

Security Breach

by reader76

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The Plea

Chapter 1 of 10

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A/N: I don't own anything you recognize.

Hermione Granger looked up to see the stylish figure of Astoria Malfoy in her doorway. Hermione had been surprised when her friend had requested a meeting in her office. Normally, they met over lunch to visit; they also saw each other frequently at charitable events. The two women had developed a close relationship due to their mutual interest in helping those in need. However, Astoria almost never came to Hermione's place of business. Hermione could only remember her friend visiting her office once in their eight year friendship; she had come to see the place right after Hermione had set up her practice.

Hermione frowned upon getting a closer look at Astoria. The normally poised witch was clearly fretting over something. Her pretty face lacked its normal temperate smile; her mouth was drawn tight and her brow was pinched with worry. To an outsider, these slight alterations in her demeanor might not set off alarm bells; however, Hermione knew Astoria better than most.

"Astoria, please come in and have a seat. Tell me what's wrong."

Astoria took a deep breath to calm herself before turning to her friend. "Draco is in trouble, Hermione. We need your help."

Hermione looked confused. "What's happened? Why isn't Draco here himself?"

"He's been arrested." Tears shone in Astoria's eyes.

"What are the charges?"

"Violation of the International Statute for Secrecy," she stated, swallowing hard. Hermione could tell that Astoria was about to cry. "He has been accused of risking exposure of our world to the Muggles on a global scale. He is facing significant prison time."

"Do you know more specifically what they say he has done?"

"I do not know the details. Draco will not explain to me what happened. He says he is worried I could be implicated. But I know he did not intend any harm to anyone."

"The charges state that he has been selling potions to the Muggle world, potentially endangering Muggles and risking exposure of magic. He needs an advocate,

Hermione. You are the best advocate in England. Please, Hermione, I know you two have an unpleasant history. However, what they are accusing him of, it simply cannot be the case. Draco has changed. He has done tremendous things for the rebuilding effort, both for wizards and Muggles. There is no way he would risk that. I would stake my life on it. Please, Hermione. Help him. If not for him, do it for Scorpius and me." Astoria was barely holding it together. Her upbringing did not encourage witches to show weakness and emotion in public; Hermione could see the pain in her damp eyes.

"Astoria, I will go speak with Draco. I need to hear his side of the story before I take the case. These charges sound very serious, but I will hear what he has to say, and then I will decide if I can help."

"Thank you, Hermione. He is being held at the Ministry."

Hermione pulled a form from her desk. "Sign this please. It states that you consulted me about representing you and your husband in this matter. It will ensure that anything you have told me is protected information."

Astoria nodded. She signed the form and then stood and left the office.

Hermione looked at her calendar. She asked her assistant to cancel her afternoon appointments, and then she gathered up her bag and headed to the Ministry.

To say Draco Malfoy was shocked to see Hermione Granger was an understatement. When they had told him that his advocate had arrived, he was sure that his father had sent the Malfoy's ancient advocate. He had represented the family for longer than Draco had been alive. He and Hermione were cordial these days; she was one of Astoria's closest friends. But the relationship was still formal and stilted. Some wounds took longer to heal than others. Draco knew she was a stellar advocate, probably the best out there. He was just surprised she would be willing to help him. However, he knew that if he could get her to listen to him, she would understand his actions and would defend him vigorously. And if that wasn't enough, then perhaps she would be willing to represent him in an effort to protect his accomplices.

When they were alone in the meeting room, she turned on him coldly. "Malfoy, I'm here as a favor to Astoria. You've got five minutes. Tell me why I shouldn't storm out of here and leave you here to rot. Selling potions to unsuspecting Muggles? Do you know the pain this is causing your wife? She's terrified that her son is going to grow up without a father. Really, Malfoy, have you learned nothing from your father's mistakes? Or are you going to try and tell me you are innocent?" Her face was flashing with anger.

Draco remained calm despite her attack on him as a husband and a father. He needed her to listen, so losing his temper would be extremely counter-productive. And lying to her would just be foolish. "No, Granger, I am not. Technically, I am guilty of the charges, at least, partially. However, there was no malice, and I assure you, nobody was hurt, wizard or Muggle. In fact, thousands, perhaps millions of Muggle lives have been saved or improved by our actions. Proper precautions were taken to avoid exposure. We were found out by an employee of mine who panicked and reported us without understanding the whole story."

She had calmed down a little. She was still agitated, but he could tell that she was intrigued. But Hermione Granger was not known for letting people off the hook easily. "Oh, so the regal Draco Malfoy is just above the law. You just know better than everyone else. Silly things like hundreds of years of history don't mean anything to you." Much to Hermione's surprise, Draco burst out laughing. "What?" she barked at him.

"Do you not see the irony in you lecturing me on tradition?" Draco straightened and composed himself. "I'm sorry, Granger. It just struck me as funny. Look, we need your help. I will be happy to tell you the whole story. I think this a case you will find that you want to take."

"Why do you keep saying we? Stop appealing to me as Astoria's friend. Don't use your wife and son in that way. I agreed to meet with you as a favor to her, but I'm here as an advocate. If I think you deserve better than the charges, I'll fight for you."

"I am not appealing to you on Astoria's behalf. Did she not tell you that there were three parties charged?"

"No. Who else is charged?" Draco's eyes lit up. This was going to win her over. There was no question.

"Well, one of the other defendants is a Squib scientist who helped us with the testing. You've never met her." She looked unimpressed. *Just wait, Granger*, he thought, *I haven't played my trump card yet.*

"And the third?" Hermione was clearly growing impatient.

Draco looked at Hermione with false indifference. "Severus Snape."

"Why, of all the dirty, low-down, underhanded stunts, Draco Malfoy! How dare you speak ill of the dead! How dare you sully that man's memory! You are still a bastard, Malfoy!"

Hermione leaped to her feet to storm out of the room; in her fury, she had forgotten that the door was locked.

Draco raised his hand casually and called, "Guard!"

A guard opened the door. Draco stated, "Advocate Granger would like to meet with the other two defendants as well."

"Very well, Mr. Malfoy, I will take you back to your holding cell. Advocate Granger, would you prefer to meet with Miss Malfoy or Mr. Snape first?"

Upon his words, Hermione Granger nearly crumpled to the ground in shock. She lowered herself into the chair across from Draco and gathered her shattered composure. She looked back at Draco, obviously bewildered. Then she turned to the guard. "Mr. Snape, sir. However, it seems I need a little more time to speak with my client here before I talk to the other defendants." She pulled a form similar to the one that Astoria had signed from her bag and slid it over to Draco. She handed him a pen; he signed the form after a quick scan of its contents.

Draco's Story

Chapter 2 of 10

Draco shares his version of the events leading up to his arrest.

A/N: Nothing you recognize belongs to me.

I've located a beta for this story now. I just want to say thanks to him for helping me break this long narrative into something more readable.

"Well, Draco, you have my attention. I'm going to need to hear your story, but first, I have a few questions."

"Of course you do, Granger." Draco's tone was neutral, but his eyes showed a spark of amusement.

"Professor Snape is alive? How did that happen? And you've been secretly working with him all this time?" Hermione was rambling and she knew it, but she was still reeling a bit from the shock.

Draco smiled and said, "With the help of Dumbledore's Phoenix and a Portkey to the Manor, Severus survived Nagini's bite. For the past twelve years, he has been living in our guest house and performing innovative potions research. Malfoy Industries has funded him; both he and the company have profited greatly from the partnership."

"Okay, then who is Ms. Malfoy? Surely he's not talking about your mother?"

Draco sighed and spoke, "This is not my story to tell, but you need to understand the basics before talking to Lyra."

He stopped for a moment and looked away from Hermione. She let him collect himself. Whatever he was about to tell her was clearly a difficult subject for him to address.

"Lyra is my sister. She is five years older than I am." He paused for a moment. Hermione could see he wasn't sure how to proceed.

"I don't understand, Draco. Was she sent to Beauxbatons? How did I not know this?"

"No, Hermione, she didn't go to Beauxbatons. She is a Squib. Mother, Father and I all love her dearly; however, they did not really know the best way to care for her when they realized she did not have magic. They did their best. She was educated in one of the top Muggle schools in England. Father encouraged her to attend university overseas for her safety."

"So he sent her away? How convenient."

"Father was starting to fear that Voldemort might return. Look, Granger, my parents made some very bad decisions. But do not," he said icily, "imply that they were trying to dispose of my sister." He paused to regain his composure.

"She returned after the war and finished her education in England. She was trained as a research scientist. She has been working for Malfoy Industries for several years."

"Malfoy, I must say, you make no sense. You have a sister that is a Squib, and you had the nerve to call me a Mudblood? You do realize that her challenges were probably similar to mine, right? Going to school in a world her family didn't understand, never quite fitting in either place?"

"Granger, can we cut the Gryffindor melodrama? I was a spoiled prat. Is that what you want to hear? I was a rotten, immature little punk who thought I was better than everyone else. I have a sister whom I adore who was sent away because of her lack of magic. I was forbidden to speak about her to anyone for fear people would hurt her. Then there you were, and you HAD magic, even though you shouldn't have, based on everything I had ever been taught. And you beat me at every single class. So I treated you poorly. I am sorry. I know my reasons do not excuse my behavior, but I had hoped that the passage of more than ten years and your friendship with Astoria would have helped. Do you really think she would have married me if I were still like that?"

Hermione considered his words. "Apology accepted, Malfoy. You are right about one thing. It is time to move on. You were a child at the time, so I suppose I should be able to let that go."

"Thank you," Draco said, suppressing a smile.

"Now, tell me about the potions. How does Professor Snape relate to all of this?"

"Severus has always been interested in medicinal potions. One of his research techniques has been to examine how Muggles handle similar ailments. Over the years, he created several wizarding potions that have a theoretical basis in Muggle medicine. Severus' name was not used and Malfoy Industries does not disclose that Muggle research was used in development.

"When Lyra returned to England, Severus was still recovering at the Manor. They got along quite well, given their similar fields of study. She was working on her advanced degrees and interested in his research; he was curious about her studies as well. I think Mother had designs on them marrying someday. I know Father did. He thought that the strength of Severus' magic might compensate for her lack of magic and produce magical children."

Draco shuddered; Hermione tried not to laugh at his reaction. At the same time however, she felt a pang of something she couldn't quite place. She dismissed the feeling and turned back to Draco's story.

"Eventually, Severus and Lyra began to hypothesize about reversing the research process. If you could add magical properties to Muggle medicines to create effective potions for wizards, why couldn't you use potion-making concepts in medicines to treat Muggle medical issues?"

"When Severus' mother fell ill to a neurological disorder that St. Mungo's had never seen, Lyra and Severus became obsessed with their goal. You see, Mrs. Snape's illness apparently functioned much like a Muggle illness. Severus developed a potion using Muggle medicines that proved to be very effective. Mrs. Snape still has symptoms, but she suffers much less now than before the potion."

"That's remarkable." Hermione was clearly impressed. Draco could see she was considering the possibilities. "What happened next?"

"Lyra refused to accept that Muggles did not have access to a potion that their medicines helped create. She worked tirelessly to try and translate the concept back to something that could be legally distributed to Muggles. She worked within the Muggle system to conduct research studies using test subjects. She developed something that was better than what the Muggles were using, but not nearly as effective as the magical potion that Snape created.

"I was aware of their research, and Malfoy Industries formed a shell Muggle corporation that functions as a pharmaceutical distributor for Lyra's medicine. Everything up to this point was completely legal.

"Still not satisfied that Muggles were at such a medical disadvantage, Lyra convinced Severus to develop a Concealment Charm that would hide the fact that the potion contained magic. He was successful. If a Muggle analyzed the ingredients, they would detect the chemical properties of Lyra's potion. The reason why it worked better would remain a mystery. Our Muggle subsidiary hired the best and brightest Muggle researchers to try and crack the code; none were successful. So, I decided to ignore the International Statute of Secrecy and manufacture the potion for distribution to Muggles. It went through all the proper Muggle testing requirements to become licensed; it was determined to be both safe and effective.

"That was five years ago. Black Pharmaceuticals has been immensely successful. Two other potions were released that have hidden magical properties. They are working on another right now. Two others contain purely Muggle ingredients, but the research process behind them did involve magic. Those will quickly be copied and essentially stolen by other pharmaceutical companies, but the research done by Lyra and Severus probably advanced Muggle medicine by ten to fifteen years. There is nothing illegal about those products."

"Have you been tracking the medical outcomes from these potions?"

"Of course, Hermione. Lyra is a responsible researcher. And have you ever known Severus to be anything less than meticulous?"

She laughed. "No, I suppose not."

"I was not exaggerating, Hermione, when I said these actions had saved many lives." He made eye contact, clearly trying to convince her of his sincerity. She had to admit; she had never seen him look so earnest. Draco Malfoy believed in what he was doing here. He had broken the law for good reason. And the people he was trying to help were Muggles. Hermione was stunned. If he was telling the truth, they had done an amazing thing. Illegal certainly, but Hermione wasn't so shortsighted to not realize the value in the actions, even if it hadn't been executed perfectly.

"That is an amazing story, Draco. Is it true?"

