttered slightly, like a dog's will when someone blows in their face. When he looked back at her, his face sagged, but his eyes were clear, were *there*.

He looked at her, really looked at her. "Hermione? Is it really you?" His face crumpled, and he dropped his head. "I see so many people who aren't there."

"I'm here, Ron," she answered, fighting tears. She put her arms around him. She could feel a tremour in his limbs. "I'm really here. I've been away but I'm back, and I'll always be back. I promise."

He allowed her to hold him, then he moved away, his eyes dull with grief. "They're all gone. Mum and Dad, Bill and Charlie, the twins, Ginny. Even Percy." He looked at her with eyes so full of sorrow Hermione couldn't breathe.

"Harry's dead, Hermione! Everyone is dead. Why was I left behind?" He shook his head. "I'm never going to see them again." Tears ran from his eyes. "I'm messed up, but I know the truth." He sighed, his lips trembling. "Everyone is dead, aren't they?"

Hermione held him, and whispered, "We're not, Ron. We're still here."

"I'm sorry, Hermione."

"Whatever for?" she asked, trying to wipe the tears from her face.

"That you lost him."

Hermione felt a thrill of fear. "Lost who?"

Ron wiped his eyes. "Snape."

Hermione felt the world split open. "S...Snape? I don't know what you mean..."

"I'm sorry you lost Snape. And I didn't tell anyone about him. Never." He put his arm around her. "I'm not angry. I was at first, but I'm not anymore. I know how it feels to lose someone."

Hermione stroked his hair tenderly. It looked dull and dry, like they were using harsh Cleansing charms on it. "Ron, I didn't lose Snape. He's alive. He survived."

"Who survived?" He looked puzzled.

"Snape. He's alive."

Ron's eyes lifted to hers. "Snape is alive? Mum and Dad and Charlie and Fred and George and Ginny are dead, but Snape is alive?"

The calm tone frightened her more than if he'd shouted the words. She answered, "Yes, Ron. I'm sorry, but he's alive."

Ron blinked, and his eyes refocused. His slow grin returned. "No, Ron," she said, suddenly desperate. "Don't go! Stay with me, Ron! Stay here with me..."

"Snape? He visits me all the time. He's an even tougher chess player than Dumbledore." Ron rose from the bed and walked back to the empty chessboard. "He brings me sweets from Honeydukes, and chocolate frogs. I got over hundred already." He turned back to Hermione. "I've been helping Fred and George at the shop. Did Dad tell you?"

Blinking back tears, Hermione nodded. "Yes, I think he mentioned it."

"Brilliant! You'll have to stop by. We've been working on some cracking good stuff." He turned his attention back to the chessboard. "The next time you come, tell Harry to come with you. I haven't seen him in ages." He smiled at her, a soft smile of lost recognition. "I'm glad you stopped by, Lav. You always were the prettiest girl in school."

Hermione bit back a sob as Ron turned his attention back to the desk. "Thank you...Won-Won." He smiled his crooked smile, the one that had made her own heart flutter, once upon a time. "I'll be back soon, I promise."

He nodded, his eyes fixed on his imaginary chess pieces, and Hermione turned to leave, feeling as if her head was going to explode.

Just as she reached for the door handle, she heard a soft. "Hermione?"

She turned back. He was looking at her with eyes that were as old as time, older than Dumbledore's; older than Hogwarts. "I'm never going to get any better, am I?"

Hermione cleared her throat. "I'm...I don't know."

He nodded in resignation. "It's okay," he replied soothingly as if to comfort her. "I knew you weren't really here. Everyone else who comes to visit isn't alive either."

"But Ron, I'm..."

"Promise me something, Hermione."

His plaintive tone almost drove her to her knees. "Anything."

He waited a long time before replying. Hermione was beginning to think he had forgotten she was there, when he finally said, "Don't come back anymore, okay? If I don't see you, I don't remember that you're not here."

Hermione walked out of Ron's room like a sleepwalker. She saw Mariam Tickle conversing with another Healer, and Hermione waited until they finished their conversation to approach her.

She reached into her purse and pulled out a bag of Galleons. "Make sure he has everything he needs, anything he wants," she said, her voice strained and tight. "I want him to be comfortable..."

The Medi-witch's eyes grew round. Shaking her head, she replied gently, "You put your money away. There's no need for that, Miss Granger. Mr. Weasley is one of my sweet ones. I take good care of him, never you doubt it."

Hermione wiped her eyes, and the other woman put her arm around her comfortingly. "It's alright, Miss. It's because you remember him when he was whole. But he has happy days here, and he's usually very cheerful."

Hermione shook her head, wanting to tell her how Ron used to be so self-centred and grounded, loyal and infuriating and lovable, but nothing would come out.

Tickle nodded, understanding. "Just remember that he's safe, and no harm will come to him."

"But he told me he didn't want to see me anymore," Hermione wept, and other woman held her, rubbing her back soothingly. "He asked me not to come back."

"It's because he has trouble distinguishing real people from the ones he sees in his mind," came the gentle reply. "He asks all his visitors to leave, but he never remembers that. He's always happy to see them when they return."

Puzzled, Hermione sniffed. "Does he have many visitors?"

"No, not many. His brother, once or twice. I think that's about it..." She gave a little giggle. "Oh, and Foreign Minister Snape, how could I forget him? You know him, I'm sure. He used to teach Potions at the old Hogwarts. He visits regularly, at least a couple of times a month."

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Pansy was not due back for half an hour. Hermione found a chair in the lobby under a moldy-looking oil painting depicting cherry trees in bloom, and sat down to think.

The idea that Snape visited Ron on a regular basis puzzled her. Why did he come...what did he hope to accomplish? She was not so naive as to think it was just to play chess. A wizard like Snape always had a reason for what he did. She was living proof of that, wasn't she?

Even now, it was difficult to think of those weeks spent with him without wanting to curl into a ball and pray for oblivion. If she closed her eyes, she could still feel the overwhelming thrill, the crippling moment of utter abandon she had experienced the first time he took her to his bed. He had seemed so achingly vulnerable, so ready to throw away everything just to be with her.

And she had believed it. She had taken insane risks, lied unapologetically to the boys, left her sentry duty...anything, just to feel his arms around her, to look into those black eyes as he entered her, to revel in the pleasure he gave her body.

It was the only beautiful thing she could remember from that awful year; those sweet, stolen moments of desperate longing and stunning passion. She thought she had fallen in love with him; she thought he felt the same. But she had forgotten who she was dealing with...Snape, the spy, the snake, the master deceiver.

Gods, but he'd played her. He'd made her feel like a goddess. The awkward and unsatisfying fumbings she had experienced with Ron bore no resemblance whatsoever to the way Snape made her feel. In her limited experience with sex, he'd turned it into an addictive drug, and she was ready to do anything and everything to have it. And then he'd made her wait those long, cold weeks of early spring. She'd gone through withdrawals like a junkie, making the boys miserable with her moodiness and sullen silences.

Then, when he finally called her, he'd waited until he'd taken her over and over, until she was limp, glugged and sated. Only then did he try to make her betray Harry. And when she didn't, he'd said those horrible things about her. He'd as much called her a whore, and not a very good one at that.

Even with that, she'd begged him not to leave her. The moment he Disapparated, however, she knew he wasn't coming back. She stayed a long time, hoping he would return and say it was all a misunderstanding. Clearly, she had forgotten who she was dealing with.

For almost a week she stayed inside the messy confines of their tent, crying. She made her excuses...the time of the month, that old convenient bugbear, was cited as the reason for her seclusion, but in reality she thought she might be going mad. She tormented herself with dreams of him, holding her, loving her, making her feel safe, then turning on her and telling her how unworthy she was. Until the day she and the boys were taken to Malfoy Manor, she had been a complete and total mess.

She had thought him a wizard risking his life for the Order, for the overthrow of evil. Instead, he had been a double-agent...perhaps a triple-agent...with loyalties that could only be guessed at. He had fooled everyone in the Order. He fooled her with his talk of 'after we win.' He had been using her all the while. Even now the thought still made her feel sick. And seeing him at the ball with that gorgeous blonde hanging smugly on his arm had sent a clear message...he wasn't exactly sitting around, pining for her. Gods, she had felt so childish and impotent in his arms.

Hermione straightened her shoulders and took in a deep breath. It didn't matter. Severus Snape was not worth it. He was a snake in the grass; he was the enemy, and she was well shed of him, she told herself. Hermione bit her lip thoughtfully. If only she knew why he was visiting Ron. If only she had ever been able to know what the man was thinking.

She shook her head. She would never understand him. He didn't want or care to be understood.

And now it was time to push him out of her...

That voice. Someone in the lobby had been speaking the same words over and over, rubbing against her ear incessantly, like the squeaking of a door hinge. Hermione looked up, slightly impatient at the interruption, but none of the other visitors were sitting within earshot.

Then she heard it again, clearer this time. "Pumpkin pasties," it said quietly. "Pumpkin pasties."

Hermione spun in her chair. Standing in the cherry tree orchard was a tiny figure...an old woman with iron-grey hair covered with a white wimple, wearing blue Healer robes belted with a silver chain.

"Pumpkin...There you are!" said the figure in a broad, Lancastrian accent. "I've been sat here trying to get your attention, but you were woolgathering."

"Y...you're Dilys," stammered Hermione. "I...I mean, you're Headmistress Derwent, aren't you?"

The witch in the grotty painting smiled. "That I am. Please just call me Dilys. The social niceties died out a few years ago, love. We don't stand on ceremony here. Not anymore. And you're Hermione, the girl our Minerva said would come to see me."

Hermione's throat closed at that. *Oh, Professor McGonagall*, she thought. *What faith you always had in me. I've been trying to live up to it, I really have* Tears welled up in her eyes again.

"Tsk, tsk," Dilys clucked in sympathy. "I miss her too, child." Then her smile snapped shut, and she turned briskly efficient like the Healer she was. "Never mind the past, Hermione. We have the future to think of! No time for dawdling, now. Come with me." And she turned and walked out the side of the painting without a backward glance. Hermione stood up in a panic. Where...? How was she supposed to...? She scanned the hall to the left and right.

"Hurrumph!" An ancient voice warbled through the air like a street monger. "Pumpkin pasties!" Hermione spied a smudge of blue and white moving briskly through a village landscape. Relieved, she took off down the hall at a barely-controlled run. She nimbly skirted around visitors and Healers, keeping the former headmistress in her sights, while Dilys wound her circuitous way through portraits, paintings, and even the odd tapestry or two.

At last, in a neglected hallway, Dilys came to a stop within a detailed Wizarding painting of what appeared to be a Muggle appendectomy in progress. Sickened, Hermione averted her eyes from the surgeons with their bloody, gloved hands and gleaming red scalpels.

"Hermione love," called Dilys, "pay attention, please. You've had such a trying day, my dear, but it's almost done. You have one more task ahead. See that door?" Hermione reluctantly lifted her eyes to Dilys' pointing finger. "That's Healer Blyte's office behind you. He is out on rounds now ... if that's what you could call his practice ..."

Her lips pursed in disapproval...at what, Hermione didn't know, but based on Healer Blyte's gruesome taste in paintings, she was willing to let it remain a mystery.

"The object you seek is in there. On a bookshelf, I believe. He doesn't know what it is. Go on, child...you don't have much time," she urged, with a flapping motion of her hands. "I'll be right here."

The door unlocked to a simple *Alohomora*, and Hermione stepped into the gloomy office. No paintings graced the walls; perhaps Healer Blyte liked his privacy. She moved through the office to a large, ornate bookshelf fronted with latticework doors. They opened at her touch, and she quickly scanned the shelves laden with books, knickknacks and old-fashioned Muggle medical instruments, looking for...well, she didn't know exactly what she was looking for, but she hoped she'd know it when she saw it. She had to hurry...surely Pansy was on her way back by now, and what would she think if Hermione had run off ... She was sure to make trouble for Hermione if she noticed suspicious activity ... such as nicking things from Healers' offices...wait, was that it? Hermione's eye fell on a roundish brass piece, flat on the bottom, covered with the same arcane-looking inlaid black vines as the piece she'd found at Borgin and Burkes. She dug for her baby wand to cast an *Accio*.

*CRACK!* came the sound of Apparation. Hermione spun with a cry, wand at the ready. Before her stood a house-elf with a very stern expression fixed between large, flapping ears. She noticed he was not wearing the standard St. Mungo's white toga, but an ordinary tea towel; he was this Healer's privately-owned elf, perhaps.

"Who is you?" he croaked. "You is opening the Master's doors without permission! You is an intruder on Master Blyte's property!"

There was nothing for it. The elf's magic could easily overpower her own if she tried to resist being caught. Hermione's shoulders slumped. "Yes sir," she affirmed, "I know I don't belong in here. But I promise, all I..."

"Sir?" He looked at her skeptically through large, protrubent eyes. "I isn't a 'sir.' Is your eyes all right? I is a house-elf, not a sir."

Hermione blinked. She was suddenly so tired. The emotions of the day were finally catching up with her. And on top of that, all her plans were about to be foiled by some

random Healer's gimlet-eyed house-elf, who selflessly defended his master's property yet didn't consider himself worthy of the most basic respect.

"You is...I mean, you *are* a sir," she sighed. "House-elves deserve a lot more than that for the jobs they do all their lives without..."

But there the little elf cut her off by rushing forward and hugging her hard around the knees. "You is She!" He seemed overwhelmed with emotion. He stepped back and looked up at her again, blinking back tears. "You is She who used to champion the rights of the elves, Miss. We remembers hearing about you, years ago! Yes!" He stepped forward and began to shake her hand vigorously. "You is She!"

"Blimey," was all Hermione could manage. "Um, yes, hello, it's me. My name is Hermione. And you are..."

"Noddy, Miss! Noddy!" Continuing to shake her hand, Noddy smiled broadly.

Hermione almost laughed aloud. After championing their rights for years, this was the first time she had actually been thanked by an elf. She wished with all her heart she could sit and talk with Noddy, but it was impossible. She desperately considered the time and her insides turned cold.

"Noddy, I'm so glad to meet you," she replied, "but I am in a terrible hurry. I am looking for something in this office. An object, brass inlaid with black vines. I need to find it quickly, and ... I'm afraid I need to take it with me, and keep it a secret. Could you possibly help me keep this a secret?"

The elf nodded enthusiastically. "I will help you, Miss! And keep it a secret! What is Miss looking for?"

Half a minute later, Hermione and Noddy eased back out the door, where she bid him a polite good-bye. He Disapparated with a CRACK a moment before she belatedly thought to ask him to deliver her back to the vicinity of the hospital lobby.

"Thank you, Dilys, for your time and your help. Tell me, can you think of any other headmasters who might have second portraits? I know you aren't able to venture out of this hospital but...maybe you might remember..."

Dilys frowned. "There were a fair few, child, but one that leaps to mind was Aloysius Everard. His portrait stands in the Ministry lobby."

Hermione knew there was just one portrait hanging in the Ministry lobby nowadays, and that was Voldemort's. But it was clearly the only idea Dilys had. Perhaps it was a start. "I hope we meet again, Dilys," she called, already jogging backwards down the hall.

"All the best, Hermione love," replied Dilys.

Shoving the brass object into her satchel with barely a glance, Hermione sprinted back the way she had come, to find Pansy in the lobby, idly inspecting the cherry orchard painting.

"Took you long enough," Pansy smirked when Hermione came trotting up, breathless and sweaty. "Did you give Weasley a visit he'll always remember?" she leered.

"Don't be disgusting," replied Hermione coldly.

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"Your Excellency, your six o'clock appointment is here," announced Mrs. Bulstrode from the office doorway. Severus looked up from his desk. He could hear the disapproval in her voice.

"Show them in, Mrs. Bulstrode. And that will be all for the day, thank you."

"Yes, sir." Curiosity warred with distaste on her homely face as she stood aside for two young men who sashayed into the office with an air of owning the place.

"How d'ya do, sir. Tremaine's the name. At your service," said the first man. "And this is my associate, Mr. Darko." Shaking her head, Mrs. Bulstrode closed the door and left them.

Severus gestured to two spindly chairs near his desk. "Gentlemen, please be seated." But his guests made for a comfortable divan instead, sinking down with twin sighs.

"Hope you don't mind, Yer Excellency," said Tremaine, "but me an' Darko had a hard day. We could use a bit of a breather on a nice sofa."

Severus gathered himself to speak sharply, but the portrait above the fireplace spoke in a mild tone. "Pace yourself, dear boy," murmured Lugubrious. "This promises to be a long interview."

Still scowling, Severus moved to lean against the front of his desk, his long, black-clad legs stretched in front of him as he studied the Snatchers. It had taken him no time at all to look up the names of the bounty hunters who captured Hermione Granger near Brighton, but a great deal more to track them down and require them to attend a high-priority interview at the Ministry.

He didn't let himself examine his own motives in pursuing this line of questioning; since waking up this morning, he had felt an overwhelming compulsion to learn more about Hermione's last days of freedom...where she had traveled, whom she had spent time with, and what dangers she had faced. That was all that this was, he told himself...a follow-up to a criminal investigation. Nothing more.

Both Snatchers wore Dickensian frock coats and striped trousers...the basic fashion staples among the Pureblood, unemployed toughs of Knockturn Alley. The one called Darko even sported grimy lace sleeves and black leather spats over his well-worn shoes. It was a look that was supposed to convey a nonchalant, ironic attitude toward the Wizarding upper class. Severus, who had barely escaped becoming a thug just like them in his youth, easily penetrated the façade and saw only poverty and resentment.

"Gentlemen," he began curtly, "I won't waste your time, as I'm sure I've taken you away from more important things. I am conducting an investigation into the events that took place in early December 1998, when you caught the fugitive Hermione Granger and brought her to justice. I would like to learn all the background from you concerning the capture and arrest."

Darko spoke up. "Excuse me, mate, but we thought we was here to meet some geezer from the MLE." He paused and gazed about cheekily, as if expecting Aurors to pop out of the wood-paneled walls. "Wha's this gell mean to you, then? It ain't no diplomatic matter. Yer Excellency," he added after a pause, his tone insolent.

They were already suspicious of his motives. Severus wondered what they'd heard of him. "For all you know, this's a diplomatic matter, Mr. Darko," he replied. "You and your associate were the Snatchers on record as having caught Granger and brought her directly to Azkaban, and I wish to learn the circumstances behind the snatch. Where you caught her, how the arrest was made, and so on. Surely not a difficult thing to remember, considering how famous she was."

"Well, that's the thing, innit?" asked Tremaine with an affected concern. "To be honest, Your Excellency, it's been so long, I'm not sure if me an' my partner can remember all the little details." He glanced meaningfully at the liquor bottles on the sideboard. "Now, if we could come to some financial agreement, as well as maybe a little glass of somefink, maybe my memory would improve."

Ah. So they were merely shaking him down for a bribe and a drink. He shared a meaningful glance with Lugubrious, then rose from his perch and moved to the sideboard. First things first, then. "Forgive me, gentlemen. What will you have?"

In a moment, he was back with two crystal tumblers of bourbon. Watching them take their first appreciative swallows, he allowed himself a quick smirk. If either of them had gone to Hogwarts and learned basic Defense, or knew of his own checkered past as a spy and a Death Eater, they surely would never have asked for, much less accepted, a drink from the hand of Severus Snape.

But unfortunately for them, they hadn't; they didn't; and so, they did.

Several seconds later, the Veritaserum kicked in, and his two guests became much more forthcoming with their answers. Before long, Severus had a detailed picture of the circumstances surrounding Hermione Granger's capture.

Foreign Minister Lugubrious, who had been listening attentively all through the interview, cleared his throat. "Don't forget to ask about all the Muggles who might have seen her."

"Right. Mr. Darko, I believe you mentioned the police?"

"There was Old Bill- a PC. He was asking the Mudblood some questions when we got there. When she saw us, she went spare, tried to get arrested by him or somefink. Like that'd scare a coupla gentlemen like us!" Darko laughed loudly, showing his foul teeth. "We walked up, nice and casual, and told him we'd look after her. It would have gone smooth, but at the last minute she only went and tried to Apparate. Right in front of a Muggle and all! Some people have no respect for the Statute of Secrecy, 'Rexcellency. She's a menace, an' you know it," he added piously.

Tremaine took up the tale. "Good job we both had hold of her. She couldn't get away, but she Side-apparated with the both of us! What a stupid thing to do! Me an' Darko was okay, but she got Splinched."

"Yes, I saw the medical record of the Splinching." Severus stared without seeing into the fireplace. In her desperation, she had Apparated with a wizard on each arm. She could have been killed.

"And the name of the PC?" prompted Lugubrious.

Tremaine spoke, his voice a little high and slurred. "Rankin, Your Excellency. Police Constable Edward Rankin of the Sussex Constabulary in Brighton." He blinked owlishly, as if surprised by his own head for detail.

When they finally began to repeat themselves, Severus advanced on each of them in turn and performed Legilimency for good measure. Pushing past the effects of the Veritaserum, which made the men want to mentally throw evidence of recent petty crimes at him, Severus dug deep into their minds until he found clear images of PC Rankin, the tourist area where Hermione had been spotted, and a few other random landmarks such as a pier and a tea shop.

At last, he withdrew and sat down behind his desk to think. It seemed Hermione's capture almost didn't happen...actually, it wouldn't have, if it weren't for the fact she had been momentarily distracted when she was stopped and questioned by the Brighton police force. Severus grimly wondered how much this PC Rankin had been allowed to remember after the Aurors, no doubt sent afterwards to mop up, were finished *Obliviating* him.

The Snatchers slumped inelegantly on the divan. In a few moments, he knew, they would fall asleep and begin to drool.

"Well, Alfred," said Severus at last, "I believe I have everything I need from these two."

"I would agree," replied Lugubrious. "But please don't kill them. There hasn't been a murder in this office since 1957, and I'd hate to see the rugs soiled."

"I cast quite a formidable *Tergeo*," he offered.

"Severus," chided the portrait.

"Oh, very well, if you insist." Severus stood up and drew his wand. *Obliviate*."

Several hours later, the two Snatchers awoke to the sensation of being tumbled by a couple of hags digging in their trouser pockets for loose change. With growls and grumbled threats, they kicked out feebly until the hags sloped away again, cackling to themselves. Opening their eyes, Tremaine and Darko found themselves face-down in a fetid corner of Knockturn Alley in the middle of the night, stinking of firewhiskey, with no memory of how they got there.

## Chapter Seven

*Chapter 8 of 14*

In a world where Lord Voldemort defeated Harry Potter and the Order, the Minister for Magic makes Hermione Granger an offer she cannot refuse - become a spokesperson for the new regime, or rot in prison. But Hermione has her own, dangerous agenda. Can she complete her appointed task without running afoul of the law, or the man she despises most - Severus Snape?

Written by stgulik and Teddy Radiator for Droxy. This story was originally commissioned as a TPP Every Flavour Auction gift, but was actually written for the 2012 Summer LJ het\_bigbang fest.

"It was so cold and rainy in Ireland, I nearly froze my cods off," said RCMC Director Marcus Thoreau cheerfully, inviting Hermione to sit on the visitor's chair in his cluttered office. He offered her a cigarette, and when she declined, lit one for himself and sat back, bluish grey smoke trickling from his nostrils like a sleeping dragon's.

Thoreau had just returned from an extensive field trip along the windy northern coast of Ireland, travel-stained and completely knackered. At first, he had found it difficult to reconcile seeing Hermione assigned to his department. There were many reasons, not the least of which was prejudice against her inferior blood status. The idea that the Minister's pet Mudblood was meant to loiter about his domain, taking up space and disrupting the other staff, made him grouchy and resentful. But after a few days, he noticed she was distinctly not a disruption, and that she actually seemed to want to pull her own weight. His attitude became much friendlier toward her, though he still tended to make disparaging remarks about Muggleborns when he forgot who he was talking to.

"There was a rumor of heightened activity among the banshees along the Giant's Causeway," he continued. "A whole load of 'em, seen leaving the coast. Floating on charmed doors, of all things. That's one of the reasons I traveled up that far. Nothing much on paper...just one blip in one report...but eventually I had to go and check it out."

"I know," she replied. "I read the report."

That stopped him. "You did?" She nodded. "Nobody reads the reports," he mused, surprise colouring his voice.

She shrugged. "I like to read. Besides, what else do I have to do?"

"Hmm. Well, when I got there, the bloke who wrote the report...Tankersley...hadn't the faintest notion what I was on about. Didn't remember writing the bit he wrote about a ruddy big group of banshees sailing away on doors. As if you could forget such a sight! He must've been drinking. We went 'round to visit the largest of the banshee communities and found no changes in the population, so there you are."

He took a drag. "It wouldn't matter in the long run...nobody cares if we have fifty banshees in Ireland or five hundred, particularly not the Ministry. But it's the department's job to keep track of them, so that's what we do."

He stubbed out his cigarette with a quick motion. Tipping back in his squeaky chair, he crossed his boots on his desk and eyed her with new interest. "All right, Miss Granger, if you're serious about wanting to keep busy, there're plenty of reports 'round here to file. Rangers like to write reports. It's what they do. Let's face it, there's fuck-all to do up on Derrywarragh Island besides write reports and pull the local girls."