"Every word of it is the truth, Granger. I'll admit that my motivation was more financial than philanthropic at first; however, every precaution was taken along the way to make sure that the medicines were safe. All of the Muggle testing procedures were followed before a single dose was sold to any Muggle."

"And you have records of this?"

"Yes, Granger. Look, go talk to Severus and Lyra. Ask all your annoying little questions and see if it holds up."

"Oh, I intend to, Draco," Hermione said, finishing writing her notes. She stopped and looked up at Draco and said, "You do realize that you could have petitioned for an exception to the International Statute of Secrecy?"

Draco's face fell. "I had no idea that was possible."

"It sounds like you need to hire a better attorney. It's very rare for an exception to be granted, but this might have qualified." Draco looked completely crestfallen.

She continued, "Obviously that would have been a better course of action, but I think we can argue that this was a procedural error. There might be a fine, probably an injunction against future production until you can present this to the international board for their approval. But if what you say is true, I can convince the Wizengamot that this was negligence at worst; and with no measurable harm done, I can hopefully get it reduced down to a slap on the wrist."

"Granger, we should not have to stop what we are doing here."

"No, Draco, and I hope you don't have to. But you need to show proper respect to the Wizengamot. You have to stop behaving like you think you are above the law. After we handle the criminal matter, we'll go after the exceptions that you need to continue production. Draco, think about what they could accomplish if they were able to employ a handful more potions experts or Squib researchers like Lyra. What you've done here is impressive, but the potential here is virtually limitless if done through the proper channels."

"Fine, what else do you need to know?" Draco said, looking tired but more hopeful.

"Oh, there is a great deal more information that I need. But first, I need to corroborate your story with the other two defendants. Assuming it all checks out, I will go talk to the Ministry prosecutor about getting the three of you released until a trial date can be set."

Draco nodded. "Thank you, Granger; I will help you in any way that I am able. Please speak with Astoria as soon as you can. Tell her what you can without putting her at risk."

Hermione shook his hand and knocked on the door. The guard escorted Draco back to his holding cell, leaving Hermione to her thoughts. She knew who was going to come through that door next, and she wasn't sure how she felt about it. Severus Snape had been the one person at Hogwarts whose approval she had desperately wanted, but she could never seem to impress him. She had been the one who had never believed he was as bad as everyone else thought he was. Even after Dumbledore's death, she had tried to rationalize what might have happened. After the battle, she had grieved his death, and she had lamented that she hadn't been able to figure it out. The fact that he had survived was beyond shocking to her, and it stirred up a multitude of questions and confusing feelings.

Snape's Story

Chapter 3 of 10

Hermione interviews her former professor.

When the guard returned a few minutes later, he was leading Severus Snape. Snape froze when he saw Hermione. He had been told that he was requested by Draco's advocate, but he had not expected to see Hermione Granger. Given his treatment of her as a student, this didn't seem like a good idea. He knew that Astoria was friends with her, but Draco hadn't mentioned any sort of professional relationship. Frowning, he reminded himself it was just a conversation; also, if Draco trusted her to represent him, perhaps he should give her a chance. She always was a bright girl, even though her unrestrained enthusiasm was often overwhelming.

Hermione's pulse quickened at the sight of her former professor. The last time she had seen the man had been nearly twelve years earlier, and she had believed he was dead. The man before her looked so much different than her memories. Professor Snape from her childhood had been deathly pale, frightfully thin, and painfully sour. The man before her looked healthier than she'd ever seen him look. His skin was still pale, but the sickly grayish tinge was gone. He had gained a bit of weight, making him appear merely thin, rather than frail. His hair was shorter than before, just barely dusting his ears. This also made him look less severe. The only thing that hadn't changed was his eyes. Dark and intense as ever, those eyes caught her gaze as he was led into the room. This time, however, she had an entirely different reaction to the intense stare.

The guard instructed Hermione that the magical binding spell would lift once the door was closed and locked behind him. She nodded to the guard. He left the room, and she heard the click of the lock behind him.

"Sir, you can imagine how shocked I am to see you here today. Shocked, and pleased, of course. Well, not to see you under arrest, but to see you alive and healthy. I had no idea you had survived. I'm so sorry we left you there like that, sir; we had no idea there was any hope."

Apparently, the inability to hold her tongue had not changed, Severus noted with a cross between annoyance and amusement. Her appearance, though, was quite altered. He remembered her both as an awkward child and later as a pleasant looking young girl. He was not, however, prepared for the warm, alluring woman before him now. She wasn't a striking beauty, but she was undeniably attractive in many subtle ways. The longer he looked at her, the more he realized that she had the potential to thoroughly enthrall a man. He snapped from his reverie, scolding himself for allowing his thoughts to stray in such directions.

"Do desist from your babbling, Miss Granger. We have business to discuss."

She smiled timidly at his admonishment. She couldn't help but note that it had lost a great deal of its former bitterness. This man sounded mildly irritated, while the Snape she remembered would probably have bitten her head off by now.

"I'm sorry, sir. It's just so unexpected. Astoria didn't inform me that there were other defendants."

"No doubt she is preoccupied with her husband's well-being, Miss Granger. Or is it Mrs. Weasley now?"

"No," she said quietly. "It's still Granger."

"I see. My apologies if I've brought up a painful topic."

"It's okay, sir. Ron and I parted ways amicably after just a few months." She couldn't help but be a bit shocked at his consideration for her feelings. "So, you have been living at the Manor all this time?"

"Yes, Miss Granger."

"Who else knows of your survival?"

"It's not a secret. I live a quiet life, and I don't seek people out. But I venture out when I need to, and I have interacted with a few of my former acquaintances over the years. Lucius informed the Ministry of my whereabouts while I was ill. I was never officially pronounced dead by anyone except Mr. Potter. I'm sure most still believe that story, but there wasn't any attempt to deceive. If you don't mind, Miss Granger, I find this line of questioning to be irrelevant to the matter at hand."

"Very well, sir. I understand that you have been charged with conspiracy to violate the International Statute of Secrecy, as well as conspiracy to commit bodily harm against Muggles. I need to hear your account of the events, including your role specifically, as well as that of Draco and Ms. Lyra Malfoy."

"I developed a few magical potions to treat Muggle ailments. Miss Malfoy assisted me in the development of some of them, although as she is not a witch, she really cannot be held accountable for their development. Most of her work was in the analysis of the existing Muggle potions. She also assisted the Muggle authorities in testing the product to ensure it was safe to use and that all of the proper steps were taken based on Muggle laws and regulations.

"We knew that using magical potions outside the magical world was forbidden. The reason for that of course is to avoid detection of magic. So, I developed a sophisticated Concealment Charm that would make the potion appear to be a simple Muggle pharmaceutical. The decoy product was also safe and effective, though not as effective as the magical potion. There has been no ill effect; Muggles are no more aware of magic today than they were when we first began this venture. Draco funded the work, and he signed off on the production of the potion for distribution.

"In short, Miss Granger, technically, I am guilty of the charges, as is Draco. Miss Malfoy, as she cannot perform magic, is not responsible for any misuse of magic. As for the preposterous charge that we are attempting to harm Muggles, that is patently false."

Hermione made a note of Snape's protectiveness of Lyra Malfoy. She decided to see how deep it ran. "But she encouraged use of the potions on Muggles. She worked with the Muggle authorities to get the products approved. And she was aware that they contained concealed magic, and that use of such magic is forbidden. The charge is conspiracy, Professor Snape. One can conspire to misuse magic without actually using magic."

"She lamented that such advancements were not available to Muggles. I did the rest."

Hermione looked away, deep in thought. He was definitely protecting the woman. Could it be that Severus had found love with his old friend's daughter? And why did she find that bothersome?

"What is your relationship with Miss Malfoy?"

"I hardly see how that is relevant, Miss Granger."

"Do you really think the prosecutor won't ask that question? I need to know the facts, sir." Hermione met his eyes. She was no longer an eleven year old in a foreign world. This was her turf.

"Lyra is very dear to me. She is a brilliant young woman, and she has fought long and hard to be respected."

"Are you trying to protect her because you have feelings for her?"

"It is unfair to subject a Squib to the laws of the magical world. She did not coerce Draco or me into anything. All of our actions were our own. Therefore, she is innocent. End of story."

Hermione felt her stomach clench. She wasn't sure why Severus' answer, or, more accurately, his non-answer, bothered her so. *Why shouldn't he find happiness with this woman?*

"Thank you, Professor. I will have more questions for you later. Are you comfortable having me represent you in this matter?"

"Not so fast, Miss Granger. You have not told me how you plan to defend this case." He looked at her critically; his eyes seemed to be daring her to falter. Hermione felt her confidence weaken for a moment, and then she snapped back to herself. She affected her most poised Advocate demeanor.

"Professor, I shall seek to attempt to get the charges dropped entirely. It seems to me that what has happened here is a procedural problem. Malfoy Industries and Black Pharmaceuticals should have filed a formal request to market their magical products to the Muggle world, complete with a plan on how to avoid detection as well as how to protect Muggles from possible harm. It is not clear whether or not such a request would have been granted; however, both of those steps were taken with considerable care. There is clearly no malice involved. I will ask that you be allowed to present your case to the International Board for a retroactive exemption. If granted, Malfoy Industries and Black Pharmaceuticals will continue as before. If denied, the company and all of its agents will cease to market any potion with magical properties to Muggles.

"If they will not drop the charges, then at trial I will illustrate the good the potion has done. I'm sure I can find a Squib or two that have benefitted, or perhaps a Muggle-born witch or wizard who has a relative that has been helped. Regardless of the illegality of your actions, good has been done here. To punish you for that, beyond a slap on the wrist, would be a failure of justice indeed."

Severus chuckled. "Well, I didn't expect to hear your completed closing argument, Miss Granger, but I am satisfied that you have a solid plan for defending this case."

"Thank you, sir. I will see about getting the three of you released as well. As you all reside together, they may want to consider house arrest until the trial."

"Very well, Miss Granger, I will accept your representation." She handed him the form, which he signed.

"I will meet with Ms. Malfoy, and then I will go speak with the prosecutor. I worked with him for several years. Perhaps that will help speed things along."

She motioned for the guard. When he arrived, she addressed him politely. "I would like to speak with Miss Malfoy." The guard sneered at the mention of Miss Malfoy. It was not a pleasant expression; Hermione felt extremely uncomfortable. Severus snarled. Hermione noted the reaction. Apparently, Snape felt the need to protect Miss Malfoy from threats of all kind.

The guard nervously applied the magical restraints back to Severus' wrists. The look on Severus' face was lethal, but he remained still and did not resist. Hermione gave him a consoling look, and he seemed to calm a bit.

The guard led him away, a little more roughly than necessary. Hermione's blood boiled. She couldn't handle seeing anyone humiliated, but seeing Severus led away restrained pulled at her in a way she couldn't explain. She shook her head and told herself that she would get this fixed for him. *No*, she corrected herself. *She would fix this for all of them and for everyone they could help in the future.*

Lyra's Story

Chapter 4 of 10

Hermione has many questions for Lyra Malfoy.

The guard came back a few minutes leading a tall, blonde woman. Hermione couldn't help but notice that the guard's eyes kept traveling up and down the prisoner. She seemed aware and mildly annoyed by him, but her demeanor was unaffected. Lyra Malfoy was positively stunning. She possessed every bit of Narcissa's beauty and Lucius' presence. She was dressed in a business suit that exuded elegance and class yet still highlighted a remarkable figure. Tall and lithe, she had long legs, curved hips, an impossibly tiny waist, a well-proportioned chest, and a graceful neck. Her skin was glowing porcelain with classic bone structure, exotic grey eyes, a pert nose, full lips, and straight white teeth. Her hair was the same platinum blonde as her father's. It hung long and silky down her back with just the slightest hint of a wave to it. She was the woman of every man's dream and every woman's nightmare.

Hermione was again perplexed as to why she felt threatened by this woman, but she dismissed it by telling herself that the beauty before her would threaten any woman. Lyra's voice pulled Hermione from her thoughts.

"You must be Advocate Granger. I'm Lyra Malfoy. I was told you are a friend of Draco's." Hermione snorted inelegantly. Lyra looked affronted.

"I'm sorry, Miss Malfoy. That was rude of me. I was a classmate of Draco's and a student of Professor Snape's. Astoria and I are good friends."

"Ah, so you knew my brother back when he thought he was Merlin's gift to the world?"

Now it was Hermione's turn to be shocked. She smiled. In addition to the other woman's physical perfection, Hermione realized that Lyra Malfoy was sharp and direct.

"Well, to be honest, Miss Malfoy, that is correct. There was no love lost between your brother and me when we were children."

Lyra seemed to be trying to remember something. "Granger Wait, you are the Muggle-born, the one that is Harry Potter's friend?" Hermione nodded again, this time hesitantly. "You really don't understand, do you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Draco's animosity to you growing up wasn't motivated by hate," Lyra said with a smile.

"Oh, Miss Malfoy, I beg to differ. You weren't at Hogwarts with us."

Lyra stiffened. "No, no, Advocate Granger, I was not. Mother wept for days when the letter didn't arrive. Father didn't look at me for weeks."

Hermione stammered, "I, oh my, I am so sorry. That wasn't a slight on you. I just mean you didn't witness Draco's treatment of me back then. We've made our peace now, but trust me when I say he hated me back then."

Lyra's pride was still smarting from the reminder of her childhood pain. She snapped at Hermione again, "You really are dense when it comes to males. My brother was jealous of you. Truth be told, he probably had a bit of a crush on you. That's how boys act when they don't have any sense. Also, Father was continually telling him that he shouldn't be beaten by you." She seemed to calm as she spoke. "Draco handled it very badly." She paused for a moment. "Trust me, he got an earful from me regarding his behavior. But it wasn't hate that caused him to mistreat you, at least, not entirely. It was also motivated by confusion and adolescent angst."

Hermione stared at Lyra open-mouthed for a minute. Lyra laughed at Hermione's ridiculous expression.

Hermione collected herself and changed the subject quickly. "That's all very interesting, but that's obviously not why I am here. You need an advocate. I will be representing Draco and Professor Snape. If you would like to ask me any questions, feel free. Otherwise, if you would like me to represent you also, I'd like to hear your take of the events leading up to your arrest."

"If Draco and Severus trust you to represent them, then I trust you as well."

"Well, then, please tell me what happened in your own words."

"As you know, Severus is a Potions master. My field of study is pharmaceutical research. There is quite a bit of overlap. When I first returned, he never left the Manor. Mother and Father were worried about him. Looking back, I think he was in some sort of shock. His life was finally his own after twenty years of being under the thumb of Voldemort and Dumbledore. Truthfully, I'm not sure which of them did more damage to him. Voldemort was obviously a monster, but Dumbledore treated him like a chess pawn. However, don't speak ill of Albus Dumbledore around Severus. Even now, Severus talks like the man should be sainted." Lyra's voice contained a fair amount of venom towards Albus Dumbledore.

"That loyalty to Dumbledore probably saved Severus' life, Lyra, if I understand what happened in the shack properly." Lyra looked confused. "Draco said that Fawkes saved Severus. Fawkes only helped people that were extremely loyal to Dumbledore. But, please continue. Tell me about your research."

"Severus was bored after the war. He didn't want to go back to teaching, so he decided to continue his research projects. We discussed them often; we also discussed the projects that I was working on in my studies. I was intrigued with the similarities between the two disciplines.

"Then Eileen fell ill, and the theoretical study became personal. St. Mungo's was unable to help her. I convinced him to take her to a Muggle physician, which he did. They recommended a Muggle drug to help her. It helped, but not much. Severus and I dissected and analyzed the medication; he started experimenting with magical ingredients to improve the potency. The improved medication that he developed was very effective against her symptoms.

"I was curious what would happen if we made the same modifications without magic. Interestingly, the altered drug was considerably more effective than the original. It

wasn't as good as the potion, but it was better. I approached Draco about marketing the modified drug. We set up the Muggle subsidiary of Malfoy Industries, and I started the process of getting the drug through clinical trials."

"After the first round of test results came back, I continued to be discouraged at how much difference there was between the magical and the non-magical samples. Severus mentioned the possibility of a Concealment Charm so that Muggles wouldn't find out about magic. He thought that he and Lucius should go to Kingsley and explain what we wanted to do, but Draco and I thought that was a bad idea. Draco and I decided that we would follow the spirit of the law, and we wouldn't worry about the letter of the law. Severus may or may not have known what we were doing, but Draco and I were definitely the driving force behind pushing ahead."

Hermione was puzzled. She'd gotten three stories that were similar in many ways, but there were obviously some key differences. Draco had made it sound like everyone went in with his or her eyes wide open. Snape had tried to downplay Lyra's involvement; Lyra had tried to make it appear that Snape's hands were clean.

"Miss Malfoy, I must tell you, I'm getting slightly different versions of the story from all three of you. Without full cooperation from each of you, it will be difficult to defend you to the best of my abilities. It seems that you are all very close. There seems to be some protection going on. I'm having a bit of trouble discerning who was aware of what and whose idea some of these actions were."

"That's the way I remember things, Advocate Granger."

"Very well then, Miss Malfoy, tell me who applied the Concealment Charm to the products." Lyra froze.

Hermione continued, "Obviously, whoever applied the Concealment Charm understood the nature of the product. You aren't trying to tell me that Draco applied these charms to hundreds of thousands of doses of the product? I'm actually hard pressed to understand how you are mass producing the potion at all."

"House-elves, Advocate Granger. We have a small staff of elves that do much of the labor. They also apply the Concealment Charms."

"Miss Malfoy, wizard magic and elf magic do not leave the same magical signatures. That is an easy thing to check."

"Good, then that will be obvious." Lyra gave Hermione a self-satisfied look.

"Who taught them the charm?"

"Draco."

"Who taught Draco?"

"Severus." She looked Hermione dead in the eye.

"Why? If he didn't think you were going to use it without permission of the Ministry, why would he teach it to Draco?" Hermione's voice was still perfectly even.

"Draco enjoys learning new skills."

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "Draco didn't even get an O.W.L. in Charms. A Concealment Charm that sophisticated would take more skill than Draco possesses in that particular discipline."

"Whose side are you on anyway?" Lyra stood up so that she had the height advantage on Hermione.

Hermione didn't flinch. She looked up at Lyra calmly. "Miss Malfoy, please sit down. I am on your side. But I cannot function effectively with stories that don't make sense. The prosecutor would destroy me, and by extension, you. Tell me what happened, really."

"Fine." Lyra was obviously not used to being beaten. She flopped back down in the chair. Hermione tried not to giggle at the action. It seemed that Lyra could be just as spoiled and temperamental as her brother.

"Severus developed the charm, but he didn't want to use it without approval. He thought that Kingsley would support us; Draco and I resisted this idea. We argued that as long as we were careful about exposure that the Statute of Secrecy was just useless bureaucracy. We even used some emotional manipulation tactics, using Eileen's progress as proof that Muggles shouldn't be denied the breakthrough. I believed in what I was telling him. Draco honestly just saw it as a huge untapped market. Draco wouldn't hurt anyone though, and he was determined that we follow all safety procedures of both worlds. He assigned me the task of researching the Muggle process for obtaining a license. We were determined to do things the right way, even though not technically legal. Severus and I would have done all those things regardless, but Draco helped us brainstorm as many precautions as possible."

"What is your relationship with Severus?" Lyra gave Hermione an incredulous glare, so Hermione explained further, "The prosecutor will probably try and argue that you are not telling the truth and that you are trying to protect one another."

"We are close. We've been friends since I came back from university."

"Are you romantically involved?" Lyra sighed. How much should she tell Advocate Granger?

"We are not currently romantically involved."

Hermione noted the use of the word 'currently'. She knew she had pushed Lyra quite a bit already today, so she decided to let it drop for the time being.

"One thing I don't understand, Miss Malfoy, is how you were caught. If there have been no ill effects and no breaches in the Muggle world, what happened to bring the attention of this to the Ministry?"

"One of Draco's employees was auditing the books. Malfoy Industries was purchasing a great deal of potions ingredients, far more than the wizarding potions operations needed. Black Pharmaceuticals was purchasing these materials from the parent company at a fair price, so there was nothing harming either business. Draco had not thought it prudent for Black Pharmaceuticals to be seen purchasing potions ingredients, so he thought that an internal transfer would be safer. It worked for a long time, but Edgecombe discovered the transfers. She continued snooping, and discovered the sale of our products to Muggle pharmacies. That's when she ran to the Ministry. I don't know if you've seen the formal list of charges, but every single product of Black Pharmaceuticals is listed as a violation; in truth, most of the products are non-magical. There are the few that are in violation, but the charges are overly aggressive and mostly false. The fact that they figured out part of the story is probably mostly luck."

Hermione bristled at the name Edgecombe. She collected herself and moved forward. "This is what I intend to argue. It seems that all three of you had knowledge that what was being done was illegal. However, in your collective zeal to help others, a decision was made to disregard the International Statute of Secrecy. I intend to argue that there was no knowledge of a formal exception procedure to the Statute. It sounds like Severus thought there might be a chance at informal assistance, but I'm not hearing that he really believed there was a formal method for gaining approval. Ignorance is no excuse for breaking the law, but it is a mitigating factor. Given that there was no harm done, I intend to appeal for a retroactive exception to the Statute and for the Wizengamot to drop the criminal charges. If you are not granted the exception, you will need to revert to only distributing the non-magical formulas."

"Very well, Advocate Granger." Hermione handed her the form to sign.

"I am going to go speak to the prosecutor. Hopefully we can put this to rest without a trial." The women shook hands politely.

Hermione called the guard. Thankfully, he managed to conduct himself a bit more professionally this time. After Lyra had left the room, Hermione collected her belongings and left the interview room. She started walking to her office. She needed to pick up some forms before heading to the Prosecutor's office. She knew him well, and she

knew exactly how to handle him. Hermione knew that he cared more about success than actually doing what was best. No doubt the high profile nature of the defendants had played a part in his decision to go after this case. He probably thought this would further his career. Perhaps if she could show him how this case could actually harm his career, she would be able to get this issue resolved quite easily.

The Prosecuting Attorney

Chapter 5 of 10

Hermione handles the prosecutor with efficiency.

Percy Weasley looked up from his desk to see his mousey assistant, Marilyn, waiting in his doorway. "You have a visitor, Mr. Weasley."

"Do they have an appointment? I'm very busy," Percy whined, obviously in the middle of something.

"It's Advocate Granger, sir. She wishes to speak to you about the Malfoy/Snape case."

Percy chuckled derisively to himself. *Of course she does. Hermione is probably beside herself that she doesn't get to prosecute this case. This has the potential to make my career.*

"Send her in please," Percy said, putting down his quill with a flourish and a smile. He never missed the opportunity to gloat. *Hermione may have been the shining star in this office when she left, but I am the Head Prosecutor now. Moreover, she is now stuck defending half-breeds and other weak-minded creatures.*

Hermione entered Percy's office, and he offered his hand. "Hermione, how lovely it is to see you. I understand you wish to talk about the Malfoy case," Percy said, offering her a chair.

"Good afternoon, Percy. How are you today?" Hermione put on her best smile as she fought the urge to roll her eyes at the smug prosecutor.

"Oh, I'm excellent, excellent, Hermione. We've finally caught the Malfoys up to no good. And the fact that Snape will go down is just a bonus. I never believed all that nonsense about him protecting Harry."

Hermione breathed deeply. It would not do to lose her temper with the Head Prosecutor. "Percy, I am here as a professional courtesy. I am on my way to file the following forms." She handed Percy the forms. He reviewed them one at a time. His smug expression faded quickly.

"You are defending them?" Percy was horrified. *This is a disaster. With her as their advocate, they might be acquitted. That would be a major blow to my career.* "But why? They are clearly in violation of the International Statute of Secrecy. And this is a chance to teach those Malfoys a lesson."

"Really, Percy, is that your primary motivation? Are you just doing this to teach the Malfoys a lesson? I thought your duty was to uphold justice and enforce the laws." Hermione's eyes narrowed; her voice was cold but calm.

Percy sputtered for a moment. "I misspoke. I am horrified at their blatant disregard for Muggle safety."

"Indeed, disregard for Muggle safety is a serious charge. We should all be looking out for the safety and health of all beings."

"Of course, that is my primary concern."

"So, if this were just bureaucratic noise, you would not be inclined to prosecute them so vigorously."

"My only duty is to protect the innocent."

"I'm glad we have the same goal. I'm sure once I explain to you the facts of the case, you will be happy to drop the charges."

Percy laughed heartily. "Don't be absurd, Hermione. They broke the law."

"They saved many lives. They were thorough in their efforts to protect Muggle health and safety. They were equally thorough in their efforts to protect the magical community. They have used the knowledge they obtained to further both Muggle medicine and magical healing. Their actions have been trailblazing and heroic. And you would punish them for it."

"They broke the law!"

"They failed to get proper approval for a restricted business transaction. It was a mistake, to be sure, but it was a decision that saved thousands of lives. If allowed to continue, that number will only grow. Lyra Malfoy is a visionary who seeks only to equalize the treatment of Wizards, Squibs and Muggles. Despite being born a Squib to a family with a dark past regarding Muggles, she has achieved a high level of education and is a very accomplished scientist. Severus Snape is a genius and a war hero whose knowledge and hard work could truly make this world a better place. He has lived a quiet life and refused all accolades for twelve years; at the same time, he has developed many potions and medications that have done immense good. Draco Malfoy is a born leader who has become a business magnate in just a few short years. He has overcome the mistakes of his past. His family may lack the influence of days gone by, but that is because they have turned from the political scene and now focus on business and philanthropy. Malfoy Industries has been instrumental in the rebuilding process. Their recent work with Muggle-borns and Squibs has been nothing short of inspiring. Advocate Weasley, you have chosen your opponents very poorly."

Percy was speechless. He stared at Hermione, wide-eyed.

"Percy, I had anticipated you would have more vision than this. I came here to discuss what corrective action my clients could take in order to resolve this matter. I had hoped we could come to an arrangement that would benefit everyone. I see now that my confidence in you was misplaced. I will see you in court. I do hope this doesn't become a media spectacle."

"What corrective action?" Percy offered. *If she can prove half of what she says, the public will be all over this. I can't be painted as the cold-hearted bureaucrat who would deny Muggles life-saving potions. My political goals would be destroyed.*

"No, Percy, it seems I'm wasting your time," Hermione said, standing and gathering her files.