Thoreau explained that after the blood purges, the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures had become severely short staffed. RCMC field researchers, called rangers, had simply failed to show up to work from one day to the next. The few rangers who remained had had to take over territories vacated by former colleagues.

Hermione bristled at the casual annoyance in Thoreau's voice. He made it sound as if his half-blood and Muggleborn rangers had skived off their jobs instead of being forced into hiding or imprisoned by the Ministry on account of their blood status.

"Nowadays, with almost everyone out in the field, very few rangers check in here at base. Even I have to fly up and spend a great deal of time in the northern territories, doing admin, that sort of thing." He gestured to the stack of parchment on his desk. "And so all these reports tend to pile up without someone competent to file them." He grinned. "I mean, we have June, of course, but I've never trusted she knows her way around an Alphabet Charm. Great old bird, but sometimes I wonder how far they climbed up her family tree, if you know what..."

Hermione stood abruptly, chest heaving. "Mr. Thoreau. I'd like to remind you I'm Muggleborn myself, and I don't appreciate the way you're talking."

Thoreau waved his hands in supplication. "Now, now, Missy! I meant no offense. I like June. She's brilliant at what she does." He gestured to her chair. "Please, please sit down. I didn't mean anything by it." Unmollified, Hermione resumed her seat, staring hard at Thoreau, who suddenly appeared to want to hurry his story along.

"Anyway there are boxes of field reports and no one to file them. I'd like you to figure out the system we used before, or set up a better one, and help us get organized."

She saw she'd flustered him badly; the new, Slytherin part of her heart wondered how she could use it to her advantage. She deliberately softened her expression. "Of course, Mr. Thoreau, I'm here to help, whenever I'm not making appearances on behalf of the Minister." An idea came to her. "But I know I could be more useful if I knew my way around the building better. I once heard there's a second, secret entrance to this department, but I've never known where it is. I've asked...certain staff members, but nobody in the department seems to have a clue what I'm talking about."

Thoreau grinned again, appearing to be relieved that he and Hermione were finally on friendly terms. "That's because it's secret! It keeps disappearing. It's charmed that way. I don't remember exactly why." He regarded her a moment. "Only senior staff are supposed to use it, but with you working for the Minister, I expect you qualify as such."

"What you do is, you look for a transom in the wall...a transom without a door. Kind of odd, yeah? When the transom appears, walk right underneath it and say 'Chalk Farm.' The door'll appear and take you right straight to the file room. Don't go and wander now! It'd be easy for a Mud..." he caught himself, "a young person like yourself to lose her head and get lost." He stood and extended his hand. She rose and accepted his friendly handshake. "Right. Off you go, Miss Granger."

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Hermione laid down the banshee report after a second read-through. In her opinion, Tankersley's sudden amnesia concerning his peculiar sighting along the Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland sounded very much like the effects of an *Obliviate*. Hermione had had more than her share of practical experience with them when she traveled for the better part of a year with Harry Potter. By contrast, she didn't think Thoreau would have had much occasion to become familiar with *Obliviates* during a career spent counting Jarveys.

But if she was right, who would *Obliviate* a man over the sight of a lot of banshees riding the waves on magical doors? Unless...she flipped through the pages of the report again. Unless Tankersley hadn't seen banshees at all, but something else...something concerning people. And when he had been discovered, his memory had been wiped, and then this report had been altered for good measure, changing it from incriminating to merely amusing.

She rubbed her fingers across the print. It sounded daft, like nothing more than a conspiracy theory. There was no way to prove such a thing. Still, the idea gnawed at her. She wished it were true; she really could use an ally against the Ministry right about now.

Walking back from the loo the next day, she finally spied the department's transom. The rectangular window was set in the wall, high above a lurid pink motivational poster. She hurried over to it, checking to see she was unobserved.

"Chalk Farm," Hermione whispered to the garish poster. For a moment, nothing happened. She started to think Thoreau must have been playing a joke on her, and that she would turn and see him standing there, wearing his insufferable grin. But then she blinked to see a nearly-invisible outline of a door before her. She instinctively groped the wall where a doorknob would be and felt a cold brass knob in her hand.

"Holy Merlin," she breathed. She twisted the knob and pulled. The door opened. She scooted inside.

She found herself in a pokey corridor, slightly curved and dimly lit. The only light seeped in from transoms above a row of doors along one side. The door Hermione had just come from was visible from this side, and had a transom of its own set above it with the words "Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures" painted on the dusty glass.

It was still too dark to see clearly. A whispered *Lumos* gave her confidence to proceed. She quickly found the door to the file room, but continued down the hall until she understood the layout. The hallway appeared to encircle this entire floor of the Ministry. There was even a very cobwebby stairwell in a dark alcove. Using this hallway...and possibly connecting ones...she would not have to be seen coming and going by way of the elevators or the more populated central halls.

Excitement gripped her. This corridor would be the key to searching the Ministry for Headmaster Everard's portrait unmolested.

"Oh, Mr. Thoreau," she whispered aloud, "You're a complete arse, but you've been as generous as Father Christmas."

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She spent an hour exploring the circular hallways and stairwells until she felt she knew her way around the periphery of the building. She managed to scoot into the RCMC file room seconds before Draco made his customary morning appearance.

"Granger, didn't you get the owl? You don't actually have to work at this job." Draco laughed from the door of the file room as he took in Hermione's dishevelled appearance.

She stood waist-deep in files, pretending to be overwhelmed by a daunting task. "Yes, well, all I meant to do was start filing these reports by location, cross-tabulating them by date... but then I got to reading, and..."

"Say no more...Hermione Granger got *interested*," he smirked.

"Right in one." She rubbed her eye with the back of her hand. "I'm hungry. What time is it?"

"Time to skive off and come with me. We'll have lunch at the Leaky. There's going to be an auction at Diagon Alley afterward, and..."

"Oh, no, Draco, not another auction." Hermione had attended the last one and regretted every moment. The Ministry occasionally shucked off excess spoils of war from the raided homes of Wizarding families who had either been incarcerated or had fled persecution. Furniture, portraits, jewelry and heirlooms...even the occasional house-elf, much to her chagrin...were sold to the highest bidder, the proceeds going to Voldemort Academy. She found it worse than sick.

Draco slid to her side. "Please, darling, say you'll go," he wheedled. "I need a second to save my seat while I bundle up my spoils. It's better when there's a second. Please say you'll go."

"All right," she relented. "Let me get my bag..."

Wordlessly, he handed over her purse, having already retrieved it. She gave a half-laugh as he tucked her hand in the crook of his arm and started off. With his other hand, he reached over and plucked something out of her hair. "Hermione, why are you all cobwebby?" he asked, throwing an apprehensive glance at the ceiling.

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"Lot Number 93," droned the auctioneer. "Please refer to your catalogues. Ceramic busts, schoolbooks and implements, jewelry, a wand holster, a metal box, various furnishings from the Longbottom estate."

The name 'Longbottom' hit her like a punch in the gut. Neville. Wistfully, she let her eye wander over the furnishing and accessories that had belonged to his family. She recognised many of the schoolbooks, but not much else...

At the sight of the small wooden desk box, her heart leapt in her chest and she felt a huge wave of emotion, which she rode out, breathing evenly so as not to draw attention to herself. She knew that box, with its dark wood and its brass fittings...knew it like the back of her hand. How often had she seen it at Grimmauld Place? It was an antique piece, charmed to work only for its owner...or owners, as the case may be. Anyone could open the box and would see nothing unusual inside. But the box's owner need only place his thumb upon the catch, whisper a wandless spell, and the box would open to reveal its true contents. It had once belonged to Mad-Eye Moody. He had keyed it to the blood of each member of the Order. They used to keep important papers inside, shared by members when they stopped by...updates, maps, lists of names, Apparation points, and so forth.

The night the Ministry fell, she, Harry and Ron had fled the Burrow and taken up residence in Grimmauld Place, they had immediately noticed the box was missing. They assumed it had been stolen by Mundungus Fletcher, along with so many other valuables. And now it was here, having arrived by who-knew-what means, and it was about to be sold to the highest bidder.

"Bidding will begin at 50 Galleons for this antique silver ladies wand holster."

Draco sat beside her, absorbed in a lengthy catalog of the day's merchandise. "Blaise thinks we should get a house-elf," he mused, "and our parents all refuse to part with one of theirs. Don't go spare on me, Granger, but I see one here that..."

She took a deep breath and threw herself into her next role. "Draco," she began with a teasing tone, "You dragged me all the way here. Now I want you to use your hefty salary for a worthy cause and buy me something for a change. Buy me..." she cast her eye around... "that bust of Nimue."

"Hmm? Nimue?" He looked toward where she pointed and lifted one eyebrow at the sight of an ancient-looking ceramic bust of indeterminate color. Whatever facial animation charm had originally been laid within it was nearly used up. Now it only winked fitfully, as if it had something in its eye.

"Granger, really," he scoffed, clearly enjoying himself.

"And also that box," she added with an impulsive air.

"Your taste in household accessories is shite, Granger," he informed her delightedly. "You know what? It would serve you right if I did buy you that junk to clutter your flat. You can use the box to store your sex toys." And before she knew it, he had proceeded to bid exorbitantly and win both pieces for her. Five minutes later, she was clutching both the box and the ceramic bust to her chest, her heart beating with a slightly lopsided air.

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Severus entered the Janus Thickey Ward feeling jaded and used. He'd been at Lucius' beck and call all day, serving as nothing more than the Minister's scratching post as he made his crosspatch way through stacks of legal documentation on the latest diplomatic defection, Austria.

After three hours of work, only to find the whole thing to be a misunderstanding and a translation error, Severus had finally disentangled himself from Lucius' clutches, but the resulting clusterfuck had made him several hours late for his usual visit with Ronald Weasley. The ancient clock ticking in the nurses' station chimed nine times, and Severus swore under his breath. He was very late, and changes in routine and schedule were not only disorientating to a patient like Weasley, but unkind as well.

He saw Medi-witch Tickle on her rounds. She waved him over. "Ron's been a bit down today, Your Excellency," she said, her face grave. "He'll appreciate a game, I'm sure."

Severus merely nodded, and knocked on the door. The voice that answered sounded as cheerful as usual, and he entered the room of his former student.

"Hello, Professor," Ron said, his open, somewhat puzzled smile firmly in place.

"I apologise, Mr. Weasley, for the late hour," Severus began. "I was unable to come sooner."

"That's okay. I just figured you were giving a detention, sir. I hope it wasn't a Gryffindor." He laughed shortly. "We can't afford to lose too many more points."

Severus felt a pang of loss. Hogwarts had been his home, and had fallen on his watch. It hurt right to the bone to answer, "No, Mr. Weasley, I can state with absolute certainty that no Gryffindor points were taken."

His sunny smile returned. "Brilliant! We'll get that House cup again, you'll see!" His smile faded. "I meant no offence to your House, sir. I was just joking, of course."

Severus held up a hand. "None taken." As the young man relaxed, Severus cast about, trying to find a way to restore some semblance of normality to the visit. "I've brought my chess pieces, if you'd like to play a game."

Ron nodded. "Sure, Professor. I'll let you have another chance to let me beat you," he replied, without his usual enthusiasm.

Instead of playing with his usual fierce concentration, Ron was distracted, troubled; what was left of his mind clearly elsewhere. When Severus took Ron's queen in a move that was more sheer luck than skill, Ron could only look on in dismay as Severus removed the piece from the board.

"How on earth did I allow *that*?" he asked himself, a line of concern creasing his smooth brow.

Severus waved a dismissive hand. "An unlucky move, Mr. Weasley. But I'm sure you will redeem yourself. I seem to recall your penchant for using your knights to your best advantage."

Ron looked pensively at the captured queen. He picked it up and cradled it in his palm. "My queen. I've lost my queen." The light of lucidity left his eyes, and Ron stared

ahead. "And the Queen lost her Prince."

At the mention of his mother's maiden name, Severus eyed the younger man keenly, but Ron was staring forlornly at the vanquished chess piece. Uneasy, he tapped the back of Ron's hand with an impatient finger. Sometimes that jogged him out of his fugue state. "I believe it is your move, Mr. Weasley."

Ron looked at him blankly. "I'm sorry she lost you." Tears came to his eyes. "It hurt so much to see her like that." He laid the queen onto the table gently, almost reverently. "I couldn't comfort her. Nothing I did or said helped." His mild face contorted in anger. "I wanted to kill Snape for what he'd done to her, but I couldn't, could I?"

Severus froze. "What did Snape do to her?" he asked, his voice as calm as if naming his next move.

"She made me swear never to tell!" Ron said, becoming agitated. "I thought when I bailed on you two, that you'd done it then. But she told me the truth. It was Snape's, the bastard."

"Ron," Severus said, his voice urgent, a terrible thought forming in his mind, "I know you promised her you would never tell, but I really need you to tell me what happened. That way, you and I can help her together."

Concern and devotion shone in Ron's expression, and he laid a comforting arm on Severus' shoulder. "She came to see me a few days ago, Harry. I thought she was a ghost like you, but the more I think on it, I'm pretty sure she was real."

The thought grew into realisation, but still, Severus had to hear the name. "Who, Ron?"

"Hermione, of course," Ron replied, his tone reproachful. Severus felt his skin crawl with fear. Ron sighed, his face full of regret. "Do you remember the night we got caught by the Snatchers and taken to Malfoy Manor?" Hesitantly Severus nodded. He had never known the three of them were taken to Malfoy Manor at any time during the war.

Satisfied, Ron continued. "You remember how Bellatrix Lestrange tortured Hermione?" Ron closed his eyes, and suddenly looked toward the ceiling. Severus realised the boy was fighting tears. "I can still hear her screaming." He put his hands over his ears to block out the sound, and a tear rolled down his freckled cheek. "She was begging and begging and screaming, and that bitch was laughing and giving Hermione *Crucio* after *Crucio*..."

Severus felt his gut churn sickeningly. He hadn't known. Hermione, tortured by Bellatrix. Gods, why did it have to be Hermione? Guilt and anger warred with his fear, along with a razor-sharp urge to kill Bella, but he mastered his emotions with his indomitable will. Hermione would not, or could not accept his comfort now. The boy before him was suffering; Severus could at least offer some ease to him. He reached out to place a hand on Ron's shoulder, and was not surprised that his hand trembled. "It is alright, Ron."

With a sob, Ron shook his head. "I still hear it in my dreams. Sometimes I think it's still happening..." he drifted off, idly playing with a pawn. For a moment, the younger man was silent. Then he wiped his eyes. "When Dobby rescued us and took us back to the cottage, you stayed outside and dug Dobby's grave, remember?"

"Of course." Severus leaned forward, wondering when this had happened. It must have been before the trio had gone on their mysterious and pointless raid on Gringott's. "Did something happen while I was burying Dobby?"

Ron nodded. "Hermione was lying in bed. I was holding her hand, and she was crying. She was in so much pain, you know, from ~~the~~ *Crucio*." The boy was shivering. "Suddenly she just started screaming, and..." Ron closed his eyes and wrapped his arms around himself, as if protecting his vulnerable underbelly. "Oh gods, Harry, she was bleeding! Blood everywhere. I thought she was hemorrhaging, dying right before my very eyes."

Severus felt his own blood run cold. *Oh gods...*

"I called for Fleur, and she took one look and told me to get Bill. Hermione was screaming and doubled over and Fleur was trying to hold her still and Bill made me leave and even outside the door I could hear her until Bill cast a Silencing Spell."

Ron stopped, and closed his eyes, rocking back and forth like a child. "A little while later they came out of Hermione's room. They looked awful. Fleur had been crying. Bill was holding her. I thought Hermione was dead!" He choked, sobbing.

Severus quickly cast an *Aguamenti* into a glass sitting on Ron's nightstand. "Drink this," he said, and Ron obeyed him instantly. After a moment, he calmed enough to continue.

"Well, I was going spare, wasn't I? You were outside, and I ran to Fleur and begged her to tell me what was going on. 'Hermione's dead, isn't she?' I said, trying to be brave or some daft shite, and she shook her head."

Severus knew. Oh gods, he knew what Weasley was going to say *Please, not this. Anything, anything but this..*

Ron gulped. "I ran into her room. I could hear Fleur shouting for me not to, but that was Hermione, you know? If it had been either one of us, you know she would have gone through You-Know-Who himself to get to us."

Severus nodded numbly. She would have.

"I ran into her room," continued Ron, "And she was lying there crying, holding her stomach. She just kept saying, 'I lost him, oh gods, I've lost the the only part of you I'll ever have...'"

Ron shook his head, his eyes losing that far-away look. "But she wasn't talking to me. She was so upset she didn't even know I was in the room. I sat by her bed, and said, 'you'll be alright.' or some such rubbish, and she said, 'You don't understand, Ron.'"

Severus felt his stomach clench almost to the point of cramping. *Don't say it, Weasley, please don't say it..*

"I knew what she meant then," Ron said, tears running down his pale cheeks. He looked at Severus imploringly. "Harry, Hermione had been pregnant. Bellatrix Lestrange made her lose the baby."

*I am stone*, Severus told himself, sitting beside the weeping boy. *I have sat by and watched innocents die. This is the penance I must bear for wanting her to bear my - I am stone...*

Ron continued, sobbing. "All I could feel was anger. I thought you and she had done it before I came back in December. I was ready to walk out of that room and find you and beat the crap out of you, and I told Hermione I would!" His expression turned to revulsion. "But I realised that it couldn't have been. She would have been showing, and she wasn't. And that's when she told me. Harry, it was Snape's baby!"

Ron dropped his head and wept. "I asked when did it happen, and she said in February." He shook his head miserably. "I asked her if somehow Snape had forced her...you know, raped her." He looked at Severus imploringly. "But she kept saying, 'No! He didn't force me. I wanted him.' Do you know how hard it is to listen to the woman you love talk about another man like that?"

*Merlin forgive me, boy*, Severus thought. *I do know. I do.*

"Harry, while we were on the run, Hermione and Snape got together, and she got pregnant! It nearly killed her when she lost that baby. I remember her crying like her heart would break. She said the last time she'd seen him, they had an awful row, and he'd left her. He'd said some harsh things, I guess, but you know Hermione," Ron said, his



tone both imploring and proud. "She doesn't turn her back on people she loves. I mean, look how she forgave me for scarpering on you two." He shook his head. "She was in love with him, and he broke her heart."

Severus sat as still as possible. Within, he felt himself splitting, as if his soul were fragmenting, splintering apart, never to feel whole again. He had spurned her with all the anger and bitterness in his blackened soul and left her crying in a squalid little motel in Shepherd's Bush and all the while with his seed nestled safe and warm in his little lioness' womb. And he left her to fend for herself with the one thing he'd wanted all along...his child growing in her ripe and fertile body.

If she had given birth and acknowledged him as the father, he would have been able to save her from Azkaban; the concubine of one of the Dark Lord's chosen would not be left to languish in that hell. She would have been his, and he would have held his child, and together they could have had something decent in their lives. But Bellatrix Lestrange had killed it. That she had not been aware of its existence was inconsequential; had she known Hermione was pregnant, she would have carved the fetus out of Hermione's womb just to spite Severus.

But he was just as guilty as Bellatrix, wasn't he? His rejection and dismissal had hurt Hermione far worse than Bella's *Crucio*. He had been a fool once again, only this time it wasn't the sore ego of a seventeen year-old boy that was bruised, it was the heart of a loving and deserving witch.

Ron sniffed, and wiped his nose with the back of his hand. "Harry, I was so bloody angry. I was ready to find Snape and kill him then and there, but Hermione, well, you know how she is. Even as upset as she was, she kept her head. She begged me to stay with her. And she got hysterical when I mentioned telling you. 'I can't burden Harry with this!' she said. 'Not now. Not ever.' And then she made me go and get Fleur, Harry. She..." Ron shuddered. "Harry, she made me make an Unbreakable Vow. I didn't want to, but Fleur agreed with Hermione, and you know me." He suddenly blushed, and sheepishly added, "I never could say no to Fleur. She agreed to be the Vow caster."

He closed his eyes and recited, "'I, Ronald Bilius Weasley, do vow that I will never reveal to Harry James Potter that Hermione Jean Granger was impregnated by and miscarried a child conceived with Severus Snape. As long as we three are all alive, I will never reveal this secret..." Ron's voice caught. With a gasp of panic, he stared at Severus in horror. "Oh gods, Harry, I've just broken an Unbreakable Vow! I swore to never tell you as long as you lived..."

He grew so still Severus could not hear him breathe. "Wait. I can't have told you. I'd be dead! You can't be Harry, or I'd be dead..." He jumped from his chair so quickly it fell backwards with a deafening clang. "You're not Harry!" He cried out hoarsely, looking at Severus as if trying to see him through the fog of madness rolling in behind his eyes.

Severus stood to go. "I think it's time you rested, Mr. Weasley," he said, reaching to take the younger man's hand. Ron jerked away from him as if his touch burned.

"Get away from me! You're not Harry! You're..."

The madness left him, and in Weasley's face, Severus could see his pale face reflected in Ron's wide, staring eyes. He backed away and choked out, "You! You heartless bastard, you tricked me! You sneaking, thieving bastard!"

Suddenly Ron lunged for Severus, who quickly stepped out of the way. "Mr. Weasley!" he cried out. "Calm down!"

Medi-witch Tickle and a male orderly, alerted by the noise, burst in, but Ron was beyond talking down. He snarled as he reached for Severus' throat, spitting in hate. "You tricked me! You bastard! You ruined her! You broke Hermione's heart! You made her love you and you broke her heart!"

Tickle threw a Binding Spell toward Ron, but the younger man managed to dodge it. Rage and madness gave him wings, and he darted around Severus, looking for a fresh hold on his opponent. "Why'd you come here? To have a laugh at the crazy man? To gloat? To remind me of what you did? To hurt her some more? You broke her heart! You destroy every fucking thing you touch, Snape!"

"*Petrificus Totalus!*" This time the spell hit home, and the orderly caught Ron as he fell, petrified, to the floor. As the hospital staff levitated the younger man to his bed, Severus could barely meet the reproachful, hate-filled gaze that glowered at him from the frozen face.

The Medi-witch managed to release the *Petrificus* long enough to force Ron to take a Calming Draught, and gradually, he grew slack enough to cancel the spell entirely.

"Thank you, Miss Tickle," Severus said, panting slightly from his exertions. "I believe everything is under control." He finally convinced the woman to give him a few more minutes with the boy to say goodbye. After assuring Severus help would be on the other side of the door, she left them alone again.

Severus made himself look the boy in the eye. "Mr. Weasley, you must listen to me," he said. "I need you to remember something." When he was sure he had Ron's attention, Severus said quietly, "I had no idea Hermione was pregnant. It is true that we parted with harsh words, but I cared for her, deeply. If I had known she was pregnant, I would have moved heaven and earth to protect her. And not just because she was carrying my child. But because," Severus sighed, and felt bitter gall rise in his gorge. He was so sick of this life, sick of this game, sick of himself. "Because she meant the world to me, and I drove her away." Ron looked away as if he couldn't bear to hear anymore. "You must believe me, Mr. Weasley," Severus said, and he could hear the pleading tone of his voice, and it should have shamed him. *Stone, you are stone...*

The boy made a sound, like a stifled sob. "I'm sorry," he whispered at length. "I shouldn't say things, even if you're not here. The wrong person might find out. Snape's just as dead as the rest of them."

*Even dead*, Weasley, Severus thought, wiping the sweat from his upper lip. *Stone can't weep. I can be stone.*

He put a hesitant hand on the boy's shoulder. "Perhaps you should rest," he said, softly, and Ron nodded and turned his back on Severus.

As he sat by the bed, Severus had an almost irresistible urge to stroke the boy's hair, to give him a little comfort. He could see his shoulders hitching, and wished he could cry with him. "You haven't done anything wrong," Severus said, hoping he was piercing the veil of madness. "You are innocent and always will be."

Ron nodded but did not reply. Severus' throat hurt; the scar ached like a bitch, and he welcomed the pain. It was some sort of warped penance for the agony that inflicted Ronald Weasley. They were two men who suffered in directly opposing proportion to what they deserved.

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Severus left St. Mungo's, returned to his home, showered, shaved, and Floo'd back to his austere office. Sleep wasn't going to happen, and perhaps throwing himself into work was a better plan than throwing himself into a bottle of whisky, which was the far more desirable inclination. His mind was reeling with the knowledge that Hermione had carried his child. That she had lost it made him feel less than a man. He had seen enough death in the past two years to last three lifetimes, but the realisation that his own child had died because of Bellatrix fucking Lestrange made him almost apoplectic. He was going to have to get himself under control and soon.

He wondered if Hermione still thought of her lost child. Weasley had said she was inconsolable, but that was in the quick moments after the severe trauma she had undergone. In the cold light of day, had she been bereft, or relieved?

Severus scowled at his reflection. Of course she had been bereft. A witch like Hermione Granger felt life, all life, was precious. Her own child *Their* child. Severus closed his eyes. A black-haired, black eyed little boy, full of scowls and glowers, like his father, sunshine and passion like his mother. A freckled-cheeked girl with a riot of curls, powerful and compassionate, adoringly looking up at him with her mother's amber eyes...