"Hermione, wait, please tell me what you had in mind."

She sighed and sat back down. "Very well, though I doubt you have the courage to support such a venture. But here's how I see it." Hermione spent the next few minutes explaining to Percy how she knew that there was a procedure for applying to the Wizengamot for an exception to the International Statute of Secrecy. She acknowledged that such approval should have been obtained up front.

"There should be punishment for such blatant disregard for the rules." Percy stood by his guns on this point.

Hermione smiled sweetly. "I believe Draco would sign off on corrective actions involving a fine paid by Malfoy Industries. The company may have made a procedural error. I'm sure there's some Ministry charity that could benefit from the additional funds."

"Illegal activities must also be terminated immediately."

"If you were to be granted an injunction, the company would, of course, comply. However, surely you understand how anxious we are to get this situation resolved. A sudden break in the availability of such successful and helpful products would undoubtedly raise eyebrows among the Muggle community. We wouldn't want to risk exposure of the magical community through such a scandal."

Percy sighed. She had him up against the ropes. "You will need to apply for an exception to the Statute. The full Wizengamot will need to hear the case. You will need time to prepare your materials."

"Two weeks, Advocate Weasley. I assure you that the company has kept excellent records. My preparation is mostly done for me." Hermione quietly hoped that was true, but knowing Professor Snape, she felt fairly confident in that fact.

"What do you want from me, Advocate Granger?"

"Drop the criminal charges. If you must, file the sanctions against the company. This should have been a corporate matter from the beginning. The defendants were acting only as agents of the corporation."

She continued, "My clients should be released immediately. I'm sure your assistant has the appropriate paperwork at her desk. Oh, wait a moment. I took the liberty of stopping by my office and having my assistant draw up the release papers. All that is required is your signature and a witness."

Percy could only nod. He summoned his assistant into his office. Hermione explained to her that she and Advocate Weasley had resolved the criminal matter in a satisfactory manner. Percy just stared in awe as Hermione explained the form to his assistant. She handed Percy the quill. Percy signed, and then Marilyn signed as witness. Marilyn magically duplicated the paperwork, took a copy for their files, and handed Hermione a copy for hers. She tapped her wand on the originals, and they vanished. They had been magically filed. The word 'validated' appeared on the top of each of the copies.

"Thank you, Marilyn, for your assistance. Advocate Weasley, it has been a pleasure. Good day." Hermione stood up and exited the office triumphantly. Even she was shocked at the way Percy Weasley folded under pressure. She headed back to the area where her clients were being held to deliver the good news. She couldn't help but wonder how they would react.

Preparations

Chapter 6 of 10

Hermione has dinner at Malfoy Manor. She continues to work with her clients to prepare for the case.

The guard was shocked to see Hermione Granger back again in the same day. "Advocate Granger, did you forget something?"

"No, sir. I am here to collect my clients. Please check your inbox; I believe the Lead Prosecutor has sent some paperwork authorizing their release."

The guard looked stunned, but he did as she asked. Sure enough, Marilyn had sent the release papers over as requested. "Very well, Advocate Granger. Would you like to meet with them before they are formally released?"

"If you would bring them all to the meeting room, I would appreciate it. There will be no need for restraints." She raised her eyebrow at him, daring him to challenge her. "I have a few things to discuss with them. That will give you time to get the wands processed to be returned to Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Snape."

He nodded and led her to the meeting room. He then disappeared down the hall and returned with Lyra a few moments later.

"Advocate Granger, I am surprised to see you back so soon. Is everything alright?"

"Please, Miss Malfoy, call me Hermione. It seems our professional relationship is going to come to a rather abrupt ending."

"I don't understand. I thought you were taking the case."

"Your brother and Professor Snape will be here momentarily. I would like to explain this to all of you together."

"Why are they allowing you to meet with us all together? What is going on?"

Draco and Professor Snape entered the room. "Granger, what is the meaning of this?" Draco asked.

"Well, I have some good news for you," she said, pausing for effect. "Advocate Weasley has dropped the criminal charges."

Two pairs of extremely wide gray eyes greeted her. The intense, black eyes, however, narrowed in response.

"Miss Granger, do not toy with us. What is going on?"

"Professor, I was able to convince the prosecutor's office that this was not a suitable matter for a criminal investigation. Malfoy Industries remains under investigation for violation of the International Statute of Secrecy. I expect sanctions and injunctions to be filed in the morning. Draco, if you would like to retain my services, I would be happy to assist the company in addressing those charges. You are all free to go home."

"Just like that?" Lyra was stunned.

"Just like that, Miss Malfoy. It seems that Advocate Weasley was a bit afraid he would be painted as a mindless bureaucrat. However, he believes that in order to continue distributing Muggle medicines, an exception to the Statute must be granted. As I said, I expect him to file an injunction to cease production during the investigation. I emphasized the importance of your work and that a lengthy delay would be inappropriate."

"Granger, that's amazing. Of course we want you to help us obtain the exception. You must have dinner with us this evening to celebrate." Draco did not look like he was going to take no for an answer.

"Draco, you should spend this evening with family. I do not want to intrude."

"Nonsense," Lyra cut in. "You are the reason he will be home with his family tonight. Astoria will never forgive him if you don't accept."

Hermione smiled.

Lyra turned to Severus and continued, "And Severus, there will be no hiding in the cottage tonight, I mean it." Severus looked mildly alarmed.

Draco slapped Severus on the back. "You know you can't say no to Lyra, Severus. I'm not sure which of these two women is more frightening. We will see you at seven, Granger. Thank you," he said sincerely.

Hermione nodded and shook his hand.

"Hermione," Lyra said softly, "thank you."

"Of course, Lyra. You are doing good work here. I'm glad I could help protect it."

"Miss Granger, thank you for your assistance. It sounds like we have much work to do in the upcoming weeks. Please let me know how I can help."

Hermione turned to look at Severus, and her heart caught in her throat. She certainly was not the swooning type, but the sight of Severus Snape looking truly grateful was a bit overwhelming. He offered his hand to her in thanks. When she took it, she felt his strength in his calloused hands. He looked away at first, but then he met her eyes. His black eyes looked endless, and while she never would have believed it before, there was warmth there as well.

Severus shook Hermione's hand quickly and pulled back. He didn't notice the softness of her skin. He didn't notice the admiration in her eyes and the way her face flushed with the slightest bit of pink. At least, that's what he told himself.

Lyra looked on with interest. Draco, on the other hand, was genuinely oblivious to what was going on in the room. He knew his wife had suffered greatly, and he needed to get home and ease her fears.

Hermione said her goodbyes and left the room after finally agreeing to come to dinner. Draco was right; Astoria would be happy to see her at dinner. However, she wasn't sure she could handle too much of Lyra staring at Severus like she was just now. *What is wrong with me? She's perfectly nice, and he deserves to be happy. I guess I'm lonelier than I thought I was.*

Hermione arrived at the Manor for dinner. A house-elf showed her to the parlor. She wasn't trying to eavesdrop, but she could hear Lyra and Draco talking in the next room.

"You know Father won't approve." Lyra sounded upset.

"Lyra, Father will go along with whatever you want. And if he doesn't, it's his loss. You are a grown woman. Aren't you tired of waiting around for everyone's approval? He's been patient, Lyra. I can't blame him for being frustrated that you keep discouraging his affections. Stop blaming Mother and Father for your own inaction."

"You have no idea what it was like for me, growing up in this house with no magic." Lyra's tone was low and deadly.

Draco sounded exasperated when he continued, "No, Lyra, I don't. But they've tried to make amends. We all have. I can't imagine that either of them would deny you this. They've wanted it for a while, too. It's not as if they don't like the man. If he asks you again, tell him yes. Stop creating problems for yourself where they don't exist. If you keep up this game, he's going to move on, regardless of his feelings for you."

"I don't know, Draco."

"Stop playing the victim. This has nothing to do with magic. He knows exactly who you are, and he wants to be with you. And don't deny it; you want to be with him, too. He's a good man. Stop toying with him."

Hermione was shocked at what she was hearing. *When had Draco Malfoy grown up?*

"Miss Granger, didn't anyone ever tell you it isn't polite to eavesdrop?"

Hermione jumped at the silky voice. "No, Professor Snape, they must have forgotten. Much like they forgot to tell you that it is rude to sneak up on people. Still skulking about, I see." Hermione tried very hard not to allow her tone to betray her embarrassment. Unfortunately for her nerves, Severus slid up very close behind her before speaking, so when she wheeled on him to retort, she found herself looking directly up into the face of her former professor. He was so close that her hands brushed against his chest. Their eyes locked for a moment, then both of them stepped back quickly. Unlike earlier in the day, this time, there was no escaping the intensity of the moment.

Hermione sputtered for a moment before collecting herself, "I was not eavesdropping, Professor Snape. I cannot deny I heard part of the conversation. I was honestly just realizing how far we've all come since the war."

"You needn't call me 'Professor' anymore, Miss Granger. It hardly seems appropriate, being that you have not been my student for over a decade."

"You may call me Hermione." Her voice was quiet and timid, something that was fairly unique for Hermione. "As you astutely point out, I am no longer your student."

Severus took in a slow, deep breath. "You may call me Severus. And anyone can see that you are no longer that overly eager child, Hermione." Once again, he dared look her directly in the face. One of her curls had fallen into her face. He pushed it behind her ear.

She flushed scarlet at the contact. "And your company is much more pleasant now that you don't carry the fate of the world on your shoulders," she offered wryly.

He chuckled, "You are a true Gryffindor, Hermione. Your flair for the dramatic has not left you." She smiled, then he leaned in closely and purred, "But don't forget that I am a Slytherin. Be very careful that you don't get in over your head, my dear."

Oh, it's far too late for that, Severus. I'm afraid I was in too deep the moment I saw you today.

Draco entered the room and looked from Severus to Hermione with confusion. He noted the blush on her cheeks and her rapid breathing. Severus appeared calm, but he was eyeing Hermione like a predator watches his quarry. Draco winced. He did not need to think of either of them in that way.

"Lyra won't be joining us for dinner. She has plans. She has left her schedule with her elf. She said if we need to schedule a meeting to discuss the case, we should speak to Coco."

Severus and Hermione both nodded. Severus had regained his composure. Hermione was outwardly calm, but her mind was spinning wildly. There was no denying that the attraction she felt was mutual, but then she was truly confused about his relationship with Lyra. Had she refused him? Was he trying to 'move on' as Draco had suggested he might? Hermione had no desire to be anyone's rebound, and she certainly didn't want to be an obstacle if they truly cared for one another and just hadn't managed to figure out how to proceed.

Much to everyone's relief, Astoria entered the room with Scorpius. The little blond imp shouted "My-Nee!" and began clapping wildly. Hermione happily took the child from his mother and sat down on the couch to visit with the little boy. Severus watched her play with the child. She took his hands and moved them enthusiastically as she sang nursery school songs with him. Severus instantly scolded himself for the direction his mind was heading. Since the war, he was becoming more comfortable with the idea that he could have a normal life. His friends reminded him what a normal life looked like, and he realized that he truly did desire a wife and family. He felt just a pang of guilt that he had superimposed Hermione into that little daydream. It hardly seemed appropriate. But perhaps he didn't want to wait forever before beginning his life. Perhaps he needed to allow himself to move forward, even if it felt uncomfortable.

Lucius and Narcissa entered, and Narcissa thanked Hermione sincerely for her assistance to her children. Lucius gave a polite, formal thank you, but he maintained his distance. Hermione was polite in her response, and she thanked them both for allowing her to visit for dinner.

Scorpius clambered off the couch and over to Severus. "Uncle Sevus, tell stowies!" Hermione watched in shock as Severus told the boy a story about when Draco was a little boy; he and Lyra had built a boat and tried it out on the lake on the grounds. The boat had been less than seaworthy, and Lucius panicked and jumped into the lake, even though both children were stronger swimmers than he was. Severus had calmly levitated the children out of the water, but they had both received a good soaking in the process. The little boy giggled infectiously at the idea of his father and aunt floating through the air. It was one of the first times Draco had used magic, apparently casting a wandless drying charm on his sopping hair when they reached the shore, despite being just six years of age.

Hermione was in tears at the thought of a tiny Draco fretting about his hair, and Lucius covered in algae while Severus simply flicked his wand to avoid danger. She couldn't help feel a little guilty laughing at Lucius' distress; of course, Lucius had caused a great deal of distress over the years, surely he could bear a bit of well-intentioned teasing.

Astoria announced that it was time to put Scorpius to bed. Scorpius protested mildly, but then he proceeded to make his rounds, blowing kisses to all of his admirers. As Astoria made her way upstairs, Draco called a house-elf for round of drinks. The group talked and laughed for a few minutes until Astoria returned to join them for dinner.

Dinner was a very pleasant event. Draco, Lyra, and Severus had been arrested the day before, so they had not been home for a little over a day. Draco and Severus reported that they had been reasonably well treated, but the Ministry officials had been in no hurry to get them access to counsel. Lucius had wanted to contact his advocate, but Astoria had stood firm that Hermione was their best choice.