With an impatient growl, Severus threw on his cloak and walked to the fireplace. *Stone. Of course I am. Just keep calling yourself that, and maybe you'll eventually believe it.*

*Your day of reckoning is drawing near. That little witch had you by the short and curlies, and nothing has changed. If you don't believe you still crave her, you are more delusional than Boy Weasley.*

*Consider yourself warned, Stone.*

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Ron heard the door close softly behind him, and he slowly turned to see Medi-witch Tickle standing in the room, a breakfast tray hovering by her arm. "Good morning, Ron. Did you sleep well?"

Ron smiled. He thought she might actually be real. The food tasted real enough. He hated to be impolite in any case. She reminded him of someone he once knew, or someone he had dreamed of once. "Fine, thanks."

"Hungry?"

"Maybe later. After my bath."

The woman nodded and cast a warming charm over the food. "Right then, let's get that bath drawn for you..."

A soft charm sounded, and a small watch that Medi-witch Tickle wore pinned to her robe suddenly glowed bright red. She frowned, then looked at Ron. "I'm afraid that bath's going to have to wait, Ron. I need to run an errand. But I'll be back."

She reached for the tray, but he said easily, "That's okay. I'll just eat while you're away and have my bath later."

She hesitated, uncertain whether to leave him on his own, when the door to Ron's room opened, and Healer Blyte looked in, his face stamped with impatience.

"Miss Tickle, a situation requires your assistance..." There was a noise in the hallway; probably a new patient, Ron thought, or someone having a meltdown.

He smiled at the Medi-witch. "I'll be fine, really."

She glanced at the door, then lowered the tray onto the desk. "Alright, but chew slowly and take small bites, okay?"

Ron smiled his sweet, charming smile. "I promise, Miss Tickle."

She hastily left the room, and Ron rose quickly to put his ear against the door.

"...come when I call you, next time, Mariam! Number twelve is upset that her toast isn't properly burnt and she used wandless magic to set fire to it! I thought she was medicated to the point that she wouldn't be able to access her spontaneous magic..."

"...she's not had her meds yet and she's not been able...Orderly, calm the patients in rooms eleven and thirteen! Make sure they aren't in any danger..."

The voices faded down the hall and joined the mélange of sounds that Ron heard on an unceasing basis. The buzz in his head confused him for a moment, and he couldn't remember why it was so important to have the woman leave his breakfast. He wasn't hungry.

He raised the lid from the tray. Crispy bacon, gammon and sausages, tomatoes and mushrooms. There were eggs, which were served scrambled on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. Eggs and soldiers were served Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays.

It was Friday. At least the voices had told him the truth, that the eggs would be right. Ron wished the voices were always so accurate, so truthful. They had told him so many lies, had tormented him with so many horrible accusations. He was so thankful that they hadn't tried to fool him, even in self-preservation.

He looked at the brown-speckled eggs, sitting primly in their little cups, waiting for their tops to be removed so he could dip his soldiers in the runny yolk.

He picked up the knife. It was a sharp knife, made of steel, not wood, like the other utensils. *We have to use a special knife with soldiers* Medi-witch Tickle had told him, with a little smile that shamed him, because it was so full of pity. *A special knife, because we like our eggs a special way. It has to be sharp to cut through the eggshells* she had said, as she hacked the top off the egg. *We can do this with a wand, but since our magic is a little uncertain, well, we'll use this knife and pretend it's our wand.*

Ron had always wished she wouldn't talk to him that way. It reminded him of someone talking to a baby, or someone sub-normal. It reminded him that he was damaged and would never get any better. It reminded him that he had broken his Vow, and put Hermione in possible danger.

He picked up his special knife and carried it to bed with him. He pulled the covers up tight until only his face showed. The voices and the sounds were no more loud or soft than usual, but Ron knew they would be gone soon. He had broken an Unbreakable Vow. He had failed.

Hermione's baby had died. Harry had died. His entire family had died. He was a loose end.

He was never going to be well again.

But he wished he'd had the chance to tell Hermione goodbye. Was she real? He thought she might *belt doesn't hurt, you know. It's like falling asleep. It's like falling-*

He pretended the knife was his wand.

It was another hour before the crisis in room twelve was resolved, and thirty more minutes before Medi-witch Tickle finished the paperwork recording the incident. It was another ten before she remembered that Ron Weasley had asked for a bath.

When she went into his room, he was lying in his bed, the food untouched. She approached his bed. He was sleeping deeply. "Ron? Aren't you going to eat your break..."

It was the coppery scent of blood that alerted her. She snatched the blankets away and screamed for an orderly. She screamed until Healer Blyte forced a Calming Draught down her throat, and her cries faded into hysterical weeping.

Looking into Ron's sweetly peaceful face, it was hard to imagine that he had opened his wrists so efficiently. He had bled out quickly, and on his face was a look Hermione would recognise when she rushed to the hospital later that morning. She'd seen the same look on his father's face only a few months before.

He looked happy.

# Chapter Eight

Chapter 9 of 14

In a world where Lord Voldemort defeated Harry Potter and the Order, the Minister for Magic makes Hermione Granger an offer she cannot refuse - become a spokesperson for the new regime, or rot in prison. But Hermione has her own, dangerous agenda. Can she complete her appointed task without running afoul of the law, or the man she despises most - Severus Snape?

Written by stgulik and Teddy Radiator for Droxy. This story was originally commissioned as a TPP Every Flavour Auction gift, but was actually written for the 2012 Summer LJ het\_bigbang fest.

For the first time in recent memory, Mrs. Bulstrode was sitting at her desk when Severus walked in. "Good morning, sir." She stood and produced a white envelope. "This just come for you...by private house-elf."

No wonder she was waiting around, thought Severus. In-bound mail at the Ministry was normally handled by the Floo Room; owls disliked being enclosed in the underground building and made unreliable postal carriers within its walls. She must be bursting with curiosity to discover who had the means...and the need for discretion...to send a house-elf to do a fireplace's job.

When he turned the envelope over and saw the seal for St. Mungo's, his heart stuttered in his chest. Without a word, he turned and strode into the inner office, catching a glimpse of Mrs. Bulstrode's frown of disappointment.

At the door, he tore the envelope open and swiftly read the contents. Healer Blythe's close, cramped handwriting was difficult to read, but the words "Weasley" and "suicide" were clear enough.

He found himself sitting in his desk chair with no memory of having crossed the room. Methodically, he crumpled the condolence letter in his long fingers, staring into the fire, his heart beating heavily in his chest. Another Weasley gone. That made...how many now? Why did the question sound so bleak and callous?

Severus' mother's family had been distantly related to both Arthur's and Molly's families; Severus had never bothered to unravel the complex and often tongue-twisting branches that all Pureblood Wizarding family trees sported. But he had known of them almost all his life; the two of them had been several years ahead of him in school...both Gryffindors, of course, and both Purebloods of the type that their Slytherin counterparts had considered weak and ineffective.

Severus stared, unseeing, across the miles of his memories. He saw a red-headed young woman, her plump face alight with happiness, bravely invading his personal space to hold up a tiny, squalling baby, red-faced and red-haired. *The first girl child born to the Weasley family in generations* she had declared with a girlish laugh. *Even you have to admit she's a beauty, Severus!* He saw her husband standing behind her, his misty smile of pride saying more than words. Severus remembered wondering how this soft-looking, sentimental man could be the same wizard capable of the lethal feats of magic he had heard tell from Albus Dumbledore.

He saw their children, too, lithe and laughing, each as ginger-headed as their parents, in a parade that spanned the years of his own life: the eldest son, calm and competent; the twins, always first to offer pranks, Sickles or solutions to any problem; the lonely Ministry boy, his cravings kept tightly buttoned down; the dragon tamer, blunt-featured and deadly with a hex; the girl, whose beautiful red hair in the torchlit Potions classroom reminded him in unguarded moments of his painful past. And Ronald, the faithful friend, cut down in his prime before he could emerge from the shadow of The Chosen One to find his true place in this world.

Gone now. Almost all of them dead and gone.

Severus could remember arguing with every single one of them in their turn, but on this day he would not deny the truth. This morning, wizards would go about their business as if nothing was amiss, congratulating themselves on their lives of privilege and the purity of their blood, unaware of the passing of a tribe of fierce, loving people whose blood had been better than all of theirs. This day, the morning sun would warm the faces of the cruel and the unjust, while another member of a fine family lay cold and alone, having died in pain and obscurity...

Lugubrious cleared his throat politely. "Severus, the Minister for Magic would like to have a..."

Severus jumped up without a word and strode out of his office. He had nowhere to go, but the last place he wanted to be was here, listening to Lucius Malfoy brag about the Ministry's latest diplomatic triumphs.

A minute later, Lucius picked up a wadded parchment on the floor of his Foreign Minister's office and uncrumpled the forgotten letter. As he read, his grey eyes glittered maliciously.

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Hermione sat at her desk after Lucius left and stared straight ahead, unseeing. Ron had killed himself. She held herself still, and within, she tried to reach out and touch his gentle, damaged spirit. She could feel nothing but her heart beating, like the hollow drum of a death march. She thought that perhaps he and Harry were at that lovely picnic she called Heaven, eating chocolate frogs and wizarding junk food, drinking butterbeer and flying with Ginny and the twins at a quick Quidditch pick-up match. She envied them.

Ron had been her first love, her first/over. They had fought and argued, laughed and dreamed together. He had held her and wept with her the night she lost her baby. "When this war is over," he told her, rocking her back and forth, "we'll start our own family, and no one will ever hurt you again. I won't let them."

He never judged her about her affair with Snape. He had weighed his wounded pride against her heartbreak, and had chosen her.

Silent tears streamed down her face. First Harry, then Neville, then Arthur, then...*Oh, Ron. I just found you. And now I've lost you forever* She thought of his sorrowful eyes the last time she had seen him. "I'm never going to get better, am I?" Was she ever going to get better?

Hermione looked bleakly around her tiny, impersonal office, surrounded by paperwork and reports no one read or seemed to care about. And Ron had moved on, whole and happy, to feast at a lovely picnic, surrounded by warm sunshine and soft breezes and the ones he loved most. Sitting alone, sobbing for her lost friends, Hermione wanted to be at that picnic so badly she could almost taste it.

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Severus walked blindly through the bustling Ministry halls, but the noise of brainless, meaningless activity drove him to seek out a less populated area. At last, he spied a

transom stuck in the middle of the wall near Accounts Irretrievable and closed in on it.

"Barbican," he whispered. When the door appeared, he ripped it open and strode down the peripheral hallway. But unfortunately, it was not empty.

"Snake!"

Severus stopped and glanced over his shoulder. Hermione Granger bore down on him, almost racing the last fifty feet. He turned to face her.

"You were there, weren't you?" she demanded. "You were the last person to see him alive! Lucius said so."

Lucius. The name made him practically see red. He crossed his arms imperiously. "Are you implying that because I was the last person to speak with Mr. Weasley, I somehow influenced his actions?"

"So you don't deny it?" When he remained silent, she reached for him, her wand in one hand. "What did you say to him, Snape?" she hissed. "What did you tell Ron that night?"

He looked at her, feeling a heated mixture of contempt and disappointment. "Why am I not surprised you sought me out just to accuse me? Your willingness to assume the worst of me is old news, Granger."

"You haven't exactly given me reason to think well of you," she shot back. "You know something? I could always tell you were lying, Snape. Your lips moved."

"And you haven't exactly been a paragon of virtue either, since the day the Minister magnanimously released you from Azkaban. From what I've heard, you've managed to provide more than ample thanks for services rendered." His eyes gleamed with derision.

She flinched but didn't move away. "According to you, I wasn't all that. Perhaps Lucius isn't as choosy as you were."

He stared at her, ugly thoughts chasing through his brain. "You don't even deny it, do you? The Hermione Granger I knew would never have used her body to get what she wanted."

"No, that was more *your* style, as I recall," she spat.

It was his turn to flinch. Finally, he sneered. "At least your arrangement has provided some pleasure for someone."

"And why shouldn't I sleep with Lucius?" she asked with a toss of her head. "I learned from the best. You were the one who fucked me for information. You were the one who walked away when the well ran dry. I waited for hours in that squalid little dosshouse, hoping you'd come back. What a naive fool I was to believe in you."

He opened his mouth to retort; stinging, unforgivable words lay on the tip of his tongue. She was watching him with uncompromising, angry eyes. The flashing spirit in those eyes was achingly familiar, yet she was such a stranger to him now. Why was he fighting a stranger? Why did being misunderstood by her feel like the worst of betrayals? Why did he believe she owed him any sympathy at all?

Suddenly his towering, righteous anger seemed to topple over like children's blocks, and all he wanted to do was stop: stop talking, stop fighting, stop everything for a change.

This was the witch who had stolen his self-discipline but gifted him with sweet madness in the midst of the hell of war. She had possessed him like no other could, until he had been ready to throw away every burden he carried, every vow he'd ever taken, just to lie by her side. And then she had carried a child...his child...and lost it while under torture, and mourned its loss.

A crushing sadness overwhelmed him. They were both so hurt, for so many of the same reasons. Why was it so easy to throw insults and insinuations at one another, instead of offering some comfort?

"Hermione," he began, "I'm so sorry for the loss of your friend..."

"Liar!" she screamed. "You always hated him. You made no bones about that. So why did you visit him? What did you hope to gain, you fucking Slytherin? Did you want him dead?" She lunged for Severus like a wild thing and she hit him squarely in the chest, throwing him back against the wall, where his head snapped back against the hard surface with a heavy thud. "Answer me! Did you want him dead?" She hauled back and clocked him in the eye with a right hook, the wand in her hand grazing his cheek and leaving a burn. Dazed and numb, beyond the ability to react, Severus reached up to touch his cheek, his eyes resting on her.

She pushed him again, continuing her tirade. "You were the enemy. You still are! Maybe you only visited Ron to suss out if he knew any Order members still alive. As if Ron could have told you anything! His mind was gone, but that didn't stop you from tormenting him to the point of killing himself."

"Stop! Stop this." His voice sounded weak to his own ears. "I didn't torture him. I never asked him a single thing, not one thing." He could not think where to begin to explain his reasons for ever visiting Weasley; to even hope to be redeemed now seemed the height of folly.

For a long moment they faced one another, panting. Hermione's eyes, nakedly bleak, looked directly into his, as if she could perform Legilimency on him. Gods help him, he wished she could.

He swallowed hard and leaned forward, his face inches from hers. "I walked into that wretched shack at the end of the war, ready to die. It's not my fault I lived. And it's not my fault you ended up in Azkaban." Her open hand flashed upward again, but he was ready this time. His arm blocked the slap. With lightning speed, he latched onto her wrist, pulling her hard against his body. "If you had come to me," he hissed, "I would have hidden you away so that you would have *never* been found." He pulled her gently to him, unable to stop himself, and leaned his cheek against her head. "Hermione ..."

She drew in a deep breath and, to his amazement, her body relaxed fractionally. "It was too late by then, Severus. Nothing mattered."

"I know," he whispered. "Hermione... I know about the baby." She gasped. He kept hold of her wrist but his thumb traced reassuring circles on the soft flesh. "I know what happened at Malfoy Manor, how you lost it after you were tortured."

She never moved from the circle of his body, but one hand inched up his chest to his shoulder and clung there. "When...when did you find out?"

"Weasley told me. It was like he suddenly woke up, thought I was Potter, and told me. I didn't know before now. Hermione, I swear. He told me the night before he...he died."

She was still for a long while, and then her low voice spoke haltingly into his chest. "Harry and Ron rescued me from...from there, took me to Shell Cottage. There was so much blood, Severus...pain...Fleur, crying...Ron, too...so much pain." She gulped. "But even then, I couldn't accept I'd lost it at first. Not even afterward. Not for days. All I'd gone through that night...the very worst thing was that I'd lost the best of us."

His other hand stole around her waist; unconsciously, he ducked his head, moved in, but she stiffened and pulled away, dashing her hand across her eyes. "But that's all in the past now. All that matters today is that y-you were the last to see Ron alive. That makes you prime suspect."

He drew himself to full height again and forced his mind to regain some control. "Hermione, if one of us is guilty of killing Weasley, I would look to the one who made him take an Unbreakable Vow...and didn't release him from that Vow after he landed in St. Mungo's."

Hermione gasped, turning pale. He pressed his point. "He was relieved to tell someone, do you know that? He was lucid enough to tell me what you made him do." His voice seethed with anger. "I don't know what pisses me off more, that you made him do it, or why you made him do it. It was always about Harry fucking Potter, wasn't it? Potter had to be protected, no matter the cost. It was your burden Weasley shouldered all these years, Granger." He laughed mirthlessly. "An Unbreakable Vow? That's tantamount to a ticking time bomb in a mental patient." She staggered back as if he'd struck her. "Unbreakables can be rescinded, but you didn't release him, even after you saw him."

"There was no Vow by the time I saw him again," she protested, but he could see the growing doubt in her eyes. "After Harry died, the Vow released Ronald on its own. The magic knows, Severus. That's the nature of the Vow. I-I didn't..." There was a pleading note to her voice now.

"The magic knows, but he didn't. He still felt guilty for telling someone he thought was Harry, Vow or no Vow. If you want to know who caused Ron Weasley to decide to carve up his arms, Hermione, you have only to look in the mirror."

She gave him one last, stricken look, then turned and fled, sobbing. He watched her go with bleak eyes.

An hour later, he threw together a trunk and Apparated the hell out of London.

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In the days that followed, Hermione's schedule of appearances stepped up to a grueling pace. She knew it was Lucius' doing; he was trying to keep her isolated through activity.

The morning Lucius had informed her with hateful joviality of the death of Ron Weasley, he questioned her closely why she thought the Foreign Minister had been informed personally by St. Mungo's. He insinuated she and Severus were having an affair. Though she roundly denied it, he did not seem convinced and pressed her further. But he was clearly less concerned about sexual politics as collusion; above all things, he worried that his subordinates might be conspiring against him. The Minister was beginning to share an important trait with his reclusive Dark Lord...paranoia. It was not the first time Hermione had noticed.

Ron's funeral was a sparsely-attended affair...mainly St. Mungo's employees and a lone member of the press. Draco had accompanied her, but no friends or family came, not even Percy. Severus hadn't shown up; she would have been surprised to see him.

It wasn't until a few days later that she had a block of time at home alone to sit and examine the box Draco won for her.

She fixed herself a cup of tea before sitting down at her little coffee table with Mad-Eye's box. She pressed her thumb to the brass catch and whispered the word that would open it. The catch gave with a familiar little click, and she opened the box with trembling fingers.

There were only a few items inside. She found a few old lists of addresses, a picture of a grinning, blue-haired toddler waving to the camera, a street map or two...and one folded piece of parchment that caused her to slop tea down her front.

"What is it? What did you find?" asked Phineas impatiently from his place on the floor, propped against the living room wall. "Turn around this way so I can read it."

She moved to sit down on the floor beside him, and they studied the parchment together. But she could not fathom the contents at first because the handwriting was achingly familiar...it was Severus'.

The parchment looked to be the last page of a letter. It gave no signature and very few specifics. It began by listing a meeting time and date, and a place...Rathlin Island. There were notations indicating the tide. The letter ended with a declaration that Severus would stay behind and help cover everyone's trail after they were away. But as to the identity of "everyone," there was no clue.

Phineas summed it up succinctly. "Obviously, the Headmaster had a hand in helping someone escape...someone from the Order, because he or she had access to this mailbox. He met two or more people on Rathlin Island in Northern Ireland and helped them leave the coast by water. He stayed behind to cover their tracks."

"So there are more members of the Order out there," Hermione murmured. Somehow, she had known Pansy had lied to her. "But why would Snape help them?" Hermione frowned, turning around to look at Black. Her head felt swaddled in cotton wool.

"We've had this conversation before," replied Phineas almost angrily. "Headmaster Snape worked for the Order; Dumbledore trusted him. Yet you continue to think the worst of him. Why do you doubt him?"

"I have my reasons," she replied stubbornly.

"Are you saying your reasons trump those of Dumbledore, McGonagall...Kingsley Shacklebolt?"

"Headmaster..." she paused, and then admitted the truth. "I had a...a personal relationship with Snape. I know him as someone who only gets close in order to secure information for the Dark Lord."

He looked at her with new understanding but no sympathy. "It's time to re-examine your reasons, my girl. You're supposed to be a bright witch, but don't let your prejudice get in the way of the truth."

She didn't answer. It was on the tip of her tongue to say Azkaban had shown her the folly of expecting men to reform, but...what if she had been blinded by his rejection of her, and he had always been on the side of the Order?

Phineas continued. "We've gotten nowhere in the search for the last two pieces. Time is working against you...your task could be discovered any day. You could use some help locating Everard at the Ministry. Can you afford to dismiss Severus Snape as a resource?"

Hermione regarded the portrait thoughtfully. She recalled the day Harry had rushed them all off to the Ministry to stop a break-in at the Department of Mysteries. He'd missed the chance to confide in Severus that day. If he had, so much tragedy might have been averted. Timing was everything; Harry's godfather, Sirius Black, might even have lived. She didn't want to repeat the mistake.

But the memory of their last encounter in the peripheral hallway made her inwardly cringe. She had felt so self-righteous, convinced Severus had done something, said something to cause her oldest friend to take his own life. But Severus' words forced her to acknowledge her own culpability. She had known the Unbreakable Vow she made Ron take had been nullified by the death of Harry Potter, but she had not taken seriously the idea that Ron might still feel beholden to the Vow by virtue of his mental illness. Perhaps he would not have comprehended if she had released him verbally, but she hadn't even tried.

But Severus understood Ron's sense of integrity better than she herself. Severus had been Ron's most constant visitor when even his own brother Percy had abandoned him. Didn't that mean he should be given a second chance?

Suddenly, Hermione was seized with a blinding desire to see him, look him in the eye again and take a measure of his character. Severus had worked at the Ministry for years; surely he would know if there was a portrait of a former Headmaster in the building. She could ask him about Everard without compromising the task Dumbledore and McGonagall had given her.

More importantly, she was starting to believe she owed Severus an apology. How he reacted to it might tell her all she needed to know.

She went through the contents again, but could find nothing she could link back to the letter. Finally, at Phineas' suggestion, she burned everything that had been in the box. It would not do to stash evidence in a parolee's flat, even tucked within an artifact as well-charmed as this one.

She looked around, and her eyes picked out the two distinctive black-and-brass pieces sitting in plain sight amidst the clutter of tag sale finds she had deliberately amassed to disguise her true mission. She was already treading on thin ice as it was.

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Rumors among the support staff at the Ministry turned out to be true: the secretary at the Foreign Minister's office was an odious troll. She had taken one look at Hermione and informed her that His Excellency was not accepting visitors today. All half-formed explanations about consulting with him on future speeches to foreign dignitaries were totally ignored. Hermione left in a huff while the woman calmly went back to her copy of *Witch Weekly*.

Of course, Hermione knew a sure-fire way into Severus' inner office, but she had wanted to save it as a last resort, considering the danger of discovery. However, desperation finally led her to the Minister for Magic's suite, where she had had free access since she first started.

Relieved to find the inner office empty and Lucius gone for the evening, Hermione activated his Floo and determinedly stepped into the Foreign Minister's office in a flash of green flame.

"Hello," said a querulous voice behind her. "Beg pardon, but who are you?"

She instantly whirled and sent a Stunner in the direction of the voice...or she would have, if her wand had been up to it. The hex flew, but what hit the portrait squarely in the chest...for it was a portrait...looked like green slime. He looked down with a mixture of surprise and hurt.

"I say," he remarked, "that was uncalled for."

"Sorry," she mumbled, aiming a quick *Tergeo*. At least the wand was capable of getting something right, even if it was just a cleaning spell. Her handiwork revealed a thin, spindly man in a bowler hat. He smoothed the front of his formal robes with immense dignity and fixed her with a gimlet eye.

"I feel compelled to warn you, the Foreign Minister would not be pleased at you poking around his office without express permission."

Hermione pointedly refused to answer and began to prowl the luxuriously-appointed office, stopping at the desk and restlessly rooting through parchments. "Where is the Foreign Minister?" she asked distractedly. "I had hoped to talk with him." She snatched up a piece of parchment and noted the writing did indeed match the sample from the Order's mailbox.

"His Excellency is away on state business. It doesn't concern you. Please come back here," he called as she continued to wander around. "I would rather not involve Security."

Something about the way he said it puzzled her. "*Whyhaven't* you called Security already?"

"Because the Foreign Minister would be even *less* pleased if you got in trouble with the law again, Hermione Granger." She narrowed her eyes and came forward, standing under the portrait. "Yes," he added, "you are well known to me."

"And why is that, Foreign Minister ..." she paused to read the placard mounted to his frame. "Lugubrious?"

He ignored the question. "What brings you here?"

"I've come to ask him ..." A great excitement seized her. Severus was away, but here was a portrait who might direct her. "Well, perhaps you could help me," she amended, assuming her most earnest expression. "I'm looking for someone...someone in a portrait. Back before...well, back in the old days, this portrait used to hang here in the Ministry. Now I've lost track of him, and I'd like to renew our acquaintance."