Draco shared with them how Hermione had stormed in and taken him to task before hearing him out regarding the charges. Hermione blushed at Draco's version of the tale. He was complimentary regarding her performance. He was especially pleased with how quickly she had formed an effective strategy.

"I still don't understand how you got Percy Weasley to drop the charges so easily," Severus stated, clearly curious.

"Percy Weasley is entirely driven by his ambition. I simply convinced him that he would be painted as cruel and shortsighted and lose any chance for a career in politics if he pursued the letter of the law rather than the spirit.

"I drew a rather ugly picture for him. This case has tremendous potential for public reaction. Those in favor of protecting Muggles would be outraged that the Wizengamot trying to deprive them of life-saving medicines. Those that fear Muggles would be terrified at the prospect of their wrath should such medicines be withheld. Most, like Percy, don't believe that Muggles would ever be clever enough to figure out that concealed magic was being used for their benefit. I simply persuaded him that no harm was done by your actions. I also pointed out to him that the public would care little as to the technical illegality of the actions. I offered him the corporate charges as a way to save face."

Severus laughed. "I always thought that boy had more ambition than sense."

"Oh, Percy is intelligent enough," Hermione admitted, "but he is too ambitious for his own good. He is rather surprisingly void of conviction. That is a recipe for poor decisions. There are many things that Percy would be very successful doing, but the idea of him as a high-level decision maker is a bit unnerving. He would forever be cowering to whoever holds the slightest bit of power over him. I'm afraid I may have exercised that power a little aggressively today. However, he let it slip early in our discussion that part of his motivation for going after this case was due to the Malfoy name and Severus' past. I may have gotten a bit carried away at that." She blushed.

"Oh, I doubt that, Granger. I know how you are when you are on a cause. Trust me. My jaw still remembers your defense of that ridiculous hippogriff third year." He turned serious. "I'm just glad you were on our side today."

"Hear, hear." Hermione was shocked to hear Lucius' voice. The others joined him in lifting their glasses.

She looked at her hands, clearly embarrassed by the attention. "I'm glad I could help. I'm afraid the corporate case may be a bigger challenge."

"But at least their freedom is no longer at stake. Hermione, I can't thank you enough." Astoria's emotions were threatening to get the better of her again. Hermione noted with curiosity that while the rest of the table was drinking a very fine elf-made wine, Astoria had opted for pumpkin juice.

Severus noticed Hermione's gaze drift from Astoria, to her glass, to Draco, and then back to Astoria's glass. He looked at Draco carefully. Draco had his hand draped across the back of his wife's chair, a strikingly casual pose for a Malfoy at the dinner table. It smelled of protectiveness. He wondered if Hermione was noticing these same details.

Hermione smiled at Astoria, the Gryffindor's eyes cutting to the glass deliberately. Severus stifled a laugh. Subtlety was not a particular strength of the pretty little attorney. Astoria clearly understood Hermione's meaning, as her eyes grew wide as saucers and her cheeks pinked up. Severus forced his eyes away from the silent conversation, as he knew that Astoria would be mortified that he had also picked up on her secret. Narcissa and Lucius continued eating, unaware of the events going on between the two women.

Hermione kept watching her friend, who finally sighed and caught her husband's eye. Draco looked at his wife questioningly; she nodded firmly.

Draco stood and picked up his glass. "We have another reason to celebrate today."

Lucius and Narcissa looked at Draco. Lucius looked a bit confused; Narcissa's hand rose to her mouth almost involuntarily.

Draco took Astoria's hand. "Scorpius is going to be a big brother in about six months."

"How marvelous." Lucius beamed at his son and daughter-in-law.

Narcissa let out the tiniest of cries, clearly ecstatic.

"I'm so happy for you all." Hermione smiled at her friends. *Wait, when did I start thinking of Draco as a friend?* She was truly happy, but there was just a hint of longing, deep inside of her.

"Congratulations," Severus managed evenly. He couldn't help but watch Hermione. He saw her obvious pleasure for her friend, but he also saw the wistfulness below the

surface. He wasn't entirely sure if he was seeing it in her, or if he was feeling it himself. He felt Narcissa's eyes on him. He looked up at the blonde, who smiled at him with a hint of sadness in her eyes. He averted his eyes and focused back on Draco, who was positively bursting with excitement.

As dinner drew to a close, Draco, Severus and Hermione talked a little about the probable next steps for the case. As there had been no injunction ordered, Draco decided that they should ship the completed potions as soon as possible for existing orders. Hermione and Severus were both skeptical of this course of action. Even Lucius suggested that would probably not be possible, as the injunction would probably come down quickly.

"You already ordered it, didn't you, Draco?" Hermione's eyes were torn between admiration, concern, and amusement.

Draco grinned. "I sent the elves to the factory as soon as we left the Ministry today."

Hermione laughed heartily. "You know Draco; one could argue that you have quite a bit of Gryffindor brashness in you."

Draco's jaw dropped; it was Severus' turn to laugh.

"Hermione, I assure you, Draco's boldness is pure Malfoy arrogance. To the naked eye, it resembles Gryffindor recklessness, but it's a different species entirely," Severus said, toasting Draco with a gleam in his eye. Hermione felt her insides turn somersaults. A charmingly funny Severus Snape was not something her heart could handle, particularly if he was preparing to propose to Lyra Malfoy.

"Hermione, are you quite alright?" Astoria sounded concerned.

Hermione managed to nod. "I'm afraid I've indulged a bit too much on this fine vintage," she said, hoping to distract the party from her musings.

Draco came to her rescue, changing the subject. "Hermione, we should probably schedule a time for you to meet with Lyra, Severus and me to talk about the case. I'm sure you'll have more detailed questions about the steps we took to make the process safe on all fronts. Knowing you, you may have some suggestions that would be helpful to improve the process."

She smiled. Draco called Lyra's house-elf, and they determined that the day after next would be a good day to go over things together.

When dinner concluded, Astoria escorted Hermione to the Floo. "Hermione, are you okay?"

"I am Astoria, truly. I am just feeling a little bit anxious tonight for some reason. I think it's being around you and Draco, seeing you so happy. I just thought my life would be a little more settled by now. I am so happy for you, I really am. I just can't help but feeling just a little concerned about my own future."

"Oh, Hermione. You'll get there. Don't worry." She hugged Hermione tightly. "It will be okay. You just have to open yourself up a little bit. You never know where the answer may lie."

Hermione smiled weakly, wondering if there was a double meaning in Astoria's words. *Had Astoria picked up on her thoughts towards Severus?*

"I should go home," she said quietly. "You and your new baby need your rest." And with that, she stepped into the Floo and headed back to her flat.

The next day, Hermione exited the Manor's Floo. She was fuming. She knew she shouldn't be surprised, but Percy's owl had really set her off.

She dropped her briefcase on the table in Lyra's study.

"Hermione, what's wrong?" Lyra asked from behind a desk piled with papers.

"Oh, I received the injunction request. It's ridiculous. Percy filed for fifty million galleons in sanctions, and he asked for a cease and desist order. I am sure that I can get the Wizengamot to agree with our side, but they delayed our appeal for four weeks.

"Well, that will give you and I enough time to get all the necessary documents together," she said, motioning to the stack of files. "These are the records from the clinical trials. This one contains the summaries. It is probably the one you will be the most interested in, but the others contain backup that you might need."

"This is very helpful, thank you. Do you know where Draco and Severus are?"

"Are you always this impatient, Granger?" Draco drawled from the doorway. "Severus will be along momentarily. He is working on something new that he is very focused on right now; he said he needed five minutes."

Hermione nodded. "Draco, I reviewed the proposed sanctions. The fine is punitive. Percy is trying to solve the Ministry's budget problems on the back of Malfoy Industries. He has literally tried to say that every single dose of the potions should be subject to a fine, but I doubt there's any way he knows what those numbers even are. Some of these medications have been on the market for several years, so that fine would be astronomical. I'm going to argue that the amount should be based upon class of medication.

"As for the injunction, Draco, I need you to paint the picture of what will happen without the medication. We need to convince the Wizengamot that continuing the injunction is more dangerous for our world than reinstating distribution of the medications. We will also appeal to the Wizengamot from a standpoint of cooperation and equality, but truthfully, the pragmatic argument will be the most effective."

Severus entered the room at that moment. Hermione couldn't help but notice his appearance. He wore black trousers and a dark grey turtleneck. He looked crisp, yet relaxed at the same time. Hermione acknowledged him with a shy smile. Severus grimaced and nodded. Draco hid his smirk behind his hand; it seemed smiling at Granger was something Severus wanted to do, even though it seemed to cause him physical pain. Lyra raised her eyebrow at the exchange. She wasn't sure she'd ever seen Severus smile deliberately. Even spontaneous smiles were rare from him, but she was intrigued as to why he was being uncharacteristically polite to Hermione.

"Well, there are a few things we need to focus on when making this appeal. We need to show the benefits to everyone.

"Draco, you will detail the benefits to Muggles. As we discussed, the company has been following the progress of the affected patients?" Draco nodded.

"Good. For each medication, we need to show how the outcomes have been significantly more positive than those available from other sources. Lyra, you will need to talk about how the non-magical discoveries have been advancements, but they fell short of the magical remedies. We'll appeal to their sense of fairness here. We'll show them how the Statute, if fully enforced, will harm the quality of life of Muggles.

"Severus, you will help show how this research, if continued, can also benefit wizards. You need to speak about your research and your efforts to use Muggle technology to solve Wizarding problems. I know this is asking a lot, but I need you to talk about your mother's case. There's no need to reveal her identity, or even that she's a personal acquaintance. But they need to understand that a witch was suffering from an illness that traditional Healers were unable to handle. We need to show them how, by bridging this gap, you have helped wizards and witches. We will paint the distribution to Muggles as the next logical step."

She paused to let her words sink in. Severus looked decidedly uncomfortable.

Draco stepped in. "Hermione, Severus' research and use of Muggle technology has been helping witches and wizards for years, long before Mrs. Snape. Perhaps that would be an angle to pursue as well. There are several very well-known products that he developed using Muggle science. The Wizengamot is undoubtedly ignorant of this

fact. You might even be able to find a personal angle for them, rather than expose ANY private information about Severus or his acquaintances."

Hermione paused to consider this for a moment. *Draco does have a point about making the appeal more global, or perhaps finding something that appealed directly to the members of the Wizengamot.*

"Interesting, Malfoy, that might be an even more effective approach. Severus, you and I will need to discuss that in more detail." She continued, "The other primary concern of the Wizengamot is going to be secrecy and protection of magic. Severus, you will need to share with them how the Concealment Charm was developed, and even more importantly, you'll need to talk about how it was tested.

"Draco, you'll need to talk about Black Pharmaceuticals and how it operates within the Muggle world without any knowledge of its linkage to Malfoy Industries except for a few key individuals. We'll also talk about how the disappearance of the drugs would likely raise questions and cause more investigation into the reason why that could be undesirable.

"Lyra, you will need to show the care that was taken to follow Muggle procedures. We will show a respect for the law as well as concern for Muggle safety. We need to show cooperation and care here. We'll give the Wizengamot no reason to question the competency of Black Pharmaceuticals to manage this process."

Lyra smiled and thought how Hermione was certainly good at her job. Draco couldn't help but wish she worked for his company on a permanent basis. Severus couldn't help but admire her either, though he was wondering if she was so quick to take charge in all aspects of her life.

Draco excused himself to get back to work. He promised Hermione that he would send her a wealth of reading materials about the success of the medications. Hermione huffed mildly at his teasing her about her love of books.

Lyra offered to show her the lab. Hermione wasn't sure if that was a good idea; she didn't want to tread on the space that Severus undoubtedly saw as private.

"Hermione," Severus offered calmly. "It might be useful for you to see the operations first hand."

Hermione was delighted. Severus led them just a few doors down from Lyra's study and opened the door.

The lab was nothing like what Hermione had expected. Her image of potions laboratories was tainted by the dungeons at Hogwarts. The lab at the Manor was bright and shiny. There were large windows on one wall. There was a small area where plants were growing.

"These ingredients are far easier to procure in seedling form. Narcissa's greenhouse has a section dedicated to our research as well. She is a rather talented Herbologist, as is Astoria, which I'm sure you know."

There were long stainless steel counters containing cauldrons of all sizes and materials. Several potions simmered and popped with their latest creations.

Hermione recognized one of the potions and looked at Severus in surprise. "Wolfsbane?"

"Indeed. Though that's not entirely accurate, as this is our more advanced version. I'm testing it now on a few subjects. This variety cuts back on the side effects for most patients. Instead of falling ill for two or three days per month, the patient merely sleeps for about twelve hours on the affected day. It should be far less disruptive to their lives."

"I'm surprised you still brew this." Her voice dropped to a whisper. She wasn't sure if this was a safe topic.

Severus sighed, knowing exactly her meaning. "I probably punished Lupin too harshly for his treatment of me when we were young. Inaction was his greatest crime. However, I certainly didn't correct the actions of my friends when I was a young man."

"He regretted that he did not help you more."

Severus looked at Hermione with surprise.

"Don't be so shocked Severus. Sirius never really grew out of that adolescent phase, but Remus did."

"I have seen his son. He's a fine boy. Andromeda has done well raising him."

"Yes, she has. And Harry has worked hard to be there for him as well."

"If you are expecting me to compliment Potter, Hermione, you are asking for a miracle," Severus smirked.

Hermione laughed. "I won't hold my breath, Severus."

There were several doors off the lab. Lyra showed Hermione where her lab was set up. It was warded to protect the Muggle equipment from the magic in the other lab.

When Hermione went to open one of the other doors, Severus winced. "Hermione ..." he warned.

"I'm sorry, is this area private?" Hermione turned to Lyra. She didn't seem to understand Severus' hesitation either.

"That is our testing room, Hermione. I assure you, we are as humane as possible, but you may not approve of what you see." Severus' voice was clearly nervous, which did nothing for Hermione's anxiety. She braced herself as Lyra opened the door.

The room was much larger than Hermione would have expected. It was bright and very clean. There were several habitats set up for the test subjects. There were groups of mice, kneazles, and rabbits living in several enclosures. They had room to move, food and water available, even areas to play. Most of them appeared very healthy.

Severus was standing behind her. "It's part of the process. We can't test anything on humans without having an idea how other creatures will react to the medications. If any creature seems to be truly suffering, we can usually heal them. We do our best to minimize any ill effects."

Hermione steeled her nerves. "Severus, you know I don't have the stomach for this kind of thing. But it looks like you try to treat the subjects as well as possible. I have lost some of my righteous indignation. I know that the goal here is to help others."

He led her back out of the room into the main lab. Lyra excused herself and returned to her study.

"Tell me about the early projects." Hermione conjured a notepad and pen. He led her into a small study that was off to the side of the lab.

"Well, truthfully, Draco was my earliest project that used Muggle technology."

"What?" Hermione was stunned and a little concerned by the revelation.

Severus laughed. "Oh, nothing untoward, Hermione, I assure you. I'm sure you are aware of the problem that Purebloods often have with fertility."

She nodded and gave a mild shudder. She'd received more than one truly unromantic marriage proposal from purebloods that sought a powerful witch to restore their family's former glory.

"Narcissa and her sisters suffered from a physical problem that made carrying a child to term very difficult. The problem worsens as a witch ages. That is why Tonks was an only child. Lyra was born when Narcissa was very young; she was not quite twenty. But the pregnancy was still extremely difficult for her; it is thought that her illness during the pregnancy may be why Lyra does not have magic.

"Narcissa and Lucius tried to have another child right after Lyra, knowing that their time was limited. For three years, Narcissa and Lucius suffered the painful cycle of hope and disappointment. She got pregnant more than once, but she suffered a loss each time.

"After I graduated Hogwarts, I was serving Voldemort, and I stayed here. Lucius confided in me what they were going through and asked for my help, knowing my skill with potions. I spent months researching all magical solutions and came up empty. As a last attempt, I examined some Muggle medical journals. Intrigued by the progress the Muggles were making, even back then, I started experimenting, trying to create an effective fertility potion." He laughed. "There was an excess of kneazle kittens around the Manor for the year or so I was testing my discoveries. Finally, I came up with something that I believed would work for humans. Draco was born about a year after Narcissa started taking the medication."

"That's amazing, Severus. So was the solution magical or scientific?"

"Both."

"Does Draco know this?" Hermione asked.

"Yes, but Lyra does not. Please understand and respect the need for discretion on that front. It would undoubtedly be difficult for her to accept that she might not have lost her magic if Muggle medicine was used. Draco only knows because Malfoy Industries still markets a version of the original potion to witches."

"So that's why you're Malfoy's godfather?" Hermione laughed.

Severus looked offended. "I would imagine it is a factor," he stated grumpily. Severus noted how easily she had accepted the story. She hadn't reacted when he'd said Voldemort's name or when he had acknowledged his time as a Death Eater. She had just watched him attentively with those eyes. A soft brown, her eyes were always full of emotion and curiosity and surprisingly little judgment.

Hermione asked him several more questions about his work. He shared with her his other creations; she was quite impressed. The conversation strayed from his potions research a bit. She never asked him anything too personal, but they talked about his early years at Hogwarts. Dumbledore had been supportive of his research. Severus didn't share with Hermione that his research was the one thing in those early years after Lily's death that kept him sane.

Every few minutes, Lyra would step out of her study for some manufactured reason or another. She greeted them politely and joined in the conversation briefly before returning to her own work.

Severus asked Hermione a few polite questions about her work; she was quite animated in telling him about her practice. She had been quite successful as a prosecutor, but punishment was not her forte, so she broke out on her own a few years earlier. She did a fair amount of criminal defense, but she also helped with other legal matters such as contracts and estates. She represented humans, part-humans and non-humans alike. She had lobbied for a few pieces of legislation improving the rights of non-humans.

"Still protecting the downtrodden, Hermione?"

"Yes, I am, although these days I try to make sure they want my help." She smiled nervously. "The house-elves at university wouldn't even speak to me. Apparently, the Hogwarts elves warned them about the clothes."

She looked at her watch. They had been talking for over two hours. "I should go. We've probably both got work to do."

For the next two weeks, Hermione visited the Manor for several hours each afternoon. The following morning, she reviewed the materials and prepared questions or requests for clarification. She would often talk strategy with Draco. She chatted with Lyra a time or two as well. Lyra and Hermione led lives that were somewhat parallel, though strangely inverted. Hermione had to give up her family for their safety; Lyra's had to send her away for hers. They both had rebuilt relationships with their families, but the old issues still lurked beneath the surface. Both women were intelligent and driven, and people they encountered were frequently intimidated by them.

Lyra noted, however, that Hermione spent most of her time not with her, or Draco, or even her dear friend Astoria. No, most of Hermione's time that week was spent in the lab with Severus. She talked with him about the case extensively. She probably had herself convinced it was all directly related to the case. But there was a great deal of talk about his past research that Lyra hardly thought was relevant. Lyra also couldn't help but notice the mild nervousness between the two when they were physically close. The looks were a little too long, and then she would become tongue tied, or he would turn sour. Hands would brush; then the floor would become fascinating to her, or some plant would require his attention across the room. Lyra wasn't jealous, at least, not in the traditional sense, but Severus had been her confidante for a very long time. She couldn't say she was thrilled with the new alliance.

Severus thoroughly enjoyed his visits with Hermione. She challenged him intellectually in a very pleasant way. And she possessed a toughness that was reassuring. There was no need to worry excessively about Hermione's feelings. If she didn't like what he said, she would give it right back to him. Lyra had always been a bit difficult in that way. She tried to project toughness, but she was more fragile than most would have guessed. Hermione, on the other hand, appeared delicate, but was fearless, probably to a fault. He just wouldn't think about those little moments that he was tempted to touch her or kiss her. He did not want to frighten her away. Just having her companionship was satisfactory, or at least that's what he tried to tell himself.

Hermione was the most content she'd been in a long time. The case was thrilling, and she was spending a great deal of time in very enjoyable company. The irony that it was occurring at Malfoy Manor was not lost on her. She even had a few pleasant conversations with Narcissa and Lucius when they would run into one another when she came to visit.

But Severus was an enigma. There were times when he was simply a milder version of his old professor persona. He was no longer cruel, but still snarky and impatient. Other times, he was calm and thoughtful, an expert sharing his knowledge and history with her and listening to her views with interest. They quarreled about several subjects, but it was more of a debate than a battle. And then there were the moments when she was aware of nothing about him except that he was a man. Those were the most confusing, because she would feel his eyes upon her, and then usually just as quickly, he would withdraw from her.

She always felt so embarrassed in those moments. He was twenty years her senior, her former professor, and he had both infuriated and impressed her for years. She had mourned his death and rejoiced at his survival. These days, she found him positively magnetic. She had no idea how she was going to handle the end of the case. She desperately hoped that wouldn't mean the end of their friendship. She knew that it was unlikely that it could be more than that, but she enjoyed his company. She didn't know she could be content with just a friendly relationship with him; however, she was sure that was all it could be, so she told herself it would have to be enough.

Insight from Harry

Hermione and Harry discuss the events of the past few weeks. Preparations for the hearing continue.

Two weeks later, Hermione sat in a café waiting for her best friend. She spotted him as he entered.

"Hermione!" Harry greeted his friend with excitement.

"Harry, I've missed you. How are Ginny and the children?"

"They're good. James' magic is starting to manifest. It's exciting to see, but I think he's driving Ginny a little mad with his mischief. He has a bad habit of hiding Albus' toys and then saying it was an accident."

Hermione laughed, "He always has been a handful. How is Albus handling that?"

"You know Albus, always pensive. He asked Ginny to ward his room."

"Seriously, at four, he understands what wards are?"

"I know. It's really not fun to realize your four-year-old is smarter than you are."

"Oh, Harry, knock it off. And I assume Lily is doing well, too?"

"Yeah, she's talking more and more."

"And undoubtedly continues to wrap you around her finger. Does Ginny like her new job?"

"Yes, though she misses playing. This job will keep her close to the sport without having to travel as much. But, enough about me; how have you been, Hermione? I understand you caused a bit of a stir with Percy a few weeks ago."

"Percy doesn't see past the end of his own nose. He thought bringing the Malfoys down would further his career. It is my job to make sure that the Wizengamot looks at the whole picture." She continued more quietly, "Did you know about Severus?"

Harry nodded cautiously. "I found out he survived when I took over the department about three years ago. I sent him an owl asking to meet. Ironically, it was not long after Albus Severus was born. He politely declined."

"He values his privacy, Harry. Being seen with you, even now, would cause a stir."

"I doubt that's the real reason, Hermione. But he is entitled to see who he wishes to see. I'm probably a reminder of many bad memories. I have to ask, what's this with calling him Severus? You usually refer to your clients by their proper titles." Harry's face was questioning.

"I call Draco and Lyra by their first names as well." Hermione was clearly defensive.

Harry was shocked at her reaction. He filed that information away for later. "Yeah, that was a shock to read about Lyra Malfoy. I guess every family has their secrets. I hope she didn't suffer too much at the hands of her parents."

"Harry, I have to be careful here. These are my clients, and many of our conversations are confidential. I will share that Lyra is very much loved, and her family did their best with her. It wasn't like your aunt and uncle. Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy were certainly ill prepared for Lyra, and I won't deny that they made mistakes. But they didn't shun her or mistreat her; in fact, they worked very hard to protect her."

"Well, that's good to hear. So, you've made peace with the ferret?"

"Yes, Harry. He actually apologized to me. I've decided that I've held a grudge for too long regarding the actions of a spoiled adolescent. Astoria is my friend. If she says he's changed, that's enough to start over."

"Well, Draco and I will never be best friends, but he does seem different. How is Snape? Is he still as grumpy as ever?"

Hermione smiled dreamily. "No, he's really not. He's still snarky and sarcastic, but it's not mean-spirited anymore. He's protective of Lyra and Draco, and you should see him with Scorpius. It was actually a little hard to believe the first time I saw them together."

"Merlin, Hermione," Harry said to Hermione, agog. "You fancy him, don't you?"

"Harry! He's a client. Don't be absurd. Just because I can recognize that his personality is different doesn't mean I'm in love with the man." She clapped her hand over her mouth. She'd said far more than Harry had implied.

"Does he know?"

She shook her head fiercely. Hermione was a little surprised at the emotion that was taking over her voice. She was working very hard to keep herself calm. "He's involved with Lyra Malfoy. She denies it, but it's clear that he cares for her. You should see this woman, Harry. I remember thinking that Narcissa was striking when we were kids. Well, add in Lucius' commanding presence, and you've got Lyra. Draco is a good looking man, but Lyra is just ridiculous. I feel like a troll in her company."

"Hermione, don't do that. You know you are an attractive woman. Men notice you. They may not trip over themselves, but that's because you scare them senseless. But someone like Severus isn't going to scare easily. If you care for him, talk to him. Don't make assumptions. If he's not with her, there's a reason."

"She thinks her parents won't approve."

"That doesn't make sense, Hermione. Severus is Lucius' oldest friend."

"I don't know, maybe it's the half-blood thing. Maybe she's just wrong, but I heard her say that to Draco. Draco told her to stop turning him down before he moved on."

"Draco said that Severus had approached her and she turned him down?"

"Basically."

"Well, if she turned him down..."

"Harry, I don't want to be a consolation prize."

"Hermione, stop it. Really, stop it. He pined after my mother for what, twenty years? This isn't a man who seeks a rebound. I know you well enough to know you aren't going to throw yourself at him, but if you fancy him and you think he has feelings for you, don't be a martyr. Either they are together, or they aren't. Find out, and stop

torturing yourself."

"You aren't horrified that I have feelings for him?"

"Let's see. You're both smart, wicked sarcastic, hardworking and fiercely loyal. I think you could do worse. Now, that being said, I do NOT want to hear anything about your physical attraction to him; that's just beyond strange." He shuddered, and Hermione giggled. He continued earnestly, "But you deserve to be happy, and so does he."

"Your reaction to the 'physical' was exactly the same as Draco's. Although he was talking about his sister, not about me, so that may have been a factor too." Hermione couldn't stop laughing.

"Oh, shit. I sound like the ferret. Seriously, Hermione, just don't limit yourself. I haven't seen you this reactive about a man in a long time. Really, I haven't seen that light in your face since before Viktor died in the explosion."