The portrait looked at her shrewdly. "Oh, yes. The young are so very fond of us moldy old portraits. I can see your enforced separation weighs heavily on you. And just who is this long-lost friend?"

Hermione huffed and crossed her arms. If he didn't believe her lie, she would have to think up another, but she knew better than to just cobble one together on the spur of the moment. Why was she pants at lying to portraits? So much for being a Slytherin at heart. "His name is Aloysius Everard. He was once a headmaster at Hogwarts. I don't even know if he still exists, or if he has been sold off at one of the Ministry auctions. If you know anything..."

"Ah. I know Aloysius quite well." Lugubrious smiled and leaned forward in his frame. "He does indeed still reside here, but after the regime change, he was placed in storage along with most of the other portraits. It demoralized him; he used to continue to visit a body on occasion, but now he mainly sleeps." He brooded. "Portraits have fallen out of favor here at the Ministry. Times change, Miss Granger. Fashions change. And paranoid people dislike eavesdroppers. That's the way of it now."

"If fashions change, then why were you spared?" she asked.

"The Foreign Minister sees fit to maintain the old-fashioned tradition of keeping his predecessor at hand for counsel and for company. It's one of his many quirks, if I may say."

Hermione studied the portrait for a moment. "And are you familiar with his...quirks?"

"I know them all," he said simply. "Now, why are you searching for Everard?"

Hermione bit her lip. "I'm sorry, sir. I can't confide everything to you if you offer counsel to Snape."

His eyes widened. "I'm surprised you feel that way," he remarked. "Severus Snape is a very honourable man, you know." At her stony silence, he pressed, "If one of his friends asked, he would do whatever he could to help, even if he doesn't acknowledge his commitment, even to himself." He regarded her steadily. "Yes, I'm quite surprised with your opinion of him, given what I know of his feelings for you. He would work tirelessly for you, if you asked him. Helping people is the only thing that truly occupies his time and energy any more."

To test the waters, she decided to play Devil's advocate. "I can't believe Death Eaters need all that much help these days," she remarked.

"Death Eaters?" Lugubrious tsked at her. "Severus Snape is no friend to the Death Eaters. He has no friends left at all, except those he worked alongside and protected from the Dark Lord before the war. Though they lost, he still takes great pains to see that they have a fighting chance to survive. I know he helped a few to escape by boat from Ireland a few months ago. A family of three named Lupin...a couple and a little boy."

Hermione sagged down into a chair. Now she knew which Order members were referred to in the letter...Remus and his wife and son, Tonks and Teddy. They were alive, and they had escaped with Severus' help.

The whole story came together. Severus must have taken them to Ireland, or met them there, to see that they got away safely and to cover their tracks. He happened to see the RCMC ranger, Tankersley, release the owl that carried a warning about an unauthorized boat launch. Severus probably used Legilimency on him, and certainly an Obliviate, then hastened to the Ministry to get hold of the report before it could be read. And in consummate Severus Snape fashion, he altered the report slightly rather than destroy it, in case it would be missed.

"Why did they travel by boat?" she asked at last. "That seems so dangerous. Why not create a Portkey?"

"Any means would have been dangerous, but it was for their security. Severus Snape was the only one capable of creating a Portkey, but he would have to have keyed it to a destination, and he didn't want the Lupins to tell him where they were heading. Not yet. Not until he was free to leave Great Britain himself and join them."

"That's another thing. He went to such great lengths to help the Lupins," she mused, "yet he chose to remain behind. Why didn't he go with them?"

"Can you not think why?" he asked gently. When she shook her head, he regarded her with a mixture of exasperation and sympathy. "I should think it obvious. He stayed because of you."

"Me?" Her heart seemed to stammer in her chest. When she spoke, her voice was barely a whisper. "What...why?"

"Because you were still in prison, Miss Granger. Ever since your trial, Severus Snape has been petitioning to have you released from Azkaban. You and your friends, Arthur Weasley and Neville Longbottom."

"I don't believe it," she told him flatly.

"Do you not know him at all?" he replied. Hermione was forcibly reminded of Phineas Black uttering nearly the same words to her. "I have shared this office with him for two years, Miss Granger," continued Lugubrious. "I know everything he has done since the war. The Dark Lord has no interest in diplomacy; assigning Severus to the Foreign Ministry was merely a device to keep him under the Minister's command. Severus has had no heart for his ostensible job. He put his whole heart into your safety. When he learned you were paroled by the Minister, and he got word his other two friends had moved beyond the Veil, he burned all his petitions here at this fire..."

Hermione felt herself near tears. "I knew someone had been petitioning on my behalf, but I was never told who."

"He was never successful, but at least he managed to transfer the Lestrage brothers so they could no longer molest you."

It felt as though a lock she placed on her heart the day she was taken to Azkaban had finally broken. All the emotions she had so carefully squirrelled away to protect herself came spilling out. A Pandora's box of feelings: loss and regret and shame and guilt, fear and acceptance and hope and desire...all fluttered out so quickly that she could not rein them in. She wanted to believe in Severus, wanted, *needed* to believe that he was good, and that he had truly cared for her. Tears threatened as her heart beat its insistent tattoo: *believe, believe, believe...*

Lugubrious' voice was gentle, almost fatherly. "For two years, I've watched him live on little more than the hope that he could pull any string, call in any favour, to get you released from Azkaban. He cares so deeply for you, my dear. More than you know; more than he could ever articulate," said Lugubrious kindly. "He loves you, Hermione."

His gentle declaration destroyed the last of her uncertainty, and she burst into tears. The portrait pretended to be keenly interested in the office chandelier while Hermione sat and sobbed helplessly. She fumbled for a handkerchief but came up empty, finally resorting to dabbing her face with paper napkins she found inside a sideboard.

Finally, with a sigh, she straightened and looked up again. "Better?" he asked, his smile kind and understanding. "Good, now, I believe we were looking for old Everard, now, weren't we?"

"Yes, sir," she said, sniffing.

"Fine, fine," he answered airily. "Now blow your nose and pay attention, dear." He gave her directions to a storage cupboard near the Floo Room. "All the old portraits were relocated there shortly after the Dark Lord's victory and subsequent restructuring of the Ministry."

Hermione smiled at his carefully-worded phrasing. A politician right down to his pigments.

"Thank you, Your Excellency," Hermione said, liking the portrait. She considered all of her conversations with Phineas. The thought that Severus, like her, wasn't completely alone, was a comfort.

As Hermione turned toward the fireplace to leave, Lugubrious added, "When you manage to wake up Everard, please convey my compliments and ask him to visit soon. I miss the old codger," he added wistfully.

"I'll remember." She managed a watery smile. "But won't Severus be furious with you for breaking his confidence?"

Lugubrious shrugged. "He won't if he never hears of it."

She gave a shaky laugh. "You must have been in Slytherin."

"Ravenclaw, actually." He favored her with a thin little smile. "We have a certain romantic streak that comes out at times like these."

Hermione smiled and waved one last time. She activated the Floo and walked into the Minister's office...straight into the arms of Lucius Malfoy.

## Chapter Nine

*Chapter 10 of 14*

In a world where Lord Voldemort defeated Harry Potter and the Order, the Minister for Magic makes Hermione Granger an offer she cannot refuse - become a spokesperson for the new regime, or rot in prison. But Hermione has her own, dangerous agenda. Can she complete her appointed task without running afoul of the law, or the man she despises most - Severus Snape?

Written by stgulik and Teddy Radiator for Droxy. This story was originally commissioned as a TPP Every Flavour Auction gift, but was actually written for the 2012 Summer LJ het\_bigbang fest.

Hermione's mind went blank as she looked up into the imperious face of Lucius Malfoy. "Good evening, Minister," she began, wondering how on earth to explain herself.

His grip on her arms was steady but firm. "Why, Miss Granger, I must say this is a pleasant surprise, popping into my office at such a late hour." He smiled down on her with eyes that would freeze fire.

"Well, I ... y-you see, I was..." she stammered, willing that supposedly brilliant mind of hers *to think!*, while the second most dangerous man in Britain waited for an explanation of why she had Floo'd into the Minister for Magic's private ante-chamber.

"As charming as your blushes are, my dear, I don't quite understand." Lucius' handsome face grew hard, and he leaned in closer. "What are you doing in my office, Miss

Granger?"

She closed her eyes. "I was working late, you see, and I meant to return to my office, and entered here accidentally, sir."

"I see." He looked at her closely. "Well, accidents happen. But I do worry that you are working yourself so hard." Solemnly, he glanced at the clock. "It's very late."

"Yes, sir, well, I was wanting to work on my speech, and the Ministry is so quiet at night and..."

"And you thought no one would be around to see what you were up to, didn't you, my dear?"

"I'm not up to anything!" She could hear the fear in her voice, and Lucius' eyes narrowed. Her flimsy panic was as transparent as tissue paper, and at her thin protest his expression grew calm, almost friendly.

"I would never presume you were, my dear," he answered, his voice a soft, viper-like sound. "You understand more than most the necessity of innocence. What is the old Muggle saying? You must be like Caesar's wife, above reproach? After all," he said, drawing closer. "Life is so precarious without the protection of one's patron."

"Yes, sir," she whispered, feeling sick.

"So, I know you'll tell me the truth," he said, a gentle smile gracing his patrician features, "about what you are doing this evening."

Suddenly, he spun her around, reached into the pot on the hearth and pinched the tiniest amount of Floo powder between his fingers. Throwing the dust into the fire, he said clearly, "*Quavonos!*" A bright green burst of flame was followed by the ghostly image of Severus' office. Hermione could clearly make out the smooth, dark lines of the ostentatious desk.

With a sinking heart, Hermione ventured a look into his face. He was looking at her solemnly. "Paying a little late-night visit to your old Professor, were you?"

"No," she said, breathlessly. "Well, yes, I was going to speak to him..."

"You and His Excellency have seen a lot of one another as of late, haven't you? Admit it!"

"No, sir, not at all," Hermione replied, too quickly. "I had to ask him a question about foreign policy, but he wasn't there."

"At this hour? No, I don't suppose he would be. He is a nefarious wizard, to be sure, but dedication to his job is not one of his vices." Hermione trembled as Lucius released her arms. He walked over to his desk and sat, steeping his long fingers beneath his chin.

"You've made quite a name for yourself, haven't you, Miss Granger?" His eyes, flinty as chips of ice, regarded her steadily. "One might say that you've taken the Quaffle and flown with it. I admit I've allowed you more leniency than was perhaps prudent, but I am not without my little indulgences."

"I've...I've tried my best to please you, sir."

Lucius stilled. "Have you?" he asked, a whisper of a smile playing across his lips. His eyes narrowed again. "Yes, you've done very well for the Ministry. Then again, the penalties for failure are rather, shall we say, incentive enough?"

Hermione tried to calm her pounding heart, but she was sure he could hear it from his desk. "I try not to think of it in those terms, sir," she said, trying to smile. "I prefer to think of the good I may achieve, more than the consequences of potential failure."

"That's good," he purred, and tilted his head flirtatiously. "Because Azkaban never lies, Miss Granger."

She froze. "Pardon?"

He stood and walked slowly around his desk. "When a prisoner arrives at Azkaban, the first thing the prison does is assign them a prison number. It is a binding identification; once assigned, it remains with you for life. You do remember your prison number, don't you, Miss Granger?"

Haltingly, she nodded. At his silent prompt, she whispered, "G-Gebo 77 Isa 96 Kenaz Degaz Berkano."

He nodded. "You were adept at Ancient Runes at school, were you not? Gebo, the rune representing greed, loneliness, obligation. You see, Hermione, Azkaban assigns your prison number based on your magical properties, your personality, your past. It studies you, it reads you. It *knows* you."

Lucius drew nearer. "And therefore, I know you. It is all there, Miss Granger. Azkaban has written you large for all the world to see." With his wand, he drew her prison number in the air, until large, fiery runes were emblazoned between them. "Isa represents treachery, betrayal, plots. Kenaz, instability, exposure. Dagaz tells of completions, blindness, hopelessness, and Berkano of anxiety, carelessness, deceit."

The runes and numbers faded, until the air was clear between them. He regarded her mildly, but his tone was hard and as cold as his grey eyes. "I hope you do not plan to visit these traits upon the one wizard who stands between you and wearing that number for the rest of your life."

Hermione swallowed. She didn't bother trying to hide the tremour in her voice. "No, never sir. You may rest assured of my loyalty and gratitude to you."

He lowered his gaze and smirked. "Oh, I think that is a given." When he looked up again, his eyes swept over her body possessively. "And I have to ask myself: what would you do to prove your loyalty to me, Hermione? What would you do to show me that I can trust you?"

Hermione closed her eyes and tried to look relieved. "Whatever assurances you need, Minister, I will be happy to provide."

He favoured her with a slow, hot smile. "I had a feeling you might say that, my dear. So I will be happy to oblige you." He raised his cold eyes to hers. "Tell me what you and Snape are plotting. *Now.*"

Her eyes flew open, and she gasped as she saw Lucius begin to rise from the desk again. She'd been sure he would demand sexual favours from her, claiming her body as a right. Such a thing would have been bad enough. But instead, he seemed determined to focus on conspiracies. He had truly worked himself into a terrible state since their last conversation. And now she was certain that nothing she could say would convince him she was not plotting against him.

Because she was, of course. She was indeed plotting against Lucius, against Voldemort himself...not alongside Severus or any other living person, but with the help of dual portraits. What if, in his paranoia, Lucius became determined to find out all she had been up to? Whether he chose Veritaserum or Legilimency, in a few seconds she might become an open book to him. She backed up, her heart racing as Lucius advanced on her.

Suddenly, a soft chime sounded in the room, and Lucius whirled around with a curse. He indicated a door to their left with a wave of his hand. "Go into that room," he commanded, clearly furious with the interruption. "Do not make a sound or you will be on the next boat to Azkaban, I promise you."

Hermione moved to obey him, feeling numb with fear. She found herself in a small closet. It was dimly lit, but Hermione could still make out several large, expensive-looking cloaks hanging on pegs across one wall. She cancelled the lights, plunging herself in darkness, but when she turned back toward the door, she got the shock of her life.

The door was transparent. Everything that was going on in the room was plainly visible. She wondered wildly if the Minister even knew of this little eavesdropping room. It was possible that he didn't; after all, he came here to deposit and retrieve his cloaks. He had never had reason to be here in the dark with the door closed. It occurred to her



that this might be one of those secrets even ministers didn't know about.

As she stared through the transparent door, she saw Lucius tidy his robes and make himself presentable. "Enter!" he barked, smoothing his platinum hair. Hermione watched in astonishment as Pansy sauntered into the room, surreptitiously looking around. "Good evening, Miss Parkinson," Lucius said, his voice as smooth as always. "What on earth are you doing here at this late hour?"

Pansy, dressed to kill in a red leather robe tight enough to be legally declared skin, rewarded the Minister with a smile so rich and knowing Hermione filed it away for future use. "Good evening, Minister," she said, her voice throaty. "I was actually looking for Hermione. I'm here to escort her home, and someone said they saw her in this area." She paused, and turned her full battery of sexual charisma onto the Minister. "But seeing as she's not here, how fortuitous that I've found you instead."

Hermione watched in fascination as Lucius' grey eyes boldly swept over Pansy's lush curves. "And why is it fortuitous, Miss Parkinson?"

"Please, Your Excellency, call me Pansy. After all, we're old friends," she purred hot and deep within her throat. She took a step closer to Lucius, whose expression changed from distracted to intrigued in a matter of heartbeats.

His eyes grew heavy-lidded as Pansy closed in and traced the pattern on his robe with a long-nailed finger. "And what causes the Minister for Magic to be working in his office at such a late hour? Affairs of state?"

At the word 'affairs,' Lucius' eyes widened, and some secret understanding seemed to pass between them, making Lucius more guarded and Pansy more smug. It was fascinating, really, thought Hermione. These bloody Slytherins had a moral compass set so differently from everyone else's.

"Yes, affairs of state can be quite tiresome, and much more trouble than they're worth," he answered.

She smirked and moved closer. In a husky whisper Hermione had to strain to hear; Pansy cooed, "But necessary, Minster. Never forget that. Aggravating as they may be, certain affairs must be tended to, and allowed to mature to fruition. If not, their absence can be remarked upon, and the consequences can be dire. Especially since their objectives are working. No," she said, sliding her arms around his waist, "affairs of state aren't worth the extra paperwork to dissolve them."

"You may be right, Miss...Pansy," he replied, and his eyes fluttered closed as she shamelessly caressed him. "Perhaps all they need is a reminder to mind their own affairs."

"Absolutely," whispered Pansy, and they fell into a searing kiss that made Hermione's eyes grow wide, then close tight in a grimace. Gods, the last thing she needed to see was Pansy bloody Parkinson and Lucius Malfoy snogging away like fourth-year Hufflepuffs.

They kissed hungrily for several minutes, all growls and groans and grinds, until Pansy pulled away with a gasp. Not so much as a blip of makeup was out of place. Hermione made a mental note to ask Pansy how she did it.

Pansy was smiling her hot smile at Lucius, and she breathlessly answered, "I'll bet your affairs of state don't give you that kind of incentive, do they, Lucius?"

"No," he answered, his voice ragged and dark with arousal. "But sometimes even the Minister for Magic has to settle for less than his due."

She laughed as she swiftly unbuttoned his robes, all the while seeming to take all the time in the world. "That's a shame, Minister. You deserve the best. Always." She tilted her head while his head fell back. "After all, why should the Minister for Magic dine on pig's trotters, when he can experience Filet Mignon?"

*Oh, thank you, Pansy,* thought Hermione, then chided herself for being insulted. She wasn't thinking anything of the sort a moment later when Pansy dropped to her knees like a Knockturn Alley whore and commenced giving Lucius what, judging by his groans and gasps, was the blowjob of his life.

Hermione watched the train wreck playing out before her, praying for a chance to slip out of the office unnoticed. At last, Pansy grabbed Lucius' arse in a possessive grip and turned him so his back was toward the closet door. Silently, Hermione opened the door and peeked out. Pansy, with one eye to Lucius' reactions, removed her mouth and began to stroke him with long, sinuous pulls, making the wizard gasp and call out her name. She waited until his eyes were closed, his head flung back in ecstasy, then mouthed to Hermione, "Go! Then she started back on her five-star blowjob, adding loud moans, which apparently sent Lucius on a real tailspin.

Hermione didn't hesitate. Creeping over to the door, she silently let herself out. From outside the door, she heard noises like furniture being scraped, and Pansy's throaty laugh, then the gruff sounds of grunting copulation. Gods, Lucius sounded like a boar when he had sex. Pig's trotters, indeed.

She took off at a run, her heels making terrible clacking sounds on the shiny black floor. This might be her only opportunity to follow Lugubrious' directions and find the portrait of Aloysius Everard. There was no telling how long Pansy and Lucius would be at it in his office. Hermione had implicit confidence in Pansy's sexual prowess, but less in Lucius' staying power.

From the RCMC, Hermione moved quickly through the transom door and down the staircase off the peripheral hallway until she reached the back door to the Floo Room. From there it was easy to figure out which store room held the ancient portraits...some wag had scrawled "Old Soldiers' Home" on the door.

Inside the dim and dusty room, portraits sat propped haphazardly against bare plaster walls five or six frames deep. Hermione pointed her wand and said firmly, *Accio Everard.*

Amidst a clatter of wooden frames, one frame popped out and bounced into the air. She caught it awkwardly, then trained her wand light over the slumbering countenance of Aloysius Xavier Everard (1729 - 1852).

"Headmaster? Headmaster Everard?" Calling his name repeatedly did nothing to wake him, nor did shaking his frame like a toy. At last Hermione remembered to speak the password.

He opened one eye blearily. "Come back tomorrow" was his unhelpful reply. It took much more shaking and several more shouts of "pumpkin pasties" before he woke up enough to contribute anything useful.

"So you are Dumbledore's best shot. His first and last device, and all hope riding on your skinny shoulders. Is that the way of it, girl?"

"Yes, sir," she replied as evenly as she could. First pig's trotters, now skinny. She might have told the portrait off if the stakes weren't so high. "And I actually should have all the pieces soon...with your help, of course."

"And then what? Do you know what it does yet? Were you even told how to put it together?" She shook her head mutely. Everard pursed his thin lips. "Well, I do not know much, but I happened to overhear that, when the pieces are close at hand, they recognise each other."

"Recognise each other?" she echoed. "How will that happen?"

"You said you have several pieces already. Did you not notice this trait?"

"No," she replied, surprised. "I...I'm forced to keep them in plain sight in my flat, but I store them far apart from each other so nobody sees their resemblance and asks questions."

"Very good," murmured the portrait. He yawned suddenly. "Well, all the best, girl. Good luck." Everard seemed on the verge of falling back to sleep.

"Sir!" she called again, an edge of panic in her voice. "The piece? Do you know where it is? Is it here at the Ministry?"

"Eh?" He roused himself once more. "Yes, yes, it was put into my charge. Last time I saw it, it was in the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes, on Level Three. Brewster used to have it, but perhaps it has changed hands since I was moved here." He blinked and gazed sadly around the store room.

"Level Three. Brewster. Thank you, sir. Oh...your friend Lugubrious said to say hello, and he would welcome a visit from you some time." She moved to prop him back amongst the other portraits, her mind already planning the back route to the next department, when his voice brought her up short.

"They burned our portraits, burned our books," said Everard, his voice infused with sudden heat. "They burned down our school...eleven hundred years in the making!...and rebuilt it in the image of that monster. Though they may try and paint a benevolent face on their deeds, every day the courtrooms below ring with the cries of the accused, innocent but for an accident of birth or situation. History will show this as a horrible chapter in our already-bloody legacy." He paused, and she thought she saw a new glint in his painted eyes. "Fight them, girl. It starts with you. Fight and win."

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In the end, the piece had been exactly where Everard had said, in the office of some assistant director named Brewster. The man had actually been using it as an ashtray. She dumped the dog ends and ashes and slipped it into the pocket of her robes before hurrying out again.

As she raced back upstairs to the upper levels, her mind began to replay the other part of her conversation in the Foreign Minister's office. Severus loved her, Lugubrious had said. He loved her. For a moment, she was tempted to dismiss the portrait as being either spelled to subterfuge or merely delusional. That thought rotated around to Ron, and what he might have told Severus about the night she miscarried. And that thought brought her right back to Severus, and their confrontation in the hall.

She had been so ready to kick him permanently out of her life, but now...

He loves you.

But could she love him again? Could she risk everything she had to do, everything she'd been trusted with finding, on his faithfulness? Was she actually listening to her hopeful, foolish heart as it entreated her to give him another chance?

She skidded to a halt near Lucius' office just as it swung open. Pansy stepped out, looking as if she'd done nothing more taxing than take a fag break. As she approached, however, Hermione could see a bright hard gleam in the dark-haired woman's eye. She walked with a long stride that would have been considered a swagger had she been a man.

She passed Hermione without even slowing down her stride. "Come on, you. Home."

Hermione uneasily fell in step beside her Parole Officer. They walked down the long hall in silence; Hermione kept casting hasty glances behind her, as if expecting any moment for Lucius to appear and screech, "Off with her head!" Hermione rubbed her forehead; she was cracking up.

Finally, the silence became too much and she ventured, "Pansy..."

"Not now," came the terse reply, and Hermione shot a worried glance at Pansy's face. She was smirking; in fact, Pansy Parkinson looked pretty damn pleased with herself.

The air outside felt a little heavy; it would rain soon. Pansy, freed from the Ministry walls, stopped and lit a cigarette, taking a huge drag and blowing the smoke into the air.

Without looking at Hermione, Pansy said, "You know, Granger, you really are a pain in the arse."

"I'm sorry, Pansy, I was just..."

"Sticking your nose where it doesn't belong. Gods, you Gryffindors are so bloody predictable." She turned to Hermione and looked at her with something akin to pity. "You've got it bad for him, don't you?"

Hermione shook her head. "You don't understand! I Floo'd into his office accidentally, and suddenly he was questioning my loyalty and I..."

"I'm not talking about Lucius, you dozy bint! I'm talking about Snape."

The breath left Hermione's lungs in a gust. "Snape? What are you talking about?"

"You don't have to pretend with me, Granger. I can even understand the attraction, really I do. Hell, half the Slytherin girls used to fantasise about him in school." She shrugged. "He's a powerful man, now. Rich, well-situated, brooding. I can understand why you'd be attracted. But if you had confided in me, you wouldn't have nearly gotten your sorry arse sent back to Azkaban. I could have told you he's out of town."

Hermione tried to look guilty. "I'm sorry, Pansy. I didn't want anyone to know."

Mollified, Pansy said diffidently, "It's nobody's business." She eyed Hermione keenly. "Even the Minister's."

Hermione looked into Pansy's unreadable eyes and felt her stomach flutter with something akin to hope. "You mean you were willing to save me..."

"Don't flatter yourself, Granger," she snorted, looking at Hermione with a sneer. "I saw you sneak into his office..."

"Saw me?"

Pansy gave her a withering look. "Yes, the Trace Spell? The one all parolees are given?" She rolled her eyes. "We went over this the first time we met. Don't you remember?"

Hermione gulped. She did now. "I see, so you..."

"...traced you as you Floo'd into Snape's office. Then the next thing I know, Lucius is coming back *to* his office."

"I've had run of the Minister's office since I started working here," replied Hermione defensively. "I had to get in to try and see Severus tonight, and that was the most discreet route." She grimaced when she saw the other woman's look of disbelief. "It was a calculated risk. How was I to know Lucius keeps such odd hours?"

Pansy regarded her a long time, as if trying to decide whether or not to believe her. "Anyway, when I walked up to the door, I heard him asking you about visiting your old professor."

"Well for Merlin's sake, why didn't you come in right then? Why didn't..." Hermione shut up. She knew why Pansy didn't try to prevent him from walking in on Hermione. She just wanted to hear her say it.

Pansy scoffed, "What was I supposed to do? Grab Malfoy out in the hall and screw him while you snuck out? I'm not in the business of shooting myself in the foot to save idiots like you, Granger."

Sullenly, Hermione bit back, "Then why did you?"

Pansy stopped in her tracks and looked away, as if she hated being forced to acknowledge her own agenda. "Let's just say I overheard our esteemed Minister tell you basically to put out or ship out to Azkaban, and I thought of a way to kill two birds with one stone." She shrugged, and the hard gleam returned to her eyes. "Well, we all have our little weaknesses, Granger. Yours is Snape." She favoured Hermione with a cool look. "Mine is Lucius."

There it was. "You mean you interrupted me getting threatened just so you could get your leg over?" Hermione demanded.

Pansy's eyes narrowed. "Well, don't sound so put out about it! I saved your scrawny neck by getting my leg over! You don't have to worry about being carted back to prison, and I've got an invitation to one of the special private Revels tomorrow night." She smirked and smoothed the front of her robe. "Very exclusive. Only the inner circle is invited. Well, them and several other morsels to be sampled. And thanks to me, you're not on the menu. Anymore," she added archly, with a secretive smile. "I'm not sure Snape will be relieved or disappointed with that. I'll guess you'll never know."

Hermione's brain refused to picture Severus participating in a Revel with some faceless witch. Instead, she quipped, "That must have been a hell of a good blowjob, Pansy."

The other woman waved her hand airily, making the cigarette smoke boil up like a scudding cloud. "You'd be amazed what well-executed fellatio will do for a wizard's philanthropic nature," she replied dryly.

Pansy turned and started walking again. Hermione practically skipped to catch up, her heart suddenly light for the first time in days.

"Thank you, Pansy. I mean it. I really didn't mean to..."

"Shut it, Granger," Pansy said mildly. "Look. I don't know what's going on between you and Snape; none of my biz. But I have a little first-hand knowledge on what it's like to want someone." She looked away with an imperious sniff. "No sense in being punished for something you didn't do, seeing as you just wanted to be with someone else." She brightened. "Besides, I've been wanting to get in Lucius' robes ever since ... well, let's say ever since I realised I was never going to get into Draco's. Your little romp gave me the perfect opportunity to do it."

Hermione rolled her eyes. Typical, typical. She was surrounded by the most unrepentant bunch of opportunists known to mankind. Slytherin's House symbol should have been a blackmail letter instead of a snake.

As they neared her building, Hermione ventured a question that had been on her mind. "Well, was it all you hoped it would be?"

"What, sex with Lucius? Well, to be perfectly honest," Pansy said, lowering her voice, "It wasn't exactly the Mighty Chief of Staff I was hoping for."

The two women giggled helplessly. "So that's why your makeup still looks fresh," Hermione remarked.

"Actually, that's a handy little spell I learned my last year at old Hoggy. I'm surprised you didn't learn it."

Hermione's heart ached a little at the thought. "Well, I was a little busy that year. You'll have to teach it to me."

Pansy eyed her critically. "We have to start with your hair first. Your Number Three is looking a little wayward right now."

Hermione reached up and felt the tangled mess of hair that had gone the way of all flesh while sprinting up and down stairs. A quick glance in the window of a darkened building made her cringe. "Merlin, I look like I've been riding on a charmed door," she muttered.

"Charmed what?"

"Nothing. A little work joke," Hermione replied. "I'm just punchy." She gave Pansy a wry smile. "This evening has been, shall we say, a little more surreal than usual."

Pansy laughed darkly. In her usual patronising drawl, she replied, "Circe, I hope you make more sense when you give speeches. Let's go. Gods, I need a drink after all that, Granger. What have you got at home?"

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Standing in the middle of his private study in Malfoy Manor later that night, Lucius Malfoy's thoughts turned to Hermione Granger and what business she could possibly have had in Severus' empty office.

She had clearly been lying when he confronted her with the facts; he doubted she was even capable of telling the truth. Look how well she took to her position. She was a natural-born liar, willing to say anything to save her scrawny neck.

And Severus. Merlin knew that Severus could not care less about his own job, but what might he and that irritating little Gryffindor be planning behind Lucius' back? Oh, he had observed them closely at the Ministry function. To some, it might have appeared they had been fighting, but Lucius had seen the spark that passed between them, the sort of spark that never extinguishes, but smolders until it bursts into flame.

He wiped his upper lip, and realised with a start that his hand was shaking. Everything was falling in place now. He was too close to achieving his goals to have them scuppered by this meddlesome witch. The Dark Lord could always induce Severus to return to the straight and narrow path, if need be.

Granger was another matter. The responsibility for warning her against collusion fell on Lucius alone. He needed someone to supervise her more closely, with a firm hand. He had anticipated that somewhere along the line, he would have to remind her of everything she had to lose the next time she sought to deal with him dishonestly. It had merely occurred sooner than expected.

After a few thoughtful moments, he conjured a Patronus. "I require your security expertise," he dictated in a hoarse whisper to the glowing peacock, "as well as your powers of persuasion for a certain ... fractious parolee of our mutual acquaintance. Come to the Ministry office tomorrow morning for instructions."

The Patronus sped on its way, and Lucius breathed easier. It was a good plan; it should be enough motivation to keep her in line until the day he had no further use for her.

After that, Hermione Granger's fate would no longer be his concern.

## Chapter Ten

*Chapter 11 of 14*

In a world where Lord Voldemort defeated Harry Potter and the Order, the Minister for Magic makes Hermione Granger an offer she cannot refuse - become a spokesperson for the new regime, or rot in prison. But Hermione has her own, dangerous agenda. Can she complete her appointed task without running afoul of the law, or the man she despises most - Severus Snape?

"You know, I believe I do remember her, Steve. Rather pretty young girl, but a bit lost, if you know what I mean. I was worried about her."

Severus nodded. He was paying a call to Brighton Nick, in Sussex Constabulary. Police Constable Edward Rankin was surprisingly helpful, in spite of the *Obliviate* he was given over two years prior.

Wearing a Muggle-style black suit, complete with white shirt, tie and Chelsea boots, Severus had introduced himself as Detective Sergeant Steven Sims from London City, and had asked to speak with PC Rankin, hoping he was still on the force. He was in luck; Rankin turned out to be not only friendly and helpful, but of sound enough mind to enable Severus to look into the man's memory and restore part of what the Aurors had Obliviated. Severus showed the PC a Muggle-style photograph of Hermione, and after a puzzled moment, Rankin blinked, as if coming out of a trance.

"You know, she completely slipped my mind, but yes, I do remember her! Blimey, that's been, what, two years ago? Time flies, eh, Steve?"

Taking Severus' silence as impatience, Rankin resumed his recollection, all brisk efficiency. "She wasn't any trouble, mind. No soliciting, no blagging, nothing illegal. I had spotted her over the course of about a week, wandering around the old Droxxell Estate on the outskirts of the town. Now that I think on it, she probably had been living rough up there, poor thing."

Rankin squinted, thinking. "It was dead winter, bitterly cold, you see. I remember about a week after I first saw her up on Droxy's Hill, I was on seafront patrol, and she was walking on the pier. Not another soul on it. It was cold as brass monkeys, and she looked quite alone, sad really. It was obvious she was homeless, and I approached her to ask if she had anyplace to go. I didn't like seeing such a young girl on her own. A nice girl like that, well-spoken, obviously from a good family. I figured she was a runaway, and some poor mum and dad were going spare, wondering where she was.

"My partner went to the car to get the address of one or two shelters in town. You know, places where she might get a hot meal, maybe somewhere to sleep, some counseling." Rankin shook his head sadly. "She didn't look, you know, strictly with it, if you catch my meaning. We've got plenty of predators around here; I didn't like the idea of her falling in with the likes of one of them."

Severus cleared his throat, feeling as if Rankin was talking about him.

The older man looked increasingly confused. "I believe we gave her the address of a shelter and she went on her way. At least, that's as much as I remember. I'd ask my partner, but he's moved to Spain. I suppose I could call him if you need..."

"Thank you, Edward, but you've been more than enough help," Severus interrupted smoothly.

Rankin nodded. "Here, Steve, this isn't a mop-up investigation, is it?" His eyes were troubled, and Severus was reminded of Arthur Weasley: protective, fatherly, caring.

"On the contrary, Edward. She's fine. Very well. Think of this as... a private matter." Severus looked at the man keenly, and Rankin coloured a bit and cleared his throat.

"Of course. Well, I must say, I'm glad to know she's alright. Nice sort of girl. I've got one that age meself," he added wistfully an unmistakable note of pride in his voice. "I know it would kill me not knowing where she was. But that's a father's love, isn't it? If we had our way, they'd be wrapped up in cotton wool until they turned thirty, to keep them safe and sound. But you have to let them go, don't you?"

Severus nodded. "Thank you, Edward. I'll just be on my way." They shook hands, and as Severus turned to leave, he stilled, frowning. Something wasn't adding up. He looked back at the PC.

"Edward, you said she'd been living rough. Can you point me in the direction of where she was staying...the Droxxell Estate, I believe?"

"Of course!" Rankin replied cheerfully. He pointed west. "Now, you take the A259 toward Hove, near St. Anne's Gardens..."

Moments later, PC Rankin awoke with a start. He was sitting in his car, looking out over the Esplanade. He sat up and looked around furtively, hoping no one saw him dozing while on duty. He tried to remember what he'd been doing before he fell asleep, but for the life of him he couldn't be bothered. "Getting old," he muttered, and rolled down the window to let the cool, sea air jolt him awake.

Using the constable's directions, Severus easily located St. Anne's Gardens, and from there quickly found the entrance to what was affectionately known as Droxy's Piles by the locals, or to give it its proper name, the Droxxell Estate. Rankin had explained that, although derelict and overgrown, the manor and the surrounding estate was considered historically significant, and was now owned by the National Trust. It looked as if a minor tourist trade had sprung up around it several decades earlier, and at the bottom of the hill that led up to the crumbling mess of a ruin was a tidy but dated little parade of shops, featuring a gift shop, a pub and a tea room. The gift shop was closed for the season, but the pub and tea room were open for business, but empty.

Severus looked longingly at the pub, but decided that the tea room might offer the better gossip. A bell tinkled as he pushed open the door and made his way into the warm, cozy café. It was all chintz tablecloths and baking smells, accompanied by the pungent, bergamot aroma of Earl Grey tea. For a wistful moment, Severus was reminded of the genteel shabbiness of Madam Puddifoot's tea room in Hogsmeade.

"Hello love! Welcome to the Tea Cozy!" rang out a cheery voice. Severus turned to see a plump, kindly-face woman about his own age emerging from the kitchen, dusting flour from her hands. "Good afternoon, sir. I'm Mrs. Hope, owner-operator of this august establishment. We've got over fifty different teas to choose from, and I've got some lovely scones just coming out of the oven. Have a seat and make yourself comfortable." Her cornflower-blue eyes were bright and smiling, and her cheeks were rosy from the heat of the oven. "We don't get many folks here this time of year, so help yourself to any table you like."

"Thank you," Severus replied, choosing a seat at the window. He draped his Muggle-style overcoat on the seat opposite.

Mrs. Hope bustled over, hands clasped around her ample middle. "Now, what can I do you for? Some sandwiches? A nice cuppa?"

Severus seriously considered. "Fifty different teas, you say? Do you have any Lapsang Souchong, perchance?"

Her eyes grew rounder, and she clapped her hands together in delight. "Oh, you have no idea how lovely it is for someone to ask for something other than English Breakfast or Earl Grey! As it so happens, I have a lovely Lapsang." She looked at him keenly. "In fact, I was just about to suggest it. You look like a Lapsang man."

Severus nodded, a little abashed. "That will do nicely, then. And I believe I will have a scone with it, thank you."

The proprietress beamed. "It'll be my pleasure." With a flick of her long skirt, she zipped back into the kitchen.

Severus looked around, trying to imagine Hermione coming in here. Would this Mrs. Hope have taken pity on Hermione's dishevelled state and offered her a meal? Or had Hermione stood longingly at the window, looking in, too proud to ask for charity, too honest, too Gryffindor to *Confund* the owner and taking what she needed, even as her stomach growled empty?

He looked through the window, up toward the hill. It was, he surmised, the hill where PC Rankin had seen Hermione. It was said to be a large, rambling estate; large enough for one small witch to hide in. Had she snuck into the old manor and found shelter there?

He was still contemplating Hermione and her last days before capture when the characteristic aroma of wood smoke wafted into the room. The Tea Cozy's owner bustled over to his table, holding a tray groaning with food and drink. The Lapsang Souchong tea, pungent and bold, overrode even the lovely scent of the fresh scones. Mrs. Hope sat the teapot down with a flourish.

"Here we are, my dear. This is freshly made from loose tea; no bag rubbish here! And I've taken the liberty of adding some clotted cream and lemon curd to your scone," she said, her round face kind and approachable. "Now, can I get you anything else?"

As he slathered lemon curd over one half of the scone, Severus replied, "Perhaps you can tell me a little about the Droxell Estate."

Mrs. Hope laughed ruefully. "Well, there used to be a bit of tourist trade here, but old Droxy's Piles are like every other stately pile in Britain...too dilapidated and too expensive to keep up. There used to be a folly there as well, but no one ventures up into those woods. It's just too hard to hike through. The entire estate sort of fell out of fashion in the 70's."

She brightened. "The lady who sold me this business told me a great story about the folly, though. All very mysterious. To me, anyway," she added, with a laugh. At Severus' raised brow, Mrs. Hope smiled conspiratorially. "Oh, it's an ever so poignant story, but I'm not even sure it's true. It sounds a bit like a very good yarn more than a true story," she added.

As Severus ate his scones and sipped his perfectly-brewed Lapsang, Mrs. Hope began her tale with the same aplomb and eagerness as an old maid imparting the latest neighbourhood gossip. Her words had the sound of an oft-told tale, as carefully molded and shaped as one of her scones.

"Well, as the story goes, a long time ago, Carlton Droxell was the owner of Droxell Estate. He was, by all accounts, a very generous and good-hearted man. Very rich, too; many considered him a great catch. As the story goes, he remained a confirmed bachelor until he met and fell in love with a society woman from London named Teresa. By all accounts, he was smitten at first glance.

"Teresa was a great beauty, but fickle, and given to flights of fancy. But seeing as old Droxell was rich and titled and landed, she flirted shamelessly with him, promising all sorts. Without even knowing her background or history, he asked her to marry him, and she accepted his engagement fast enough, but she never would set the date. Over and over, Teresa promised to come and live with poor Droxell, but she always managed to give him the slip and stay in London, surrounded by young swains only too eager to flatter and compliment her.

"Droxell's obsession with Teresa became his entire life; he thought of nothing else but bringing her to his home and making her his wife. Finally, in a fit of jealousy, he raced up to London and accused her of loving someone else. That heartless girl returned his ring, and said she wouldn't marry him because she hated that huge, old drafty house he lived in. She told him she wouldn't haunt there as a ghost. Well, Droxell was heartbroken. He returned from London dejected, but determined to show Teresa how much she meant to him. Anyone can buy his wife a house, he thought, but how many show their love by building her a palace? In his deluded state, he declared he would build a monument to Teresa, just like the Taj Mahal had been a monument to the Raj's lost wife. And to show his love and devotion, he would build it himself with his bare hands."

Mrs. Hope paused and poured some more tea into Severus' empty cup. "The locals made all sorts of jokes behind old Droxell's back. They named his project Droxy's Folly." She explained, "Now, a 'folly' is a just garden ornament that looks like a building. Sometimes they're fairly elaborate. But Droxy's Folly was something else entirely. The neighbours called him a proper fool. But Droxell believed, and kept on believing with all his heart that one day, his beloved Teresa would see what he had done for her with his own two hands, and say yes, and mean it." Mrs. Hope sighed. "It must be wonderful and terrible to love someone that much, don't you think?"

Severus felt the tea grow bitter in his mouth. Solemnly, he nodded. For a moment, The Tea Cozy proprietress and her customer were silent. Mrs. Hope continued gazing out the window, her eyes far away.

"For years he toiled. The Manor fell into disrepair and neglect while he laboured. Then one cold, January night, when the building was almost finished, he fell asleep in the wintry, unfinished hall, and the poor man froze to death. They say they found him all quiet and peaceful, like he was still sleeping. In his stiff, cold hands was a picture of the lovely but heartless Teresa, and on his cheeks were the frozen tears he'd cried over her."

She paused. There were sympathetic tears in her eyes. She caught his glance, sniffed, and cleared her throat. "The legend goes that the very next summer, cold-hearted Teresa returned to tell her faithful suitor that she was, at last, ready to marry him, but all that remained of him was the monument to her faithlessness, Droxy's Folly."

Mrs. Hope stared intently out the window, and curious, Severus followed her gaze. They were looking up the green side of the hill leading up to the estate. The ridge sloped steeply upward and crested sharply at the top, showing a pristine edge of space.

"So what ever happened to Droxy's Folly, Mrs. Hope?" Severus asked.

The woman shrugged. "I'm not sure, really. Except for the actual manor house, which is little more than a ruin, most of the estate is grown over. I suppose it could have been bombed during the war. A lot of buildings on the coast were destroyed. If it's still there, it's little more than rubble, probably." She heaved her considerable bulk onto her feet. "You know, I think I have an old picture of what it looked like." She went off and rummaged through a drawer beneath the till.

"Ah ha!" She placed the small, faded photo in Severus' hand. It was a typical summer seaside type of postcard, with lurid colours and exaggerated lines painted over the original photograph, which was probably taken around the turn of the century. It showed a stone building, perhaps thirty feet tall, with rounded turrets topped with crenelated battlements. It sat in the midst of a ring of trees, looking tidy and almost delicate, like a miniature castle, which, of course, was exactly what it was.

"Impressive," he murmured. "Especially if one believes the story that he built it with his bare hands."

"It does seem a little hard to believe," Mrs. Hope laughed, "unless, of course, he used magic."

He glanced up, but he could tell she was being facetious. Soberly, he extended the postcard to Mrs. Hope, but she waved it away. "No, you keep it. As a gift."

Severus bowed slightly and placed the postcard in his jacket pocket. "Thank you, Mrs. Hope. May I say I have enjoyed your story. It was a fine tale, and finely told."

Thirty minutes later, stuffed to the gills with tea and scones, Severus bade the cheery and aptly-named Mrs. Hope good-bye and casually walked to the corner of the parade of shops. Quickly glancing around, he Disillusioned himself, then started up the hill, his heart fluttering with excitement. He'd not felt this alive and magical since the day he'd pushed the Lupins' boat into the water and watched it float away into the treacherous North Sea.

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The hill was steep, and halfway to the top, Severus removed his Muggle-style coat, rolled up his shirt sleeves and loosened his necktie.

After cresting the hill and walking deeper into the estate, Severus felt a tingle in his nose, like an electrical charge. Looking down at his arms, he watched, fascinated, as the tiny hairs rose and stood on end. He was stepping into no-man's land. Magic.

Severus looked around. From his vantage point, he was surrounded by a copse of trees. In the distance, he could see the edge of what appeared to be a stone foundation. That must be the old manor house. Something about that outcropping of stone, bleached white by time, jarred his memory, and he pulled out Mrs. Hope's gift. He stared at the photograph carefully.

The folly stood in the middle of the photo, but behind it, and to the left, was the formation of embedded stone he saw now. He looked from the photograph to the foundation and back, and he recognised he was standing in almost the exact spot the photographer had stood when the photo of Droxy's Folly was taken. All that remained was a small clearing, covered in stubby grass. Severus frowned. The folly's foundations should be as obvious as the old manor's. Where were they?

Cautiously, he walked toward the clearing, his senses on high alert. It was then that Severus felt it. A tingle of magic drifted in the air, so delicate and airy it was almost

subliminal. It tickled over Severus' skin like a single dandelion seed, capricious and playful. Notice-me-not. Guilt Geas. Motion Detection, and Purging Protector, Muggle Repellent, traces of Fearful Fog, Muffliato, and a couple of strange wards he couldn't quite identify. He knew if he stayed long enough, he could unravel them, but he was too unnerved.

He at last knew the real secret of Droxy's Folly. Somehow, his brilliant witch had taken a legendary building, *and made it disappear*. The entire building was gone. At that moment, he was so damn proud of her he could have kissed her feet.

Severus closed his eyes, and stepped into the bank of wards. He felt the wave of magic sluice over him like warm rain, mixed with the subtle scent of incense. His skin prickled in delicious shivers of remembrance. With his emotions kicking in his gut, he leaned into the barrier, and it enveloped him in a cocoon of warmth and protection and acceptance as familiar to him as her embrace, and as welcoming as her bed.

He stretched out his hand, and ran it through the silken air, and the wards happily fluttered over it like hundreds of tiny mouths licking teasingly at his skin. They felt so sensually lush, as if they were caressing his very essence, and he was touching hers. It was so intimate, so tactile, that for a moment he seriously wondered if, wherever she was, she could sense him, encased in this downy cloak of protection. He had never felt anything so delicate, yet so luxuriously tensile. Her magic did not judge him; it could not lie.

Hermione. Her richly dense cocktail of wards was layered with power, sandwiched with geas, chiming with her intelligence and cunning and integrity. This mesh would have fooled the Dark Lord himself, and yet it still allowed Severus to nestle within it as safe as a babe. Blanketed within, he was accepted and recognised and unseen to anyone. The sudden, sweet realisation that she still loved him enough for her wards to embrace him so tenderly nearly drove him to his knees. Even after everything that had happened, her magic knew him, and welcomed him like a lover.

Severus felt that aching, sweet knowledge of her, and it was as wild and fierce as it had been when they were first lovers, trying to get close enough to merge into one skin, hungry for one another with that diamond-hard, soul-quenching passion that is the birthright of any true love.

He pictured her face, tangled with the suffering and loss she had endured, and the strength she carried, and the love and trust he had stolen. Remorse and grief assaulted him so violently the wards shimmered and cradled him, as if trying to protect him from an unseen attack.

He'd taken her to his bed. He had coveted her. He'd used his skills to steal her away and make her love him. And then he had thrown her away, believing she had done the same with him.

"Oh Hermione," he whimpered, "I lied. When I walked into the Shrieking Shack to die, I told myself it was for Lily. But the truth was that I couldn't face life without your love."

She was the only reason he was glad he survived. He still loved her. Why had he never told her so?

The desire to see her, to hold her and to confess everything to her was so strong he froze, and for the first time in his life, he was incapable of either Apparating or conjuring a Patronus.

He had to go to her, and find her, and tell her the truth. Every bitter, sour bite of it. He had to touch her, beg her, get down on his knees and lay his sorry heart at her feet. Oh, gods, he wasn't worthy of this witch's regard for him, and he wanted to be, more than anything. Whatever it took, even if, like Droxy and his folly, he used himself up in the trying, it would be better than living in this soulless world without her. He would stay in the sweet, blind comfort of her wards forever, if this was all she was willing to give him.

He had to return to London. He had to find her and make her forgive him. He had to tell her that he still loved her, more than anything, even his life.

*He still loved her more than his life.*

He stood, buffeted in the warm, loving current of her wards, and wept.

## Chapter Eleven

*Chapter 12 of 14*

In a world where Lord Voldemort defeated Harry Potter and the Order, the Minister for Magic makes Hermione Granger an offer she cannot refuse - become a spokesperson for the new regime, or rot in prison. But Hermione has her own, dangerous agenda. Can she complete her appointed task without running afoul of the law, or the man she despises most - Severus Snape?

Written by stgulik and Teddy Radiator for Droxy. This story was originally commissioned as a TPP Every Flavour Auction gift, but was actually written for the 2012 Summer LJ het\_bigbang fest.

Hermione took a sip of her morning tea, grimaced and pushed it away. She'd let it get cold and it tasted awful, but she needed the caffeine after last night. She and Pansy had sat up for an hour after they got back to the flat and drunk a small bottle of brandy Hermione had stashed in the back of a cupboard. She was now ever so slightly hung over.

With a tired sigh, she pulled herself onto her feet and took the mug into her tiny kitchen, snapping on the kettle. She'd get through this cup if it took her...