"Harry, don't be silly."

"No, Hermione, I mean it. It was cruel that you lost Viktor. You deserve someone that makes you light up like that again."

"But Oliver and I..."

"No, Hermione. I know you and Oliver were good for each other, but it wasn't like what I'm seeing here."

Hermione looked insulted at his comment.

"It's okay, Hermione, it really is. He lost Katie; you lost Viktor. You were both just trying to survive."

Hermione winced. It hurt to think about losing Viktor, even now. But what she really resented was the implication that she had somehow used Oliver. "That's not true, Harry. I cared for Oliver."

"Of course you did. And he cared for you. You didn't do anything wrong. But you turned down his proposal for a reason, Hermione. You were together five years. And when you decided not to get married, you just went your separate ways. That's not the way love works, Hermione. It's not that tidy when it ends. You know it as well as anyone."

She frowned. She hadn't really considered how easy her break-up had been with Oliver. She thought it was because it had been a mutual decision, but Harry had a point. How many couples break up after that length of time without someone being devastated?

"I do hope he's happy now."

"He is, Hermione. Ginny is still in touch with him. He's met someone."

Hermione smiled at his words.

"Ginny has met her. She's a Muggle, and Oliver seems completely enamored with her." Harry searched her face for any sign that this news pained her. He was pleased to see nothing but joy in her face for her former lover. "You deserve the same, Hermione."

"Harry, I know you mean well, but I really don't want to get in the middle of whatever is going on with Severus and Lyra. Time will tell if they are going to be a couple or not. I don't need to create drama."

"Hermione, just make sure you are basing your actions on facts and not impressions."

She nodded and changed the subject. Harry was happy to talk more about the children.

Two days later, she entered the lab and greeted Severus brightly, "What are you working on today?"

"Well, I'm trying to develop an improvement to Blood-Replenishing Potion. But it isn't going well."

"Ah, I'm sorry. Do you have time for some questions regarding the case?"

"Yes. Let me get this cleaned up."

Hermione nodded.

"You can go ahead and ask your questions."

"I'm just going over the list of products you've developed for Muggles that haven't been marketed broadly. Can we go over why?"

"Of course, but I'm not sure why it would be relevant."

"Severus, we want to show that your decisions of which products to market were well thought out. It may be helpful to show which ones didn't make the cut. So let's go over them:

"Formula 4 Pain relief potion; preliminary tests show it was incredibly effective."

"It was too effective. Patients reported that it worked 'like magic'. We decided that was a danger all its own. That was actually the problem with several of the formulas. We found we were more successful treating ailments that manifested themselves slowly. People tend to question it less when a medication helps them over the course of weeks or months."

"Formula 8 Prevention of premature births; this was also very effective."

"We haven't ruled that one out yet. The first test subjects are approximately five years old. I have concerns that this medication may inadvertently increase the incidence of Muggle-born witches or wizards. In the wrong hands, that could be dangerous. When the Muggle children born as part of the clinical trials hit ten or eleven, we'll be able to see if there's any uptick in magical births."

"Interesting, but it is used on witches."

"Correct. We are less concerned about reducing Squib births than we are about increasing magical births among unsuspecting Muggle families. That seems to be a risk of exposure."

"Formula 12 Another pain relief potion."

"It was proven to be mildly addictive in Muggles. Testing was terminated, and the subjects were assisted in breaking any habits that may have formed."

"There are two or three others that have been distributed to Wizarding hospitals, but with the express purpose that they can be used on Muggles. Can you explain that to

me?"

"Those are for trauma situations. If a Muggle is involved in a magical mishap, they are occasionally taken to St. Mungo's. Those patients are hit with an Obliviate anyway, so risk of exposure is eliminated that way. We aren't comfortable with Muggle doctors administering these medications, but the Healers understand the issues. There are several Muggle hospitals internationally that have Wizarding wings. We supply the Wizarding hospital with medications like Formula 4. They occasionally consult on Muggle cases, so they are well equipped."

"That seems like a reasonable compromise. Under a Healer's supervision, that is perfectly legal. Why not do that with all of the products?"

"Volume, Hermione. We want to help the most people with the products that we feel are truly safe. So, rather than have them administered to a handful of Muggles by Healers, we have made them available through Muggle channels and have jumped through the Muggle hoops. The ones that are more concerning on an exposure basis are restricted to Healers."

"Yet another protection against exposure. Excellent, Severus." Hermione's stomach chose that moment to growl.

Severus looked at her questioningly.

"I was distracted and skipped lunch."

"I actually haven't eaten either. Would you like me to have one of the elves bring something to eat? I need some air. We could eat on the patio. Today's work has been frustrating."

Severus motioned to the doors that led out to the gardens. There was a small garden table just beyond the doors.

"That would be nice. Today has been a bit maddening for me as well."

"Coco," Severus called out. Coco appeared immediately. Severus asked for sandwiches to be brought to the patio. Coco disappeared with a pop. "Shall we?" Severus voice betrayed nothing, but he felt oddly nervous. It was perfectly normal for him to have lunch with Hermione while they were working, but for some reason, it felt a bit like he was asking her for more.

She smiled modestly and followed him out onto the patio. "I don't think I've ever seen the gardens," Hermione stated, clearly impressed by her surroundings. "Astoria and I generally visit away from the Manor, given my history here."

"They have made a number of changes to the house since the war. Astoria has turned the drawing room, which holds so many painful memories for everyone, into an art studio. She doesn't have any negative associations with it, so she paints in there frequently. Recently, Draco has started to venture back in to it. Truthfully, it's completely unrecognizable."

"Good. It's nice to see people move forward. Sometimes it's easy to get trapped in the past."

Severus narrowed his eyes. Hermione gasped at the look on the face of her former professor. It seemed that her comment had reignited his former ire.

"Do be careful, Miss Granger." His voice was cold and hard.

"Severus, I hope you don't think I was insinuating anything about you." She reached out and touched his hand involuntarily. "It's a problem I have experienced. Harry brought it to my attention a few days ago."

Severus hadn't pulled his hand back. He was looking at her intently. His expression had softened, but she could tell he was waiting for an explanation.

"I lost someone very dear to me, someone on whom I had pinned all of my hopes and dreams of the future. Viktor Krum and I rekindled our romance after Ron and I parted. We were engaged when he was killed."

Severus' eyes grew wider. "Hermione, I had no idea. I heard about Krum's death, but I didn't know you were involved with him."

She wiped her eyes. "We kept it out of the media deliberately. But at any rate, please don't think I was attacking you."

"I am sorry for jumping to that conclusion. And I am sorry for your loss."

"Thank you. I apologize for bringing up such a heavy topic."

"Hermione, don't. I am curious why Harry brought this up to you now."

Hermione looked at Severus, terrified. She wanted to sink into the floor. She did not want to tell him that she'd been discussing her attraction to him with Harry. She thought quickly. "Oliver Wood is in love." *There*, she thought, *maybe that will throw him off the trail*.

"Now I'm thoroughly confused. What does he have to do with anything?"

"Oliver was my safe haven after Viktor's death, and I was his."

Severus shifted his weight, his jealousy rising.

Hermione continued, "Katie Bell and Oliver married a year after the war ended. She also died in the explosion that killed Viktor."

Severus gasped. He remembered Katie from when she was a student. By all accounts, she was a likeable girl. She and Wood were probably an excellent match.

"Oliver and I grieved together; after a suitable amount of time, we found comfort in a relationship. It lasted a long time. We were content, happy even. He wanted children, so he proposed. I couldn't marry him; it just didn't feel right. I care for him, but I felt it wasn't enough for marriage and children. He was probably relieved when I said no. We said goodbye about a year and a half ago. When Harry shared the news of Oliver's new relationship, I felt nothing but happiness for him."

"I hadn't really considered it, but Harry made me realize that Oliver and I were together for safety and comfort. We were actually both hiding from our fear of loss in each other's arms. The fact that he has truly moved on gives me no pain, but it does make me realize that I haven't moved on, even though I thought that I had."

"It's interesting how different people respond to grief differently." Severus had completely calmed down now. "Lily's death made me completely turn inward. You were able to maintain a successful relationship."

"I'm not sure it counts as successful when it's based on deception, Severus."

"You didn't lie to him."

"No, and he didn't lie to me. We both deceived ourselves."

"You both survived something horrible without it destroying you. You helped one another. You didn't lose yourselves the way I did. You may have even learned something about how to make a relationship work. That sounds like a success to me."

She laughed weakly. "But now I have to figure out how to move on."

"It's not easy," he said, looking at the ground. He looked up at her hand, which was still resting on his. He looked back up at her and leaned in a bit closer. "You will find someone, and he will be very lucky to have you."

She winced. She'd rather hoped she'd already found someone. However, it seemed that while he liked her, his feelings were platonic. He hadn't even considered that he was the one she was interested in.

Severus noted her discomfort. *Had his compliment really made her that uncomfortable? Was the idea that he saw her value as a partner that revolting to her?* He withdrew his hand carefully. If she didn't want more than friendship, he wouldn't allow himself to indulge that fantasy. That was a road he had traveled thoroughly, and it didn't lead to good places.

Lyra stood in the doorway to the garden. She knew that Severus took his meals out here when he needed to think, so she was not surprised to find him out there. She was, however, surprised to find Hermione with him. She watched as they talked. Whatever the topic was, it was clearly littered with emotion. Her hand was on his, and he had leaned in closer than typical for Severus. She looked wounded and unsure of her next step. He retreated gently, and he looked wounded as well. Lyra shook her head.

These two are completely clueless.

"There you are, Severus. Hermione, how are you today?" Lyra's voice was cheerful.

Hermione jumped back from Severus a bit further, almost like a child misbehaving. If Hermione hadn't looked so sad, Lyra would have been amused by the action.

"I am doing fine, Lyra. Thank you. I have some questions about the testing process for you. If you have time to discuss, that would be helpful."

"Absolutely. Do you think we'll be ready?"

"Yes. I've got more good information than I can use. I have a little more organizing to do. We'll need to have a final strategy session tomorrow before the hearing on Friday."

The conversation continued about the upcoming hearing. Hermione was relieved. Her feelings and thoughts about Severus were all very confusing. She needed something to focus on that she could easily understand.

He was grateful for the distraction as well. Talking about the case was interesting and comfortable. And having Lyra at the table gave him somewhere to look instead of at Hermione's beautiful but sad face. How he wished he were the answer to her happiness.

He shook his head and turned back to Lyra. She had been his friend for a long time. He briefly let his mind wander to the time when they had both thought there was more between them. Years before, he had been flattered by the attentions of such a beautiful woman. She had appreciated that he saw more in her than just her looks. The romantic relationship had been short-lived and fiery. Ultimately, they realized that there was no compatibility as anything more than friends. As friends, her vanity and his reclusiveness were amusing quirks. As a couple, they were fatal flaws.

Once they realized this, the physical chemistry between them had morphed into something different. He was grateful for her companionship and respected her intelligence. Her bluntness kept him in check. She appreciated that he let her speak her mind and that he listened to her perspective on magical issues, even though she didn't possess the skills herself. No, they were much better as friends.

The Hearing

Chapter 8 of 10

Hermione argues her case for Malfoy Industries.

Hermione walked calmly into the courtroom, followed by Draco, Lyra and Severus. She took her seat; Draco sat next to her with Lyra and Severus directly behind them. Her eyes surveyed the other occupants of the crowded room. The gallery was nearly full; it seemed that there were many interested in the fate of the Malfoys' latest project.

Kingsley Shacklebolt, Amos Diggory, and Robert Hilliard were the Interrogators for the case. Harry Potter sat as a member of the Wizengamot, as did Arthur Weasley, Andromeda Tonks, former Auror Gawain Robards, Minerva McGonagall and about forty others. In the gallery, Hermione nodded to Bill Weasley, Filius Flitwick, Horace Slughorn and a few other familiar faces.

Amos Diggory would take the leading role, as the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Hermione knew that this was Robert's first case as the Senior Undersecretary to the Minister.

Amos cleared his throat and began to speak. "Ladies and gentleman, Malfoy Industries has asked for an appeal regarding the injunction placed upon the distribution of pharmaceuticals to the Muggle community. Advocate Granger will be presenting the case for Malfoy Industries. I understand that you have several witnesses available to answer questions from the Wizengamot."

"That is correct, sir." Hermione addressed Amos with a polite nod.

"The Department for the Misuse of Magic will be represented by Lead Prosecutor Percy Weasley. Advocate Weasley, I understand that you have a witness to call as well."

"Yes, sir." Percy's obsequious smile was met with a chorus of subtle groans.

"Very well, we will begin with Advocate Weasley's opening statement." He motioned to the center of the courtroom.

"Ladies and Gentlemen of the Wizengamot, the matter before us is simple. The agents of Malfoy Industries deliberately flouted the International Statute of Secrecy. They marketed no less than seven illegal substances directly to Muggles. They did so with blatant contempt for Muggle safety or the secrecy of our world. This request is merely a legal smokescreen they have filed in an attempt to protect themselves from criminal prosecution. We will prove today that not only should their request be denied but the company should be sanctioned for its flagrant disregard for the law."

"Advocate Granger, your opening statement, please."