There was a tap on her kitchen window. Turning, Hermione was surprised to find a postal owl fluttering there. A moment later she was tearing into an envelope from the Ministry's Parole Board.

The letter informed her that she had been seen breaking into Ministry offices and stealing. She was ordered to stay at her flat pending an investigation. It ended with a notice that she would be interviewed by a Parole Officer assigned to her case.

Hermione's knees gave way, and she dropped back into her kitchen chair. So, she was under house arrest while they investigated her activities at the Ministry last night. Had she tripped a ward or alarm of some sort? Perhaps Lucius was feeling more vindictive than either she or Pansy could have anticipated. It was one thing to be suspected of canoodling with the Foreign Minister late at night, but to be accused of thievery was a serious charge indeed. She closed her eyes and willed herself not to panic, but her pounding heart was having none of it. Lucius could bring her before the Parole Board...hell, he was the Parole Board...and send her back to prison without a fuss.

*Interviewed by a Parole Officer* - Why did they phrase it in that manner? Pansy was her Parole Officer, but this letter made it sound as if someone new was being assigned.

There was a sharp knock on the door. Relieved, Hermione stood to answer it. Now she would learn the whole story. She wondered if Pansy was as hung over as she...

Suddenly, the door blew back on its hinges, and she threw an arm over her head with a cry of alarm. Standing in the doorway were the Lestrangle brothers.

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Severus arrived at the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures almost ahead of the rest of its staff. He had left his hotel in Brighton first thing in the morning, stopping off to shower and change back into Wizarding garb.

His visit caused something of a sensation. A smiling older witch whose name he didn't catch bustled up to greet him, declaring someone named Perry would not believe that the Foreign Minister himself had visited her little office. Miss Granger had not come in yet, the woman said, but she assured him she would be told of his visit the moment she walked in the door...

"So she's not here, eh?" Severus turned to see Pansy Parkinson lounging in the doorway.

"Miss Parkinson." He greeted her with a polite nod. "Why are you looking for Miss Granger?"

"Because I'm responsible for her comings and goings...or rather, I was, until this morning when I was summarily removed from her case. That bastard. Doesn't he honor any of his negotiated settlements?" she mused enigmatically. "No wonder Wizarding Britain can't seem to get any treaties signed."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," said Severus testily. "Please tell me what's happened."

Pansy glanced at Severus with a shrewd look he could not fathom. "Well, if anyone needs to be brought up to speed, Your Excellency, it's you." She gave a sardonic chuckle. "First of all, your office became a high-traffic area last night when ..."

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"Well, well. Long time no see," said Rabastan Lestrangle. "We've missed you, didn't we, Dolph?"

Rabastan and his brother Rodolphus pushed their way into her flat. A low, painful whimper caught in Hermione's throat, and she began to shudder. "You're not supposed to be here," she declared shrilly. "Get out!"

A low, dark carnal laughter came from Rodolphus. "Oh, now is that anyway to welcome old friends? I'm hurt, aren't you, Rab?"

"I should say so. I thought you'd be happy to see us, Granger." Rabastan's dark eyes roamed over her body hungrily. "Why, you scrub up nicely, for a Gryffindor."

"Here, kitty kitty," Rodolphus cajoled behind her. How did he get behind her? She turned to try and keep them both in her sights. The two wizards were leering at her as they closed in. Fear caused her muscles to betray her...she could not move from her spot on the floor.

Heart beating wildly, she managed to gasp, "My Parole Officer is going to be here any minute..."

"No she's not," Rabastan sneered. "We are your new Parole Officers. The Minister for Magic felt you needed more...protection. You're a danger to yourself, luv...unauthorized access to Ministry offices, thievery...forgetting favors..." he tutted with mock regret. "It's a problem."

"The Minister decided what you need is a firmer hand," continued Rodolphus. "From now on, we'll be escorting you to and from the Ministry every day, and to your appointments as well. We'll keep a much closer eye on you, make sure you don't go poking around any more like you did last night. Your Miss Pansy is busy blowing the Minister in his office again, no doubt," he added. "From what I hear, she's an expert. Not like you, innit? We always had to tell you what to do. No finesse." He leered as he looked her up and down. "Has she taught you any new techniques while we've been gone? Why don't we sit down right now and have you show them to me."

He reached out to put a hand on her elbow. She jerked her arm away, gasping for air. She couldn't seem to get a deep breath. The horrible memories of what the two Death Eaters had done to her in Azkaban flooded her vision, and panic, wild and disjointed, set in. She backed away from them until her back was against the wall and placed her hands over her ears as the harsh male laughter closed in on her.

She cringed as Rabastan Lestrangle pressed her against the wall, his large hands roaming over her body with lecherous, bestial familiarity. He purred in a coaxing, evil voice. "Little kitty here is getting excited." She tried to push him away as he ground his pelvis against hers, showing off his erection. "Always playing hard to get, aren't you? You know that gets me horny."

Hermione knew what would happen next. Rabastan had always been the one who loved to rape her, while his brother preferred her mouth on him...usually at the same time. She remembered only too well her few encounters with them as unrelieved horror. There had been nothing remotely sexual about their 'games.' It had been about pain, humiliation, power and abuse.

Rabastan squeezed a breast as he continued to press her against the wall. "And if you don't cooperate, guess where we'll all go? Back to your favourite place on earth, Prisoner Gebo 77."

The two men started laughing as if they'd just heard the funniest joke, and Hermione fought down a wave of nausea. They would take her back to Azkaban. Lucius' agreement with Pansy was for nothing; he had immediately replaced her with the Lestranges. He was trying to send her a message. He might still throw her away...

But she was not in prison yet. And Hermione Granger was no longer incapacitated by malnutrition and despair. She was standing in her own flat, two steps away from building a weapon that might mean the end of these two sadistic bastards and their ilk forever.

Hermione looked Rabastan in the eye, drew in a deep breath and let out an ear-piercing scream. He tried to put his hand over her mouth but she made a sharp gesture with both hands and he was flung backward by a burst of spontaneous magic. The overhead lights started to flicker and the wall sconces burst apart, and the two brothers were pelted with bits of glass and wood; they cursed and cowered under the assault as the lights sputtered and went out.

Only then did she stopped screaming and run out of the flat.

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As soon as Pansy mentioned the names of the men who had summarily replaced her as Hermione's guardians, Severus turned on his heel, his heart in his throat, and strode out of the office and to the elevators. In the Atrium, he broke into a run and was at the Floo and on the sidewalk of the bustling London streets before he knew it.

Following Pansy's directions, he Apparated to the cellar of the building where Hermione lived. It was a dark, deserted place; wand light showed it to be a tenants' storage room, filled with old kitchen appliances and odd pieces of furniture. Severus could sense that the upper stories of the building were warded against Apparition, so he found the staircase and sprinted upstairs.

The moment he reached the landing of the floor which housed Hermione's flat, he knew instinctively something was wrong. He found her door, and it slowly swung open at his touch. His wand at the ready, Severus eased into the darkened room. "*Homenum Revelio*," he whispered, and when the spell showed no one in the flat, he added, "*Lumos*."

The flat had been trashed; even the lightbulbs were broken. He looked around in dismay at the wreckage. From the corner of the room he heard a gruff yet impossibly familiar voice. "Back again, are you? Discovered another glass you forgot to smash? Merlin forbid the girl would be allowed to take a drink in her own house. You've left her nothing, you malodorous hooligans..."

"Phineas?" called Severus. "Is that you?"

"Who's there?"

Severus moved in closer. To his astonishment, he found the portrait of Phineas Nigellus Black huddled in his frame on the floor, squinting in the wand light. Severus could not begin to imagine how the former Hogwarts headmaster's portrait had come back into her possession, but now was not the time to ask.

"Headmaster - thank Merlin!" Phineas was obviously relieved to see a friendly face. "Severus, if you care anything for the girl at all, you need to help her now," he implored. "They've gone after her. The bastards came in..."

Severus' heart started pounding. "The Lestranges?" he asked.

"Yes! They showed up, started threatening the girl with acts of atrocity that would blind you. She fled from them, but they didn't go after her right away. They started turning the place inside out, claiming they were looking for valuables stolen from the Ministry." The infamous Black sneer of disdain was firmly back in place. "I ordered them to get out, but...now, Headmaster, don't go off half-cocked!"

Severus, who had already headed for the door, stopped and waited with barely-controlled fury.

In a quieter tone, Black continued. "You literally missed them by moments. They obviously came here to harm the girl. Threatened to take her back to Azkaban if she didn't start cooperating more with the Minister."

Severus felt a chilling calm sweep over his body like a casing of ice. "Where's Hermione now?"

"I don't know. She fled, and they let her run like cats chasing a mouse. They said they'd catch her soon enough..."

He raced out of the flat, and as he closed and warded the door behind him he heard the portrait roar, "This is Malfoy's doing, boy! Watch your step!"

Out on the street, he wildly looked around for any clues as to which direction Hermione might have taken. A faint shout from down the street caught his ear. He turned in time to see Rodolphus Lestrage cast a Dillusionment charm on himself and take to the air.

Severus cursed even as he crouched and launched himself into flight, hastily Disillusioning himself as well. Other than the Dark Lord, he and Rodolphus were the only two wizards he knew of who were capable of flight. If he was flying in broad daylight, in plain sight of Muggles, he must be tracking Hermione like a hawk. Fortunately, Severus was capable of trailing him. Years of association had taught him how to follow Rodolphus easily.

But within seconds, Severus wished there had been another way. The day was grey and overcast; a cold, sharp rain had started, making it hard to see. He had not flown in almost two years; it was tiring, back-breaking, draining magic when one was out of practice. Doggedly, he kept the other man in sight as they flew south over the Thames.

Suddenly Rodolphus' pale, shimmering shadow dove downward, toward the Millennium Bridge, and from overhead, Severus spotted Hermione. Rabastan Lestrage had effectively herded her onto the bridge, and she was heading toward the South Bank at a dead run, with Rabastan casually strolling after her. He could hear her cries of alarm, but Muggles seemed not to be able to hear or see her; as he watched, Rabastan reared his wand arm back and threw a powerful Notice-Me-Not charm in her direction, which was apparently effective enough to keep her isolated and alone.

From above, Severus watched her skid to a halt, then turn briefly to keep her enemy in sight. She switched to a trot, keeping her distance from Rabastan, but she could not see that overhead, Rodolphus also had her in his sights.

"Hold on, Hermione," Severus whispered as he began his dive, his robes streaming behind. He wondered how he could get her out of this situation and not compromise either of them, and realised he could not.

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Hermione knew she had lost. It was the same, sickening feeling she'd known the day she saw Harry die in a blaze of Fiendfyre and fall the ground, a smoldering carcass that smelled of roasted flesh and burst internal organs. It was the exact paralysing realisation she'd had that day on Brighton Pier...the knowledge that she'd finally been caught and was going to Azkaban.

Only this time, there was no Professor McGonagall to send her to safety, and she was incapable of Apparition. No one else knew where she was.

Rabastan Lestrage had pursued her through the streets, always staying within wand range, with the deliberate gait of an animal running its prey to ground. "Now, little girl, what did you go and trash your flat for?" he jeered. "It's a mess now. Damaging Ministry property is a criminal offence. And you know what happens to bad girls when they commit crimes?"

Hermione barely heard his taunts. All she could see was Azkaban. All she could hear and smell was Azkaban.

As she reached the middle of the bridge, she thought of the weapon. With any luck, after she was gone, Severus would eventually come to her flat and Phineas would tell him the entire story. Severus could take up where she left off. The mission could continue even after she had gone.

She backed up against the railing of the bridge and turned to look at the water. It looked cold. It looked kinder than Azkaban. At that moment, she made her decision.

*My name is Hermione Jean Granger, not Gebo77lsa 96 Kenaz Degaz Berkano. My life is my own, not Voldemort's, and not Lucius Malfoy's. If I am to die, then I will choose when and where.*

She wished she could have spoken to Severus one last time. So many things left to talk about ...

She heaved herself over the railing and jumped.

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Rabastan gave a yell and broke into a run as Hermione hoisted a leg over the railing. Instantly, Severus changed his trajectory, aiming for a point below the bridge. Rodolphus also shouted from mid-air, but like his brother, he would not be able to catch her before she fell. Neither wizard had seen Severus yet.

As Hermione dropped from the tall bridge, he dove like a bullet, casting spell after spell to slow her fall. He knew the impact would likely kill her. Five feet from the surface, her descent finally slowed, and he cast his own shields as they hit the water together with an horrific splash.

The shock of the cold water nearly drove all the air from Severus' lungs as he frantically looked for Hermione. The river was as murky as it was frigid, and he cast *lumos* to aid his search. She was nowhere to be seen.

A flash of white caught his eye, and he dove toward the source. It was sinking rapidly. With a mighty heave, Severus blindly reached into the increasing darkness. His hand closed around her wrist and he hauled her upward.

Their heads broke the surface and they both gasped for air. Severus looked back to see both Lestrage brothers standing at the railing, their eyes sweeping the river. There was no time to lose. He gathered Hermione to his chest and clumsily flew out of the water with her, angling them low, under the bridge and out of their line of sight.

They collapsed in an ungainly heap on the embankment, Hermione crushed by his weight. She gave a mighty cough, turned her head and vomited up what looked like half the Thames. She pushed weakly against his chest, gasping for air. "Wh-who are you? Please ... please ..." Severus cancelled the Disillusionment spell with a flick of his



wand. Her eyes went wide. "S-Sev'rus...?" she choked. "What-what're you..."

He ignored her feeble protests as he looked around and got his bearings. The Lestrangle brothers might not have spotted them yet, but they could not be far behind. He tightened his grip on her, closed his eyes and Disapparated them with a crack.

They landed in a cold, pitch-black room. It was the cellar of Hermione's building, the first, nearest place he could think of. At last he rolled off of her and helped her to her feet. "Are you hurt?" he demanded, roughly grasping at her dripping head, chest and shoulders to assure himself she was still in one piece.

"I-I'm alright," she answered weakly. "Severus..."

"We have to get out of here. Can you stand another Apparition yet?"

She shook her head. "No, Severus, Apparition ..." she gulped and steadied herself. "Apparition won't save us. The Lestranges are assigned to me, and I have the *Trace*." His eyes widened in alarm and his heart thudded even harder. "They'll be here any moment..."

Twin pops behind them made their ears ring; instinctively they turned and dove behind a refrigerator, drawing their wands as red jets of light streaked past them. Severus returned fire, shooting Stunners into the gloom in the direction of the curses. He tried to push Hermione to her knees with one hand, throwing a *Protego* over her.

"Hello, Snape," called a voice...Rodolphus'. "Fancy meeting you here!" Severus could not see them at all...the darkness was total...and hoped he and Hermione were just as well hidden. "What were you thinking, nicking our little kitty from the river like that?"

Severus did not answer, but cautiously stepped out to the left to draw fire away from Hermione. His booted foot knocked the leg of a chair. *Stupefy!*" came a shout, and a red bolt just missed his head. He quickly threw a curse of his own before ducking behind something tall. He heard Rabastan grunt in pain.

"Snape!" called Rodolphus again. Severus instantly fired at the sound of his voice, but the bolt deflected off a shield. "No need to shed your blood today. Give us the girl and we'll say nothing about this to the Minister." Rodolphus laughed crudely. "She's a tart, all right, but she's not worth losing your favor with our Lord."

"*Hominem Revelio!*" cried Rabastan. Rodolphus growled profanities at his brother as a faint yellow glow appeared around all four of their bodies. Severus spied Hermione, positioned now some distance away, behind what might have been a stack of boxes. Even as the glow began to fade, all four figures took off running to avoid the frightful barrage of each other's hexes.

Severus smirked to himself. Rabastan's thoughtlessness could have cost the brothers any strategic advantage. Such was the nature of the spell; it made all of them equally vulnerable. They were not likely to cast it again without pause.

"Here, kitty, kitty," came Rabastan's wheedling voice. The brothers had separated now, and Severus knew Rabastan was about to begin stalking Hermione. There had been no peep from her; he prayed the girl had the sense to either fight well or stay out sight.

"Rab!" he shouted. Rabastan aimed another curse in his direction but Severus was ready; his body curled, just shy of the bolt, even as he fired a curse of his own...then did the same thing in another direction as Rodolphus fired at him. This time he heard Rodolphus hiss in pain. But Severus knew this was only the opening volley, and that the Lestranges would never give up until both of them were dead. They were predators at heart and would ignore all losses for the thrill of the hunt.

He sneered at that thought. If a hunt was what they wanted, a hunt was what they would get.

Moving to stand behind a wardrobe, Severus quietly slipped off his squelching boots, socks and outer robe, and stood barefoot on the cold concrete. He aimed his wand away and wordlessly performed the strongest Aguamenti he could muster. The sound of water splattering against a wall drew the brothers' wand fire toward the sound. In that instant, Severus ducked and sprinted straight toward one of the brothers in the dim after-image of the fading spell, his bare feet making almost no sound. Another randomly-fired bolt missed him by a mile.

The figure cried "*Stup...*" but Severus was there, upon him, keying on the sound of his voice to drive the heel of his hand upward and connect squarely with a nose. He grabbed the figure by the shoulders and brought up one knee to jab the man solidly in the groin. The figure gave a high squeal of surprise before Severus Stunned him. Still gripping the man's shoulders, Severus yanked him down and around, angling the figure in the direction that the other brother's shots had come from. With his wand clenched, he fumbled the other man's wand out of his hand, adding the second to his own.

"*Hominem Revelio!*" shouted a deep voice. Severus and the figure in his grip lit up again, and Severus continued to pivot, half-crouched with the man in his arms, toward his illuminated enemy, his own head and body mostly shielded. "*Avada Kedavra!*" A killing bolt arced toward Severus with lethal accuracy and hit the glowing figure in his arms. As the dead weight began to sink to the floor, Severus' own lit body came into view and he lifted his wand arm.

"Snape! *Avada...*"

"*Locomotor Wibbly!*" cried Hermione. A purple bolt of energy fired from somewhere off to the side and hit the figure squarely.

The man gave a mighty roar as he lost his balance. "Shit! You stupid bitch!" His legs seemed to collapse beneath him as the light faded and they were plunged into total darkness once more. He crashed to the floor. The noise was like a giant tree falling in the tiny basement, and Severus tracked it silently. "I'm gonna fucking kill you..."

A flash of intense white light flew from the wizard's wand in Hermione's direction; in that moment, his wand hand was illuminated in a lightning-bright glow. It was instantly gone, but not before...

"*Avada Kedavra!*" shouted Severus.

The words scissored into the air, raw and malignant, and green light burst from the two wands. The wizard, briefly engulfed in energy, fell backward onto the concrete and did not move.

All was silent for a moment. Then... "Severus?" Hermione whispered.

"I'm here, Hermione," he replied shakily. "It's over." He relaxed his grip on the body at last and slowly stood.

"*Lumos Maxima*," she called softly. A pulse of light flew from her wand to hover near the ceiling, illuminating the cellar with a small but harsh light. His eyes momentarily dazzled, Severus looked down to find himself standing over the body of Rodolphus Lestrangle. Rabastan lay dead about twenty feet away, his arms and legs akimbo and his unseeing eyes reflecting the tiny light above.

Hermione stood up from behind an ottoman. She stared at the dead men, and then her eyes met Severus' in stunned disbelief. As he gazed on her pale face and wet, bedraggled state, he knew he looked much the same, and his delayed reaction over the difficult flight, the drop in the freezing river and the subsequent duel caused his heart to give a mighty leap of irrational anger.

"The Jelly-Legs Jinx?" he roared. "Of all the curses you learned in Defense, the only one that came to mind was the fucking Jelly-Legs Jinx?"

"I couldn't help it!" she shrieked back. She threw down her wand with a clatter. "This fucking baby wand doesn't work properly! I can't do curses! I can only make practical jokes and clean shit off of portraits!"

Her own legs wobbled, and she sat down hard on the ottoman and burst into tears. He staggered over and sat beside her, taking her into his arms. "I know, I know," he soothed, rocking her gently. The anger drained from him like water. "You were very brave."

"It was the best I could do," she sobbed, and Severus pulled her tighter as relief, powerful and sweet, shocked him into a bark of laughter.

"It was perfect," he rasped, and kissed her wild hair. He smiled as he crooned, "You were magnificent."

## Chapter Twelve

*Chapter 13 of 14*

In a world where Lord Voldemort defeated Harry Potter and the Order, the Minister for Magic makes Hermione Granger an offer she cannot refuse - become a spokesperson for the new regime, or rot in prison. But Hermione has her own, dangerous agenda. Can she complete her appointed task without running afoul of the law, or the man she despises most - Severus Snape?

Written by stgulik and Teddy Radiator for Droxy. This story was originally commissioned as a TPP Every Flavour Auction gift, but was actually written for the 2012 Summer LJ het\_bigbang fest.

He managed to Apparate them to the cottage, but only just. His wrist and shoulder tingled, which was a sure sign of a near-Splinch. He checked Hermione carefully, but she was also unharmed from the journey.

Looking around at the country lane Severus had chosen as their Apparition point, Hermione frowned in puzzlement. "I thought you lived in London," she said, shivering in the cool air.

"I have a flat in London...a generous gift of the Dark Lord's. This is my home."

He reached into his robes and produced the bit of parchment. It seemed fitting that the first person to read it would be Hermione. She took the parchment without question and read it out loud. "Severus Snape lives at Ivy House, Bunnybeg, Ireland."

The air around them shimmered, revealing a lovely stone cottage surrounded by a picket fence. A thatched roof and chimney gave it a fairy-tale look, and as if to enhance this, the door swung invitingly open. Hermione squeaked in surprise as Severus swept her up in his arms and proceeded to carry her across the threshold.

"Severus..."

"Welcome to Ivy House," he said, shortly, carrying her easily through the door into the cottage. "You're my first guest."

He pushed open the bathroom door, then kicked it closed behind him. She was shivering now, and he frowned worriedly as he glanced down at her white, strained face. Groggily, she looked up at him with tired eyes.

"I've got to get you warm," he said, his tone brusque with anxiety.

"But the Trace..."

"...is no longer a concern. I removed it before we left London." He looked down at her and tried to smile. "You're safe now. No one's going to harm you."

She nodded and closed her eyes with a sigh of exhaustion. He carried her to the large bath suite, and several spells later, the large bathtub he'd yet to use was filling with hot water and a healing potion that filled the room with a faintly medicinal scent. By then, the combination aftershocks of cold and trauma had Hermione shivering so uncontrollably her teeth chattered. Severus pressed her close, trying to infuse her with his own diminished warmth.

"I need to get you out of these wet clothes and into the bath, Hermione," he said. She nodded, obediently trying to unbutton her blouse with trembling fingers. "Don't bother with that. I'll take care of it."

A quick spell removed the sodden clothes, but the abrupt loss of the only insulation between her skin and air made her cry out, and her muscles locked painfully.

"S-S-Severus," she stuttered, her eyes full of pain and humiliation. He gently deposited her into the steaming water, and she sank into the warmth, a moan of blissful relief escaping her lips.

"I'll be right back," he announced, and left the warm bathroom to root through his potions cupboard. When he'd chosen four small bottles, and gulped down a couple more, he lit a fire in the grate, cast the widest Warming Charm possible, then dashed back to the heated sanctuary.

Hermione was lying as still as the water around her; Severus knelt beside the tub and thumbed open the first three bottles. Gently sliding his arm beneath her head, he lifted her upright. "Drink these," he commanded softly. "You've had a physical shock, not to mention swallowed some of the most polluted water on earth."

Obediently she took each potion in turn. As she swallowed the last, Severus eased her back against the lip of the tub and stood. After a moment's hesitation, he shed his own wet garments. Hermione watched him solemnly, and when he was done she leaned forward. Severus sank into the lovely warm water behind her, then pulled her back against his chest. With a sigh, Hermione relaxed against him, and Severus' heart beat hard and fast as he gently cradled the witch in his arms.

Gradually her frozen limbs grew warm and stopped spasming. Her skin grew rosy as the warmth stole into her body. He conjured a flannel and opened the last of the four bottles, anointing her shoulders with a pale blue liquid that drizzled over her skin like honey. For several minutes he concentrated his attentions solely on making her comfortable and cleaning the river from her body and hair. As the flannel glided over her flesh, she turned in his arms until she was lying sideways against him. He put his arm around her, and sluiced water over her, rinsing the soap away.

She shuddered against his chest, and he realised she was crying. "That's good," he said, stroking her back comfortingly. "It's alright, my brave little Gryffindor." He pressed a kiss against her tangled hair. "My brave, mad girl."

"Severus, what do we do now?" she whispered against his chest.

He considered for a moment. "First we get you warm, and then we plan."

She rubbed her cheek against him and he pulled her as close as humanly possible. He could feel her tremble. "The Lestranges said they were going to take me back to Azkaban."

Severus smiled grimly, grateful she could not see his face. "Well, we saw how well that worked out for them, didn't we?"

She shuddered. "I kept thinking, 'I can't go back there. I'd rather be d...'"

"Shh," he soothed, unable to hear her say it. "You don't have to worry about that now. Don't even think that way." When she didn't reply, he stroked her cheek. "I couldn't bear the thought of it, Hermione," he declared softly. "Please promise me you won't go anywhere without me."

She reached for his hand and entwined it with hers. She studied it for a moment, then kissed it softly. "I promise." She looked up at him, and his heart swelled at the look in her eyes. It was the same look of admiration and affection he remembered from their first night together. She kissed his cheek almost shyly. "Thank you for saving my life, Severus."

For several moments, they lay in the hot water together, his arm around her, her hand curled within his. Finally, she shifted. "It was you, wasn't it?" she whispered very close to his ear, as if afraid of being overheard. "You arranged for Remus and Tonks to escape. I found the Order's mailbox with the letter you wrote him."

That surprised him; he had thought the box long destroyed. "Yes, it was me. I arranged for them to launch from a fairly remote location here in Ireland. Unfortunately, a ranger saw a little more than he should have. I had to follow his owl and alter his report at the Ministry. It was a matter of a change here and there."

Hermione raised her head from his shoulder and favoured him with one of her heart-stopping smiles. "I guessed that. It was brilliant."

He ducked his head. "It was a desperate act. I don't even know if either family survived."

Hermione looked at him sharply. "'Either family'? It wasn't just Remus' family?"

Severus shook his head. "It-they..." For some stupid reason, he was near tears. "Bill Weasley and his wife and daughter escaped as well."

He was engulfed in a thrashing, splashing tangle of wet arms and legs and knees dangerously close to his bits as Hermione straddled him and covered his face with tear-stained kisses. "You did it! You amazing wizard! You did it! Oh, Severus..." He was too happy to do more than merely hold on as she hugged him tighter and told him how brave and clever and wonderful he was.

As she squeezed most of the air from his lungs, he rasped, "Hermione, I must remind you that I don't know if they even survived or not." He hated killing the entire mood, but he couldn't stop himself.

"You gave them a chance. That was more than they had," replied Hermione, and kissed his damp cheek. The joy in her eyes made him feel more validated than anything he'd ever done, and her praise was a balm to a spirit that had been little more than dormant since the day their world crumbled around him. She tucked a stray lock of hair behind his ear. "But you should have gone with them; you should have saved yourself, and protected them along the way..."

He took her head in his hands, his tears threatening once again. "I couldn't leave, Hermione. You and Arthur... Longbottom ...you were still in Azkaban. And Ronald, too..." He gripped her arms tightly. "How could I leave you? Even if you never wanted to see my face again, how could I leave if there was one chance in this hell we live in to see you safe and not abused, and..." His voice choked and he looked away.

Hermione grew very quiet, and even though she hadn't moved, he sensed her pulling away from him. Finally, she said, "I'm sorry, Severus."

Puzzled, Severus asked, "Whatever for? You have no need to apologise."

Her lip trembled, and she lowered her head. "I said so many awful things to you at the Ministry. I'm sorry I blamed you for Ron's death. You were right about everything. I should have rescinded the Vow. And I lied to you," she said, weeping openly. "I never slept with Malfoy. He would sometimes tell me it was his right to take what he wanted, but...we never..."

"I understand," he replied, gently massaging her shoulders, "We have both said things we regret." He clenched his jaw, remembering. Shame filled his chest until it crowded out his ability to breathe. "Ah, gods, witch. That last night, in that miserable little hotel, before the end of the war. I said so many unforgivable things. I meant none of them. I should have just told you the truth, that I was too tired and too afraid to think about what I was doing. Instead I lashed out and said things I deserve no forgiveness for. I was a fool to say them, and an even bigger fool to leave you. I should have kept you with me." He closed his eyes. "I should have sewn you up under my skin before I let you go."

He fell silent. The only sound was Hermione's soft sobs. Feeling helpless, Severus simply held her while she spent her emotions.

"I lost our baby, Severus." Her whisper was almost too soft to be heard.

He pressed a hard, searing kiss against her forehead. "No, you didn't," he said fervently, his heart tearing open. "You did everything you could to protect it. You must forgive yourself, Hermione." He hesitated, and in spite of his resolve, his own tears fell. "You must forgive me as well. I don't think I could bear it if you don't. I know I don't deserve it, but..."

"Shh," she answered, and he allowed her to comfort him as he cried, hating his soft heart, but blessing hers for forgiving him. With the slightest of hesitations, as if afraid of his rejection, Hermione took his hands in hers. Her eyes were solemn, but full of beautiful, silvery hope. "I never stopped loving you," she confessed. "I told myself I did, and I tried, because I didn't know any better." Tears streamed from her lovely eyes. "But I still love you, and I believe in you."

He was holding her too tightly; the poor girl could barely breathe, but he couldn't let go. A dark sound tore into the room, and he knew it was his own wail of relief and sorrow. And then he was raining kisses over her face, babbling over and over, "I love you, I do, I never stopped, I love you, Hermione, I love you, please forgive me..."

"Of course I forgive you," she said, returning his flurry of kisses, and threw her arms around him, splashing water over the floor. "Oh, gods, Severus, you are..."

"My beautiful girl, my brave girl... my brave girl..."

Gradually they calmed, and their kisses grew less frantic until they became soft, gentle affirmations of what little remained unspoken. Severus touched his mouth to hers once more, and their lips moved together as if horrible words had never been pushed into the air by them. They forgot the past and thought of only this sweet joining, and soon they were as familiar with one another as the first time they had touched.

She stroked his arm absently, then reached up to caress his cheek. He trapped her palm between his shoulder and cheek, and pressed his lips against it. He felt her breathing hitch; in that moment his body heated of its own accord, and the water suddenly felt too hot. His desire bloomed, and with it came the hunger for her that he remembered so clearly. His erection followed, and he didn't even bother to try and hide it. Hermione pressed against it in an unmistakable invitation, and Severus grew lightheaded with need.

"We'll end up like two prunes in here," she whispered huskily, then slid her arms around his neck, rocked gently against his hips. "I've missed you," she murmured, her breath warm and soft against the ragged scar at his throat. Her tiny palm stroked his chest as she pressed a tender kiss against his jaw. "I never stopped wanting you, either."

"Hermione," he groaned. His hands slid over her back, and he shivered at the feel of her skin beneath his fingertips. "Have a little pity on me, witch. I'm just a man, and you're making me all too painfully aware of how much I want you."

He could feel her smile against his skin. "I know. I'm very aware."

Silently, she leaned away from him and grasped the sides of the tub. Like Venus rising from the waves, she rose to her feet, water sliding from her heat-flushed body. He could see the small nest of curls between her thighs, painted with water droplets, and so close his mouth began to water...

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Hermione's knees felt weak as she slowly stepped out of the tub. She reached down to place a gentle but firm hand against his chest. "It's my turn," she murmured, and reached for the flannel and the vial of potion.

She drizzled its contents over his chest, delighting in the scent of mint and lemon. He watched her with heavy, glowing dark eyes as she slowly moved the flannel over his shoulders, his chest, his taut abdomen. His eyes slid closed as she caressed him lovingly, her hands gliding over his warm, smooth skin. The cloth slid over his Dark Mark, and he watched her careful avoidance of it with approval. He was glad. He didn't want her to touch it; be defiled by it.

He relaxed, and lay back against the tub, and he laughed softly. Impulsively, she put her arm around his shoulders and touched her lips to his forehead. He sighed, and nuzzled into the crook of her neck with staggering sensuality. His voice was dark and honeyed as he murmured, "Gods, I love the way you touch me. I always have."

Hermione placed a tender kiss against his parted lips as her hand drifted lower, past his navel. He watched the journey of her fingers as they lightly teased his taut flesh, and with a glance upward, he parted his thighs for her with a sound that was almost pleading. Her breath caught as her hand closed around an erection already hard and needy and waiting for her. His muscles locked, as if an electric shock had charged the water. "Please, Hermione," he moaned against her throat, his lips warm against her skin. "Please touch me there. Please."

Hermione held him as she stroked him, her own arousal hungry and powerful. His hand rose from the water, and long, wet fingers enclosed possessively around her nipple, gently tugging the ruched flesh. He thrust against her hand, his eyes closed, and Hermione's heart began to pound as his expression lost its severe look and softened with abandon.

She stroked him harder, and the concentration in his face transformed into vulnerable, erotic bliss. Severus Snape, lost in his passion, was the most beautiful sight she had ever beheld; she had never tired of watching him lose control. She remembered those wild, stolen nights, when she would gaze eagerly into his face as he took her, feeling her own ecstasy burst from her at his release. It was the most intoxicating and primal kind of magic, knowing that she, Hermione Granger, had put that look of utter abandon on the face of a controlled, repressed, powerful wizard like him, and made him beg for the privilege.

He was close to climaxing, she could tell. Beneath the water, her hand slid along his length, stroking hard the way he liked it, the way he had taught her, the way she had touched him in countless dark dreams that both awed and tormented her. His hips answered her hand in counterpoint by thrusting into her grip, his cock hard and slick and straining, as if a coil within him was winding to an unbearable point, holding him suspended in agonised pleasure.

"Yes," she moaned, completely and utterly entranced by his ecstasy, fucking him with her fist. "That's it, Severus. I need to see you come..."

"Hermione," he gasped, his voice sweet and boyish and beautiful, her name both a question and a plea. His head fell back and his pale skin bloomed with heat and colour...

And he came, oh, gods, he came. The coil within him blasted apart in her hands, and he pressed his face against her neck and howled his climax into the room, his body tensing and releasing, tensing and releasing as her name was scored from his throat like the most perfect spell. "So good... always so good," he moaned, as the uncoiling left him innocently loose and spent against her body. She could feel his harsh, helpless breathing hot against her skin, and she stroked him with increasingly gentle hands as he shuddered. His fingers released their grip on her breast, and he stroked it soothingly, an apology.

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It was several moments before he could think coherently enough to realise she was probably cold, draped over the edge of the tub, holding him so lovingly. But he was so comfortable, lying against her shoulder, while she petted and fondled him and pressed kisses against his sweaty temple. Gradually, his head cleared from the glorious orgasm, and he wasn't sure if he should feel embarrassed for artlessly coming in the bath, or just *Evanesco* the water and try to locate all the bones she'd stolen from his body after jerking him off.

He sighed, at an utter loss for what to say. Finally, he settled on, "Well, that was a first for me."

He heard her laugh. "That makes two of us. You've been a lot of firsts for me, Severus." She stood, and faced him, mother-naked and beautiful. He saw some scars he didn't remember, and her nipples were larger and darker. His eyes riveted onto the tiny triangle of curls between her thighs, and he drank in the sight of her greedily. "Merlin, witch, I want you," he breathed, reaching for her.

Wordlessly, she held out her hands. "I think you'd better take me to bed, Severus."

She helped him out of the tub, and he meticulously dried her with the large, thick towels he'd bought for the cottage but never used. She delightedly returned the favour, making the simple act of drying their bodies a most delicious form of foreplay. They were silent as he took her hand and lead her from the bath toward his bedroom.

This room, so different from the black-on-black sterile bedroom of his London flat, was comfortable and inviting. As he walked toward the large, four-poster bed, he turned back to Hermione with a smile. "I hope this is a little better than the last bed we shared."

She returned the smile, and pressed against him, her arms snaking around his waist. "It's perfect." She looked up at him, her lovely amber eyes warmly affectionate. "The thought of you lying there is very alluring."

Severus cupped her face in his hands, and placed a gentle kiss on her lips. It was not their first wild, fiery kiss, nor was it the desperation-fueled kisses of their last encounter at the hotel in Shepherd's Bush. It was a tender declaration of his love and regard for her, and he cradled her reverently to his body as his lips moved against hers. She made a soft, helpless whimpering sound in her throat that he could actually taste in his mouth, and a rush of heat washed over his body.

He slipped his hand beneath her hair and caressed the back of her neck, deepening the kiss to a slow ride. He suckled against her mouth as if they had all the time in the world, as if their lives weren't endangered by the events of the day. Hermione seemed to sense this, and opened to him like a flower, her soft, warm mouth yielding to his tongue as he slid between her lips in the most decadent, languid of penetrations. He moaned against her mouth, and trembled as her hands caressed his body.

Reluctantly he eased away from her lips. He had to see her face, had to know what she was thinking. Looking down into her heavy-lidded eyes, regarding him with such trust and love, he was infused with the same feral, carnal madness that had incinerated him on that long ago Boxing Day evening.

"Oh, Hermione," he whispered softly. He had forgotten how sweet it was to want her.

She pulled him onto the bed with indecent haste, and he pressed her into the mattress as she kissed him wildly, turning his blood to fire. He was hard again, so ready for her, but he pushed his own desire away.

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Hermione closed her eyes as Severus pressed against her. His weight felt exquisitely overwhelming, and she lay back, allowing him to take her over. He eased down her body, each kiss a blessing and a reverence, each caress an act of worship. His palms slid over her breasts, cupping them as if they were precious things, too valuable to bruise, too venerated to mar. His tongue drew a trail of heat that scorched her nerve endings raw, making her feel as helpless and drugged as the first time he had laid her down and taken her.

"Severus, please," she whined, feeling lightheaded and outside herself, needing him.

He laughed against her flesh. "Patience, love," he purred, and his mouth, hot and wet and sinfully good, closed over her taut nipple. He had meticulously learned her body, and he had an excellent gift for recall. Every teasing lick, every hard, hungry suck, every playful bite left her writhing and moaning beneath him, begging him not to stop, *Oh, gods, don't stop.*

Perversely, he stilled and looked up at her. "I'll make you forget," he panted, his voice dark and ominous, his eyes like black fire. "There is no one but me. There is nothing but pleasure. Say it," he commanded, drawing her aching nipple in his mouth and sucking hard. He drew away. "Say, it," he repeated, his voice gentler. "No one but me."

"No one but you," she moaned, understanding. "Nothing but pleasure. Make me forget them. Make me feel good again, Severus."

"Oh, yes," he hissed, leaving her nipples hard and wet, his mouth moving down, past her navel. Each kiss carried its own sweet moan, so that they vibrated against her skin as he eased her thighs apart, his hands gently insistent, and she opened for him gratefully. Her reward was a smile the likes of which she'd never seen from him. In that moment, with a dimple teasing his cheek, and his black eyes full of love and fire, Severus was so beautiful Hermione almost swooned.

And then his thumbs parted her folds as delicately as he would a pair of lacewings, and his long tongue painted a fluttery, feathery pattern of pleasure over her swollen clit. She cried out in shock, her orgasm upon her so violently her wail of relief echoed in the room. He lapped at her like a thirsting man, burying his large nose into her cleft, driving his pointed tongue into her core over and over, then engulfing her clit, sucking it into his mouth. Hermione screamed as a second orgasm jolted her hips from the bed, and he held her down, as his long fingers slipped into her slick channel and found the perfect spot, attacking it ruthlessly.

He sucked and licked and tongued her, until she was insensate and trembling. Her hands were convulsively clutching at his hair, and he smiled against her skin. "I want more," he growled, slowly withdrawing his fingers from her drenched and pulsing core. Hermione watched as he licked her juices from each finger, his smouldering eyes never leaving hers, and she reached out to him, making a soft, mewling sound of need.

He happily indulged her, and entered her arms, his secure weight pressing his rock-hard erection against her belly. He filled her mouth with kisses that tasted of her essence; they intoxicated her with their heady languor. "Please," she whispered against his lips. Finally, finally, his spine curled inward as he entered her body with the slow, practiced ease of a trusted, faithful lover.

Hermione gasped at the delicious friction of being filled by him. He was large; she could feel every silky inch of him as he delved deeper and deeper. "Holy fuck," she whispered shakily.

Looking down at her with a smirk, he chuckled, "I couldn't agree more." He withdrew almost completely, clenching his teeth against the sensation. "Oh, gods, you feel so good," he moaned, and curled into her again, making her shudder with desire. He rose onto his forearms, letting his hips swing free, watching her with lust-glazed eyes, his mouth kiss-swollen and parted in an 'O' of pleasure. Together they watched his large cock, glazed with her juices as it penetrated, then withdrew in a slow dance.

They hissed and shivered as he pumped slowly, in and out, and he moaned with each breath. "So wet and tight. *Oh fuck* it's good," he rasped. Some of the drugged look left his eyes, and he kissed her gently. "No one but you, Hermione. No one has ever made me feel this good."

Hermione put her arms around him and drew him closer, reveling in the heat and scent of his hard, male body. "More, Severus," she whispered, feeling her own coil knotting within. "You know what I want," she mewed, frantically tugging his earlobe with her teeth. "You know what I like."

He looked down at her with something of his trademark sneer. "I know what you want. Didn't I always give you what you want?"

"Yesss..."

"Tell me," he entreated. He was looking at her with such erotic intensity she felt her core well with slick need. "I want to hear you say it. You know what it does to me to hear you say it."

His hips pumped faster, but not enough. Helplessly she groaned into his ear. "Faster. Harder. Oh, gods, Severus, don't tease me anymore! Fuck me hard and deep and fast, like you used to! Make me lose myself in you! Oh, gods, yes!"

He had obeyed her from her first urgent words, rising from her body like Poseidon on a wave of power, and roared his passion into her, holding nothing back. Hermione keened as his body drove into her, lightning fast, pounding into her ruthlessly. As he thrust, his magic rubbed and crackled against hers, sending sparks of unspeakable pleasure sizzling over her, inside her and around her, until she was primed, and ready and...

Molten heat erupted in the center of her core, taking her impossibly high, until her orgasm burst from her, sending her crashing against him, wailing in relief that was too long in the waiting, too intense in the making, too beautiful in its fulfillment. She screamed his name, and he dropped to her body, wrapping his arms around the small of her back, and she made a feral, carnal sound that proved too much for him.

"Oh, fuck," he panted, his eyes glassy and wild. "I'm coming, oh, gods, I'm... Hermione!" He thrust into her so hard she actually cramped, and roared as his climax took him over the edge, his beautiful voice hoarse as he cursed and drove his white-hot seed into her waiting womb. He shuddered against her body, and she kissed his face breathlessly, holding him tightly as their bodies grew boneless and sated. His spent cock slipped from her, and she hissed at the loss of him.

Finally, when he could at last catch his breath, he rolled over, dragging her into his arms. They lay in the waning light, their breathing slowing to a soft rush of sound. "Fucking hell, witch," he panted. "You're even more wonderful than I allowed myself to remember."

She didn't bother to hide her grin. He was gorgeously flushed, his pale skin tinted pink, his eyes inky pools of contentment. He looked, as Pansy might have said, well-fucked and glad of it.

Hermione snuggled against him, and he lazily pulled her closer. Both dropped off to sleep almost instantly.

It was sometime later when Severus opened his eyes. Long shadows across the floor showed the fading light, and he guessed that no more than two hours had passed since he and Hermione had drifted off in one another's arms. Beside him, she twitched, then woke with a start, her arms flailing in blind panic. Instantly his hands moved to stroke and soothe her. "It's alright. You're safe." He felt her slump in relief, and added, "Are you in any pain? Was I too rough?"

Hermione shook her head and relaxed against his shoulder. After a few silent moments, she said softly, "Why, Severus? Why did all of this happen?"

Puzzled, he looked down at her. "Why did what happen?"

She regarded him gently, without judgment, only love and concern. "Why did we lose in the first place? Why did the Dark Lord try to kill you, then restore you to favour?"

Severus mentally took a large breath. He had sworn to tell her the truth, and so he started from the beginning. He filled her in on all the events they didn't talk about during that last, terrible year, when the only thing that made him want to continue breathing were those few short weeks of their passionate affair.

He told her about Lily Evans and his pact with Dumbledore to keep Harry safe. He told of how the Dark Lord had become convinced these 'Deathly Hallows' were the key to his immortality, and how he'd tried to kill Severus to ensure his full ownership of what he had believed to be the Elder Wand.

"Ironically enough, it was Lupin who saved my life," he said. He almost laughed at the shocked look on Hermione's face. The animosity between himself and the werewolf was well-known...as far as it went. "Nymphadora was injured during the battle, and when all was lost, Lupin stole her away to the Shrieking Shack." Severus shrugged slightly. "He found me there, and managed to get me to St. Mungo's. Then he and his wife fled here to Ireland."

Severus sighed. "Once Harry Potter was killed and the rest of the Order dead or scattered, Voldemort magnanimously decided to let bygones be bygones. He lost confidence in the idea of the Elder Wand and its loyalties. He had trusted me once; it never occurred to him that I was anything other than a loyal Death Eater ready and

willing to die in his service.

"By that time, Malfoy had convinced Voldemort that I contributed to the success of the battle by betraying the Order and setting up the endgame. As a reward, he was prepared to offer a great boon upon my awakening. I regained consciousness almost three months later.

"I almost told Lucius exactly what he could do with his very high position," he said, absently twirling a damp curl that lay on Hermione's shoulder. "But I realised perhaps I was being given a second chance that had little to do with the brave new world." He gathered her in his arms. "I realised it might afford me the opportunity to do something decent, to somehow make up for the miserable failure I'd been for the Order...the miserable failure I'd been for us. I had done everything wrong." He sighed. "I was always the wrong man for the job. Dumbledore needed a spy; I agreed because I was too guilt-ridden to deny him. But I have never been a courageous man. In every moment of my life when it really counted, my fear paralysed me, and I was too afraid." The words fell from his lips heavy with regret. "I am a coward."

Hermione shook her head, her eyes soft with concern. "That's not true, Severus. Bravery has nothing to do with fear or the lack of it."

He nodded. "My head knows that, Hermione. My heart is another matter." He stroked her cheek, his affection for her swelling within. "I always admired you, you know. You were so brave, so strong. I think I was half in love with you already the night I walked into your wards, and they took me home."

With a gentle finger, he smoothed the faint line that threatened to etch a more permanent crease between her brows. "My brave little lioness, and I wasn't worthy of you, no matter how much I longed to be. I vowed that, if I could just survive long enough, I would become the wizard worthy of you, even though I held no hope you would ever want me again after what I did, the things I said."

"You must let them go, Severus," Hermione murmured, her soft breath warm against his chest. "What happened between us was sad, but I don't regret us. And at the time, I wasn't even thinking straight." Her voice was hollow. "All I could feel was fear. It was madness. They told me you were dead." She became still. "Then everyone in my world died, too."

"I didn't even know you were alive," he rasped. "I was sworn in as Foreign Minister two weeks before you were captured in Brighton. The first thing I tried to do covertly was to make sure you were placed with someone who wouldn't hurt you. I managed to find out Longbottom was already there, and..."

She rose from his arms and looked down at him. "What? You made sure they put me with Neville?" she said, her eyes filling. He nodded. "Thank you," she said brokenly, "for both our sakes."

He could barely meet her gaze. "I'd heard he was all but dead. I had hoped you two could support one another and keep each other alive while I worked to free you. By then, Azkaban was locked down tight and The Lestranges were using it as their own personal playground." He felt bile rise in his throat. "I managed to get them transferred to the continent, but not before they..."

"Shh," she said gently, and placed her fingers over his mouth. "I survived, didn't I? And I suspect I wouldn't have, but for all that you did."

"It wasn't enough," he replied bitterly.

She kissed him, and pulled at him until he was lying against her. He nuzzled against the soft pillow of her breast, and she stroked his hair. "It was everything," she whispered against his forehead.

He placed a possessive kiss against her breast, and pressed his hand against her flat stomach. "One day, I will put my seed in your belly, and you will kindle again." His voice trembled with emotion, but he didn't care. "And I will protect our child with my life, and see that he is born in a world without fear. And he will know how brave and beautiful and strong his mother is, and how much his father loves her."

Hermione placed her hand over his. "And he will be beautiful like his father, and strong and full of magic, and his mother will love him so..."

He was kissing her again, coaxing her body to renew its desire, and soon they were once again on fire, sparking with passion and magic and hope, and they made love with sweet, straining urgency, whispering their love for one another, and their promise to never be separated again.

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Over breakfast the next morning, he reluctantly brought up the need to plan their next move. "Hermione, we have to leave the country as soon as possible. They'll start looking for us today, if they haven't started already."

To his relief, she nodded. "Yes, I know. I'm ready to go, Severus. I've gotten everything I need here." She gazed at him with love in her eyes. "But first we have one stop to make."

He shook his head decidedly. "Hermione, no. We already packed your flat, picked up Phineas and those odds and ends you said were the most important..."

"Yes, but there is still one important thing left to be done." Strength and power seemed to flow from her, making his heart pound. "And then I'll go wherever you wish to take me." She reached for his hand and kissed it firmly. "I'm yours now, and you're mine."

He sighed in relief, squeezing her hand. "Thank you."

## Chapter Thirteen

*Chapter 14 of 14*

In a world where Lord Voldemort defeated Harry Potter and the Order, the Minister for Magic makes Hermione Granger an offer she cannot refuse - become a spokesperson for the new regime, or rot in prison. But Hermione has her own, dangerous agenda. Can she complete her appointed task without running afoul of the law, or the man she despises most - Severus Snape?

Written by stgulik and Teddy Radiator for Droxy. This story was originally commissioned as a TPP Every Flavour Auction gift, but was actually written for the 2012 Summer LJ het\_bigbang fest.

Lucius looked up from the paperwork on his desk as his secretary escorted Auror Philip Jupiter into his office. The older man greeted Lucius with a perfunctory bow. "Excellency."

"Good morning, Auror Jupiter. Your office said you wanted an appointment at the earliest. I gather this is a matter of extreme urgency. Do sit down." He waved at one of the less comfortable guest chairs.

The older man sat down rather stiffly, glancing around the palatial suite as if he'd rather be anywhere else. He spoke without preamble. "I'm afraid we have bad news concerning Rodolphus and Rastaban Lestranger."

"Oh?" Lucius sighed. "I suppose my newly-sworn Probation Officers have been a bit heavy-handed with their charge, eh?"

"I wouldn't know about that, sir. I'm here to inform you the Lestrangers are dead."

"*What?*" Lucius stood abruptly, knocking over a teacup. "When did this happen?"

"Some time yesterday, sir." The Auror settled back in his seat and drew a parchment from his robes. "We received a report at 4:00 p.m. yesterday that Parolee Hermione Granger had not shown up to work and was presumed missing. Her former Parole Officer stated she had not seen the parolee all day, and the current Parole Officers could not be reached. At 6:00 p.m. we visited her flat at 11B Marmont Mews and found signs of forced entry. We immediately noticed the premises were not secured, and *Homenum Revelio* revealed no living persons in the residence."

Lucius made an impatient gesture, but the Auror simply trained a jade eye on the Minister. Lucius sat back down and controlled his temper with an effort. There would be no hastening Jupiter in the recitation of his report.

"We entered the premises and noticed evidence of physical disturbance. The entire premises had been ransacked. Back-up teams began a sweep of the building. When we reached the cellar, we found two bodies on the floor, dead. They were subsequently identified as Rabastan Lestranger and Rodolphus Lestranger."

Lucius sat back and shook his head incredulously. "How in Merlin's name did they die?" He knew the Lestrangers to be the toughest and most ruthless of wizards. That they could both be dead...

Jupiter consulted his notes. "It appears that they murdered one another by casting simultaneous Killing Curses. *Priori Incantatum* shows the last spell cast by both victims' wands was *Avada*." He folded his notes and returned them to his pocket. "As of this morning, there has been no sign of the parolee. Her Trace is missing, suggesting she may be a fugitive. As you know, the Trace would have stayed in effect even if she were dead. No arrests have been made. We will continue to investigate and search for the missing parolee."

Lucius frowned. "Thank you, Auror Jupiter. Please keep this office apprised."

Soon after the Auror took his leave, Lucius stood, crossed to his liquor cabinet and poured himself a large whisky, downing it quickly before pouring another. He sat down at his desk, and tried to get his head around the morning's revelations.

He did not, could not believe the two Lestranger brothers had killed each other, even out of some perverse need to duel over the witch. Rabastan and Rodolphus were Death Eaters and hard men, but they were from a venerable family line. A tradition of preservation had always been drilled into the Lestranger children from birth: one never spilled family blood...only other's.

And on top of it all, there was Granger, gone missing. Did she manage to murder her Parole Officers and escape on her own? Highly doubtful. For one thing, it was impossible for her to have removed the Trace herself. And it was inconceivable she could have overwhelmed and killed two such dangerous wizards. No, she couldn't have done it...or at least, not alone. Someone had to have helped her. Only a very clever and formidable wizard could have gotten the drop on Rab and Dolph Lestranger...and there was only one wizard close enough to Granger who would bother to. Severus.

He stopped and idly picked up the letter he'd found on the floor of his office first thing that morning in front of the Floo.

*Dear Lucius:*

*I quit.*

*Good luck with the Ukraine.*

S.S.

Lucius closed his eyes. "Godsdammit," he swore softly, under his breath. "This is jolly inconvenient."

He looked down at his left arm and considered his Dark Mark. It had not been activated in over a year; the Dark Lord preferred other methods of communication now. He could have Severus' head on a platter in a matter of hours; all that was needed were a few whispered words and his wand stroking the Mark.

Lucius pondered the repercussions of that. If he informed the Dark Lord of Severus' defection with Granger...for he was now certain that was exactly what had happened...how much of the blame for the debacle would be visited on his own head?

He thought about Granger. Too clever for her own good, she was. Cunning, secretive, willing to fight dirty... He snorted. Merlin, he might as well be describing Severus. Perhaps the two deserved one another.

Lucius had always been rather fond of Severus, though fuck knew why; the man had always been more trouble than he was worth. But he had saved Draco's life during those dark moments in the days before their final victory. He owed Severus, but being the consummate Slytherin, Severus had never called in his debt. Unless, of course, he was tacitly calling it in now.

Lucius' mouth twisted into an ironic smirk. Even though he saw Severus every day, in his mind, he was still the same, skinny little black-eyed oik skulking around the Slytherin Common Room. Well, somehow, that skinny little black-eyed oik had got the drop on both Lestrangers - a feat not to be taken lightly. It spoke of someone who felt he had little to lose. That kind of wizard could be dangerous if cornered.

*But then, so can I,* he thought.

Making his decision, Lucius strode to the Floo to summon press secretaries and assistants. There were official reports to alter, press releases to write and state funeral services to arrange.

For this crime, Severus Snape was as good as dead; so was Granger. The Ministry would merely report their obituaries a little prematurely.

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November 20, 2000

*From the Office of the Minister for Magic, The Honourable Gentleman Lucius Malfoy, Order of Voldemort, First Class:*

### **Ministry Officials Involved in Fatal Accident**

*The Ministry of Magic is sad to report that, during an important meeting regarding the upcoming foreign summit of the European Magical Community, Foreign Minister Severus Tobias Snape (OoV, 2nd CI) and Muggleborn Liaison Ambassador Hermione Jean Granger were involved in a fatal Splinching during a multi-Apparation accident. Mr. Snape was 40; Miss Granger was 21.*

*"I am simply devastated not only to have lost one of my oldest and dearest friends, but also a young witch cut down in the very bloom of youth," said Lucius Malfoy, Minister for Magic. "Apparition is very exact magic, and should not be attempted by more than three people at a time. Let this be a lesson to us all."*

*The foreign minister, formerly Headmaster at the former Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, was instrumental in the defeat of The-Boy-Who-Didn't-Live. Miss Granger, a former leader of the failed rebellion, had performed two years of community service before joining the Ministry as the Public Relations Liaison Ambassador. Mr. Snape and Miss Granger left no surviving relatives.*

*A memorial fund in their names has been established, and all donations should be made via Gringotts account to the Pureblood Orphans of the Rebellion Education Legacy, and sent to the Department of the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, Ministry of Magic, London.*

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November 20, 2000

The Daily Prophet, Page 10, Column 4:

### **Ministry Officials Involved in Fatal Hunting Accident**

*The Azkaban Office of the Warden reported today that two Azkaban Detention Officers died while on holiday. Rabastan Lestrangle and Rodolphus Lestrangle were killed in what Aurors have determined was a "tragic accident" during a hunting trip in Luxembourg. Rodolphus Lestrangle is survived by his former wife, Bellatrix Black Lestrangle, sister-in-law of Minister for Magic Lucius Malfoy. The family was not available for comment.*

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Draco used his wand to slice through the tape that crisscrossed the door to Hermione's flat. The door opened, but neither he nor Pansy moved to enter the flat. After several seconds, Draco risked a glance at his former fiancée. She looked quickly away, unable to meet his eyes.

"Truth to tell, Pans, I can't bear the thought of doing this," Draco said quietly, and waited for her derisory laughter.

To his surprise, a warm hand landed gently on his shoulder. "I'm not thrilled about it, either, but such a thing ought to be done by ... people close to her." She tried a smile, but it didn't quite seem to make the cut. "Come on. The sooner we start, the sooner it's done."

He nodded, and together they entered Hermione's flat. Draco grimaced. "Merlin, you'd think they would have tidied the place up! It's not right the way they've left it."

Pansy looked around dispassionately. "Yeah, well, the Aurors aren't exactly known for their housekeeping skills, are they?" She headed for the bedroom. "I'm going to start in here. I'll help you with the bigger stuff."

For several moments, they set to their task, enlarging boxes, packing up the many items Hermione had managed to amass during her short time in the flat. Pansy came out of the bedroom with four shrunken boxes.

"I guess we can send these to charity."

"What is it?"

"Clothes, shoes, knickers. Personal effects. Nothing special." She snorted. "Granger wasn't exactly the last word in fashion. I hate to inflict them on the poor, but it seems a shame to put them to waste."

Draco nodded. "I've finished in the kitchen, so all that's left is the front room."

They worked in companionable silence for several minutes. Pansy hefted a bust of Nimue. "Merlin, what on earth possessed her to buy this piece of tat? She might have been the so-called smartest witch of her age, but her taste in decor was shite."

"Funny, that's just what I told her." He remembered the day at the auction when she entreated him to buy the bust, and for a moment he thought he might cry. Knowing that showing any sort of emotion around Pansy would be fatal, he cleared his throat. "She loved her bric-a-brac, didn't she? She told me it was because she'd lost everything right before the war. She said she just wanted to feel like a normal witch again, surrounded by the things she loved." Draco's voice did break then, and he looked away. "She was alright for a Mudb..." He stopped, and looked down at the bust of Nimue. "For a Muggleborn."

Pansy nodded. "Yeah, she was." She picked up a stack of books. "Come on, Draco, let's finish up. This place is giving me the heebie jeebies."

"Yeah, sure," he said, unsmiling, and bent to his task once more.

Several moments passed. "Huh. That's odd," Pansy said.

"What is?" Draco asked. He looked up to see Pansy looking around the flat with a distracted frown.

"Well, call me mad, but I'm sure some stuff is missing." Pansy pointed to a stack of books on a shelf. "I'm positive she had these between these two heavy metal bookends." She held her hands out to describe them. "They were these huge ugly brass things." She looked around thoughtfully. "And I'm sure she had a painting here as well." She pointed to a spot on the floor. Frowning, she looked around. "You know, I'm positive some of her stuff has been taken."

Draco shrugged; he had no idea whether anything was missing, nor did he care. "Maybe someone broke in," he suggested dubiously. Neither of them cared to pursue that line of thought. The Aurory tape had been in place when they arrived. Accusing Aurors of theft would be akin to accusing the Dark Lord of flipping Pygmy Puffs over a rainbow, and would probably result in very similar injuries.

They quickly finished their unhappy task, and when they were done they shrank down the boxes for transport. Taking one last look around the empty flat, Draco ushered Pansy out and closed the door behind them with a sigh.

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Severus and Hermione stood together on a hillside overlooking Muggle Brighton, breathing in the cold evening air. Behind them stood the tangled, wooded area that bordered the back end of the old Droxxell estate. Just in front of that stand of trees...according to Hermione...was the place they sought, a place Severus had only ever touched the edges of with his Wizarding senses but had never laid eyes on.

Only one thing remained to be done. Hermione turned away from the view. "Are you ready to see it at last?" she asked.

"Yes, I'm ready," Severus replied. He reached in his sleeve and took out his own wand and handed it to her. "I imagine you'll be needing a proper wand for this."



She smiled at him tenderly. "You're right." Turning toward the trees, she drew in a deep breath and looked ahead, holding Severus' wand aloft. He stared ahead, too, not wanting to miss a thing.

At the whispered incantation, he felt a rush of whispery noise and a pressure on his eardrums, and the first of the wards fell away. Then the rest seemed to tumble down and the structure was revealed to his eyes at last.

It was a storybook castle...or rather, a model of one.

The folly was a square structure of granite blocks, approximately twenty-five feet on each side, and stood perhaps three stories tall. Miniature towers flanked all four corners, dotted with thin, arrow-slit windows and topped with intricate stone crenellations.

Weeds and saplings had grown around the castle in the two years since Hermione had cast her repellent spells here, but Severus thought he could see a shallow ditch that ran in a circle about the folly...an overgrown moat...with a small foot bridge before the wooden front door.

Still holding Hermione's hand, Severus levitated the trunk they had brought with them, and picked his way over the bridge rather than wade through the weeds on either side. The closed door was dark, weathered wood ostentatiously decorated with metal studs in the shape of a *D*. Above the door was a coat of arms done in the same grey stone.

"It's ... it's ghastly," murmured Severus.

"Oh, how unfair," Hermione giggled. "I camped here for a few nights and the place really grew on me."

He smirked. "It has a very sad story, you know."

"I know. I heard about it in this little tea room at the foot of the hill."

"Ah, yes, the tea room. I see I wasn't the only one fall under the spell of Mrs. Hope's charms, then."

Hermione's tone was wistful. "It was her scones I fell for. She gave me her leftovers at night. I think I might have starved if she hadn't helped me out."

Severus coaxed the rusty hinges to move creakily with a whispered charm. Inside, he found a plain stone floor and unfinished, bare walls. There was no ceiling above; the structure was hollow. The moonlight peeking in the tiny upper windows gave them just enough light to see by. Muttering a quick *Lumos*, Hermione led him to a shadowy corner, and uncovered a small rucksack hidden beneath bracken. She picked it up by the strap, shook some leaves off, then reached in and removed what looked like the largest and heaviest of the pieces. It was round and open at one end, like a wide-mouth vase. Thick, enameled black vines twisted across its face.

"I was shocked to find this in my pack the day I fled Hogwarts," she told him. "I had no idea what to make of it at first. Then tucked inside, I found a note explaining it was a piece of a larger invention, a weapon Professor Dumbledore had created when he was young. A weapon that could bring down Lord Voldemort himself."

Hermione frowned. "The note asked me to search out the other pieces from the most venerable of witnesses. That was all it said...'the most venerable of witnesses.' I had no idea what it meant. Only after I landed in prison did I have time to really think about it, and I realised...the venerable witnesses were the portraits of headmasters that lined Dumbledore's office. They had borne witness to everything he did.

"By then I'd met a thief in prison who had found and pawned some of my old possessions. He gave me a lead on the whereabouts of one of the headmaster portraits...Phineas Nigellus Black."

Hermione told Severus about her previous association with the curmudgeonly portrait, and how, after they were reunited, they put aside their differences to find the remaining dual portraits, as well as the pieces they guarded. "There have been days when Dumbledore's mission was the only thing that kept me going," she whispered. "Spokeswitch for the Ministry ..." she hitched a breath. "Oh, Severus, I sold out Muggleborns and half-bloods, all to buy me time to search. I pray that someday it will all be worth it."

"It will," he stated emphatically, his voice strong with conviction. "We'll make it so." Her smile of love and trust was her answer.

Soberly, Severus and Hermione contemplated the piece's exotic beauty, and the high price that had been paid in a quest to bring its fellow pieces back together again.

He put his hand on her shoulder. "Hermione," he told her soberly, "We have to leave England now, as soon as we finish here. I'm afraid there's no time to search out this fifth piece."

She nodded wearily. "Yes, I know. But I will come back..." she amended herself when she caught the look in his eye. She took his hand. *We* will come back, and finish what we started, and we'll find the fifth piece someday."

"Together," he finished.

She smiled. "Yes."

As Hermione opened the trunk to place the large piece with its companions, Severus felt a sudden, inexplicable warmth, like a small sun hovering near him. He glanced around. "Have you taken all your wards down?" he asked.

Hermione nodded. "I dropped them all before the folly appeared. Why?"

He looked around uneasily. "I'm not sure." He held himself still, trying to pinpoint the sudden change, but could sense nothing untoward. Hermione certainly seemed oblivious as she contemplated the piece that had started her on her journey.

"Headmaster Everard told me something important when we met. See, each piece is inlaid with black enamel on brass." She softly trailed a finger along the beautiful twisting vines, then reached inside the trunk and brought out a smaller piece. "But whenever two of them come within a few inches of each other..."

She demonstrated, and Severus watched in amazement as the vines on the face of each piece began to writhe and turn about themselves, finally resolving into what looked like script. He rubbed at his chest absently, trying to stifle the growing sensation of intense heat.

To distract himself, he ran a finger along the vines. "I don't recognize the language," he said finally, barely able to keep the strain from his voice. He was having difficulty breathing, as if he'd been exerting himself.

"It's a cuneiform variation, very similar to the runes we learned in school, but the vines connect the letters like cursive," she replied, watching the forms shift and writhe on the metal cylinders. "Every time a new piece came in contact, the letters resolved a little further. It will probably take all five pieces in order to finally read the whole thing." She sighed in frustration. "I've been studying it at home, and I think the words are instructions for putting together the device and using it. But I have no hope of reading the instructions...of finishing Dumbledore's mission for me...without that fifth piece...Severus, what in Merlin's name is wrong?"

Severus was gasping now and clutching his chest. His skin felt as if it was on fire, and he was sweating. The small sun had now turned into a blazing inferno pressing against his body. "Heat..." he gasped, struggling to breathe against the stupendous heat that was roasting him alive. "Burns... Something's wrong..."

His knees buckled, his body contorting with the burning pain. Hermione supported him as he collapsed; her voice shook. "Is it...is it your Dark Mark?" she asked frantically. She looked around. "Shall I try to Apparate us..."

"No!" He tore at his coat front, seeking the source of the branding heat, and pulled his hand away with a curse. "It's my pin!" he hissed.

Hermione stared at him, confusion and fear warring in her expression. "Pin? Severus, what are you..." She jumped as he clutched his chest, then yanked his hand away with a cry. "Severus, talk to me...you're frightening me!"

"Bloody hell!" Severus flung his cloak from his shoulders. With a terse bark of pain, he plucked the ornate silver pin from his chest. "Fucking thing!" he spat, and flung the pin away; it felt as if it had been superheated. Immediately, the pain abated, and he took a deep breath.

To their amazement, instead of falling onto the ground, the pin flew through the air and stuck solidly to the smaller brass piece as though magnetized.

Stunned, he and Hermione watched, rapt, as the tiny face of Medusa on the cameo came to life. The serpents that made up her hair began to stretch and curl, writhing on the flat surface until they resembled the twisting black vines on the other pieces.

Hermione's eyes widened, and she gingerly touched the cameo with one wary finger. "It's the fifth piece! It has to be. I've seen it before...you were wearing it on your robes the night of the Ministry ball. Oh, Severus," she breathed. "Trust you to..." She shook her head. "How on earth did you come to be the owner of the last piece? Where did you get it?"

"Can't you guess? From Dumbledore," he murmured, equally surprised. "It was around Christmas, right before the end. Before the Forest of Dean." Their eyes met in mutual understanding. "His portrait directed me to where he had stored it in his office, and he gave it to me as a present. He said it was an heirloom, and he wanted me to have it. 'Keep it close at all times,' he said. So I did. I don't normally take to jewelry, but I tend to wear this all the time...as a memento, I suppose.

"That crafty old poof," he grumbled. "He can't even give a bloody Christmas gift without it being a plan within a plan."

Hermione's laughter was as much in relief as it was mirth. "I'll even bet he told you to be on the lookout for 'pumpkin pasties,' didn't he?"

His eyes flew open wide. "Yes! I thought the old fool had completely gone mad! He told me the pin was always good for a few pumpkin pasties." He rolled his eyes. "I got it in my head that the pin somehow triggered the house-elves to bring me sweets." He grimaced at her barely concealed smile. "Wonderful. I feel like a complete idiot now."

She shook her head. "You mean you never tested your theory?"

He made a face. "Merlin, no! I hate pumpkin pasties." Hermione's laughter was beautiful to hear after so many laughter-less years, and he ruefully chuckled with her.

She couldn't take her eyes off the exquisitely-wrought pin. "So," she continued in a more thoughtful tone, "Dumbledore gave you the pin months before Professor McGonagall put the piece in my rucksack, the night of the Battle of Hogwarts. Maybe Dumbledore intended you to reassemble the device yourself after he and McGonagall put the pieces in the care of the dual portraits. But then you fled the school, and the night Harry died and Hogwarts was about to fall, he had no way to give you the remaining piece in his office, nor any instructions." She looked wistful. "So I was drafted for the job instead."

He experimentally levitated the pieces apart, and the silver pin drifted upward toward his waiting hand; it was cool to the touch again. He studied the innocuous pin sitting benignly in his palm. Thoughtfully, he said, "Seeing as we don't really know what this 'weapon' does once it's assembled, I think it would be wise to keep the pieces separate until we're more settled."

Hermione nodded. She, too, could not tear her gaze from the pin. "I know I'd feel better if we were in a safer place when we decide to find out what happens." She tried a shaky smile. "I'd rather you didn't spontaneously combust any time soon."

Severus chuckled darkly. "I'd rather I didn't as well, unless, of course, it's in bed with you." Her flush of pleasure was a joyful thing, and he tried not to smirk as he made a production of fastening the pin on his coat.

Now that it had been recognised for what it was, the pin seemed perfectly happy to ride on his breast without further incident. It gleamed softly in the waning light, looking no more dangerous than any other piece of jewelry. *Damn Dumbledore. He could have at least pretended to trust me with yet another of his secrets, instead of having it burn me alive at the proper moment...*

They packed the other pieces and left the folly, walking carefully back across the bridge, their trunk following obediently.

"Now what?" she asked somewhat rhetorically.

He took her hand as they made their way back down the steep slope. "Now we plan. We learn, we decipher the writing, and one day, we'll return. One day, we'll come back here for good, and our children will be free."

They turned back as one and looked back at the folly, standing stark and lonely in the moonlight. Severus thought it tragic that it had been built for a woman who had never understood or appreciated its significance. At one time, he knew exactly how it felt. *Droxy, I'm honestly sorry she didn't love you back. But she didn't deserve you. She didn't know what she had...*

Hermione rose on tiptoe and gently kissed his cold lips. "No, but I do," she whispered, and he realised he'd spoken aloud.

Looking down into her intelligent eyes, Severus mused, "After the war, Lucius told me we were making history." He held up her tiny hand, wrapped trustingly in his, and kissed it; a pledge and a vow. "We will make the real history, Hermione. This isn't over by any means."

Severus took one last look at the Folly, and took a deep breath of England. He was renewed with life and purpose, and his heart pounded with excitement. Gods, he was glad to be alive. He looked into the eyes of the woman he loved, grasped her hand more firmly, and together they disappeared, leaving Droxy's Folly silent and waiting under the light of the harvest moon.

~fin

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#### Authors' Notes:

TeddyRadiator: In January 2010, Droxy won a TPP Every Flavour Auction for a fic from me. I spent the last eighteen months feeling so guilty that I could not get this story written - but the truth was it was just waiting for stgulik as well. Events always conspired to keep this fic from coming together, until the fearless and resourceful stgulik said, "Let's write it together." Never have I had so much fun writing a fic, nor felt so good about one as well.

Droxy deserves the best. She is a catalyst, a cosplayer, a nurturer of all things SSHG, and above all, a great friend. This story is dedicated to her prompt, her presence, and her patience.

I would like to thank stgulik for this great ride - I had the time of my life, as I always do when we work together. I would also like to thank toblass for her sterling beta work - without her, this story would not be here. And I would like to thank DMuse, who simply waited for me to get it through my thick skull that this story would be written when it was time to write it.

Here is Droxy's original prompt. It took a long time to get here, but it's right on time:

*"Voldemort won and understands that a content population is easier to govern, even if he can't love. His administration is not stupid; they made their enemies loyal to*

*Voldemort. However you see this loyalty program implemented, or managed, HG isn't loyal, but acts loyal. How has she avoided detection and why isn't she impacted by the loyalty scheme? Harry is dead.*

*Provide a "happy ending" for SS and HG in this AU environment. I want UST that makes readers scream at their monitors and demand your head on a platter. Resolve the UST with at least a hot kiss. Also, I want dueling and seductive dialog.*

*HG has a job equal to her brains (no prostitute or helpless!HG). SS and HG don't work in the same organization.*

*Voldemort trusts and values SS a great deal, and orders SS to "get a life". What did SS do to have Voldemort intervene? Was he mopey, lonely? hexing Death Eaters?*

*How do SS/HG fall in love, resolve the loyalty situation, and growing UST? No one overthrows or kills Voldemort, you can't change the loyalty scheme."*

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stgulik: Last spring, Teddy was lamenting the fact she hadn't written Droxy's prompts into a story yet. We marveled at how tough they were to put together. Voldemort lives and the populace is (beginning to be) loyal to him, yet Severus and Hermione live HEA? How could that possibly happen? I finally found a loophole: they wind up leaving England. But not to run away - to regroup so they can fight another day. And that's when the story began to take shape.

The working title was "Droxy's Folly" because we were semi-serious that it was utter folly to believe poor Droxy would ever have her prompts realized. Then one day, we were about three chapters in, and things were actually taking shape, and Teddy said, "Did you know there is actually such a thing as a folly?" One trip to Wikipedia later, we knew we had to create a folly to hide Hermione's first piece in. I think it became a character in its own right.

Thank you, Teddy, for believing I could write and for putting up with my mad need for color-coded To-Do lists. Special thanks to toblax for your valuable suggestions and your eye for detail and continuity. We couldn't have done without you!

A gifted artist, slr2moons, created a luminous, amazing illustration for this chapter of Droxy's Folly as her entry in the lj het\_bigbang challenge! Readers, please go and admire Droxy's Folly, by slr2moons, and leave her a comment if you would.