"Ladies and Gentlemen, this matter is anything but simple. Malfoy Industries and their Muggle subsidiary Black Pharmaceuticals has developed or improved approximately twenty medications in the twelve years since the war. These products were developed using tried and true research procedures, both Muggle and magical. They were

rigorously tested by all applicable governing bodies before they were administered to anyone. The products have been immensely successful, saving thousands of Muggle lives and improving the quality of lives for thousands more. Many of the specific allegations brought forth by the Department of the Misuse of Magic are patently false. Malfoy Industries does acknowledge that Ministry approval should have been pursued prior to the distribution of some of the products, but ambiguities in the law made the proper course of action unclear. Malfoy Industries and Black Pharmaceuticals are represented here today to present the facts to the Wizengamot and to develop a strategy going forward that will benefit both the magical and Muggle communities."

Kingsley spoke next. "Thank you both. Now, Advocate Weasley, please elaborate on the charges of past violations."

"Certainly, Minister," Percy said, walking over to a large flip chart with the heading of Black Pharmaceuticals Violations. "I would like to point your attention to this chart that describes the list of magical products illegally marketed to Muggles." Percy pointed his wand towards the flip chart as the products materialized on the chart.

Tremor Reducer Treats neurological condition. Widely distributed to Muggles.

Blood Restorative Modified blood replenisher. Administered to Muggles in hospitals.

Sedative Used for medical procedures and in trauma situations. Administered to Muggles in hospitals.

Prenatal Potion Designed to prevent miscarriage. Widely distributed to Muggles

Nausea Reducer Anti-nausea potion. Widely distributed to Muggles.

Scar Vanishing Potion Anti-scar treatment. Sold directly to Muggles without the interaction of a Muggle doctor.

Cholesterol Balancer Treats heart disease. Prescribed by Muggle doctors.

Percy continued. "All of these products use magical ingredients and are illegal in their current form. They have all been sold directly to Muggles." Percy smiled smugly at the Wizengamot. "I would like to call Marietta Edgecombe to the stand."

Amos nodded and called Marietta to the stand. The heavy bangs she had worn in her later years of Hogwarts were gone. The scars from the 'Sneak' hex were completely gone. The look she gave Hermione as she passed was deadly. Hermione looked straight ahead, not allowing her past encounters with Marietta to show.

"Ms. Edgecombe, please tell us what your role was at Malfoy Industries."

"I worked in the accounting department."

"Ms. Edgecombe, please tell us how you learned that the company was using magical ingredients in Muggle potions."

"I found records of a transfer of potions ingredients from Malfoy Industries to Black Pharmaceuticals."

"Magical ingredients?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did you do next?"

"I thought it might be a mistake, so I checked the historical records. Each month for the past several years, Malfoy Industries made purchases of potions ingredients. They purchased far more than the Wizarding potions needed. Each month, a transfer was made to Black Pharmaceuticals."

"And who does Black Pharmaceuticals serve?"

"Muggle pharmacies. There are a few products that are over-the-counter that are sold directly to non-pharmacy retailers."

"Thank you, Miss Edgecombe. I have nothing further."

Percy smiled at Marietta. She gave Hermione a satisfied sneer.

Amos Diggory spoke up. "Advocate Granger, do you have any questions for Ms. Edgecombe?"

"Yes, sir." Hermione stood and smoothed her robes. She crossed over to where Marietta was sitting.

"Miss Edgecombe, can you tell me which ingredients were used for which of the medications?"

"Pardon me?"

"Advocate Weasley has published Exhibit A, which is the record of the product transfer from April, 2010. Did you provide this to Advocate Weasley?"

"Yes, Advocate Granger."

"So, this is how you became aware that Black Pharmaceuticals was using magical ingredients in potions for Muggles?"

"Yes, Advocate Granger."

"Then, I would like you to tell the court which magical ingredients were used in which formula. In particular, I would like to focus on the scar removal medication to start."

"I do not know."

"Then, how did you know magical ingredients were being used in those formulas?"

"I knew they were used in some of the products."

"But you don't know which products used which ingredients?"

"Correct."

"Are you a Potions mistress, Ms. Edgecombe?"

"No."

"Did you complete an N.E.W.T. or equivalent in Potions?"

"No."

"An O.W.L.?"

"No."

"Are you an accredited Muggle scientist?"

"No."

"So all you were privy to was a purchase order? You really have no idea how the products were used?"

Marietta froze. "They had to be using them for something."

"My apologies, Ms. Edgecombe; you have made it quite clear that you discovered an inventory aberration. Tell me, who is your supervisor at Malfoy Industries, Ms. Edgecombe?"

"Justin Finch-Fletchley."

"And when you informed him of the potential problem, what did he do?"

"I-I did not inform him."

"Can you tell me what Master Snape's role is at Malfoy Industries?"

"He is the head of Potions Research."

"Did you speak with Master Snape regarding your concerns?"

"No."

"And Miss Malfoy? What is her role?"

"She is the head of research and development at Black Pharmaceuticals, and she sits on the Board of Directors of Malfoy Industries."

"Did you speak to Miss Malfoy about your concerns?"

"No."

"Did you speak with Mr. Malfoy?"

"No."

"Employee relations?"

"No."

"Legal?"

"No."

"Did you speak to anyone inside Malfoy Industries about your concerns?"

"No."

"Is there a company procedure for concerns about company wrongdoing?"

"We're supposed to talk to our supervisor or to the legal department."

"And you did not?"

"Correct."

"You went directly to the Ministry without attempting to find the root of the problem from your supervisor, the head of the Potions department, or anyone else inside the company?"

"Yes."

"Do you know specifically what illegal ingredients were used in any of the potions?"

"No, Advocate Granger."

"Miss Edgecombe, have you ever used this product?" Hermione held up a tube of ScarBGone, which was a product marketed to wizards.

Marietta frowned viciously at Hermione. "Yes, I have."

"And how did it work for you?"

"Quite well, thank you, Advocate Granger," Marietta spat out bitterly.

"Can you read me the list of ingredients from that product?"

Marietta read the list aloud.

"Could you verify that none of these ingredients appear on the list Exhibit A?"

"That is correct."

"What about this product?"

"Scar Vanishing Solution..."

"Have you ever heard of it?"

"No."

"Thank you, Ms. Edgecombe."

Marietta returned to her seat in the gallery.

"Ladies and Gentleman, this is the commercial name for the scar reduction potion listed on the injunction. It is the same product as ScarBGone. As Ms. Edgecombe has just told you, it contains none of the magical ingredients provided on Exhibit A. Both products are perfectly legal for use on both Muggles and wizards. ScarBGone, as you can see, has been used successfully for years."

"Objection!" Percy asserted. "There is no proof of Advocate Granger's assertions. This is all merely hearsay."

"If Advocate Weasley would like to provide other evidence that magical ingredients were used, I would be happy to listen." Hermione gave Percy a mischievous smile.

Amos Diggory turned to Percy. "Do you have additional evidence on this matter?"

"No, sir."

Then, Amos turned to Hermione. "Can you provide evidence of the ingredients used?"

"Absolutely, sir. Master Slughorn, please come forward. Members of the court, allow me to introduce Master Horace Slughorn. He taught Potions at Hogwarts for decades before his recent retirement; he has reviewed the reports, and he is prepared to answer questions on this matter from the Wizengamot."

Kingsley motioned for Horace Slughorn to come up to the front of the room.

"Master Slughorn, can you tell me if there are magical ingredients in this scar removal cream?"

"No, Advocate Granger, there are not."

"Were there any magical techniques in developing them whatsoever?"

"None at all. Mr. Malfoy took me to the Muggle laboratory where it is produced. I procured part of my samples from there."

"And this product, Master Slughorn?" Hermione held up the anti-nausea medication.

"That is an anti-nausea medication used in Muggle hospitals. It is used for cancer patients undergoing treatment. Severe nausea is one of the unfortunate side effects of the Muggle cancer treatments."

"Does this product contain any of the ingredients found on Exhibit A?"

"No, Advocate Granger."

"Thank you, Master Slughorn. I have no further questions."

Hermione continued. "Ladies and gentleman of the court, here are three sets of analyses, conducted by independent apothecaries with no ties to Malfoy Industries. They all corroborate Master Slughorn's testimony. Here are the production and distribution records for 2008 through 2010 for the two products. Note that these two formulas are developed in Muggle laboratories."

"Advocate Weasley, do you have any questions for Master Slughorn?"

"Yes. Master Slughorn, do the other five products on the list of sanctions contain magical properties?"

"Why yes, Advocate Weasley, they do."

"Thank you, Master Slughorn. I have nothing further at this time."

"Advocate Granger, you may call your next witness."

Hermione smiled. "I would like to call Healer Hippocrates Smethwyck."

Healer Smethwyck crossed the room slowly. He was a small, frail man, but his eyes were sharp and intelligent.

"Healer Smethwyck, are you familiar with these two products?" Hermione held up the blood restorative and the sedative.

"Yes, Advocate Granger."

"Have you ever used these products on your patients?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Wizards or Muggles?"

"Both."

"At St. Mungo's?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"How often does St. Mungo's treat Muggles?"

"Occasionally. Usually, it is the result of a magical accident, but sometimes, we help in the case of an emergency or natural disaster."

"And are magical remedies ever used?"

"Yes, Advocate Granger. This practice has been documented since the 1940's. Muggle hospitals were overrun with victims of the Muggle war. St. Mungo's treated Muggles as well as wizards during this time and frequently used Wizarding healing techniques. After the war ended, the restrictions were added regarding Muggle testing. That is the only major change in practice."

"Have you seen evidence that the Muggle testing was completed?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Did it follow proper protocols?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Hermione turned to the court. "Here is the documentation that proper licenses were obtained for these two products." She turned back to Healer Smethwyck. "So, in your

opinion, are there any legal ramifications to the use of these two potions on Muggles?"

"No. St. Mungo's has worked with Malfoy Industries and Black Pharmaceuticals for several years to ensure these two products were used properly. Given the protocols that were followed, there was no need for Ministry involvement."

"Thank you. I have no further questions."

Hermione turned to face the Wizengamot as she waved her wand, causing several stacks of documents to appear on a table in front of Kingsley. As they appeared, she said, "Ladies and Gentlemen, several other Chief Healers at other hospitals have provided affidavits regarding the use of these two products. This packet contains testimony from the U.S., France, Italy, Canada, and Australia."

"These two are not in violation of the International Statute of Secrecy. Here are distribution reports for these two formulas. It was only sold to licensed magical hospitals for use under strict Healer supervision."

Hermione paused for effect. The members of the Wizengamot all looked thoughtful. Percy looked horrified. He regained his composure.

"Healer Smethwyck, did St. Mungo's supervise the broad distribution of the other three potions in question?"

"No, sir. They were used by St. Mungo's on occasion, but it is my understanding that they were also marketed to Muggle hospitals."

"Thank you, Healer Smethwyck; I have nothing further."

"If I may draw the court's attention to the distribution reports for these potions, they show that these products were, in fact, marketed directly to Muggle facilities and not supervised by St. Mungo's or other wizarding facilities."

Kingsley Shacklebolt turned to Hermione. "You may respond."

"Malfoy Industries concedes that magic was used in the creation of these potions. However, we do not believe that this violates the International Statute of Secrecy. I would like to address this directly with the Wizengamot at this time."

Amos Diggory nodded.

"First, I can find nothing in the law that specifically forbids giving a potion with magical properties to a Muggle. Most past cases involving Muggles and inappropriate use of potions involved harmful potions. The ones that I can locate where the potions were not harmful generally involved coercion of some form."

"Surely, Advocate Granger, you are not arguing that the Statute allows potions to be freely distributed to Muggles. Magic is not to be used in the presence of a Muggle." Robert Hilliard had found his voice.

"Sir, it is my understanding that it is a crime to knowingly perform magic in a Muggle-inhabited area or in the presence of a Muggle. The magic used to create these potions was completed entirely in magical laboratories. No magic was performed in the presence of Muggles."

"Advocate Granger, magic is performed on the ingestion of these potions, even though it isn't performed directly by a witch or wizard at that time." Amos Diggory spoke directly to Hermione.

"Sir, I agree that it is a questionable practice under the Statute, a gray area. However, another clause of the Statute states that magic can be used in front of Muggles in situations where lives are threatened. It is on this basis that we apply for special permission to continue marketing these potions. These potions have saved many lives, and in addition, they have improved the lives of many others."

"You may begin your argument, Advocate Granger."

"Thank you, sir." Hermione stood and walked in front of the court.

"Malfoy Industries seeks exception to the Statute for the requested products. We believe this action will improve quality of life for wizards and Muggles."

"The use of magic on Muggles is not without precedent in our society. Charms are used on Muggles by law enforcement officials when deemed necessary to protect public safety. Memory charms are also used to protect the secrecy of the magical world. As discussed by Healer Smethwyck, Healers often perform life-saving charms on Muggles in emergency situations. Approved potions are allowed to be used under Healer supervision."

"Malfoy Industries views their work in potions research as a logical extension of the work of those Healers. The more sensitive products have only been distributed to Healers, while the other products follow all Muggle protocols for safe distribution."

"I will first address the benefits of the products. After that, I will address the steps that Malfoy Industries has taken, and continues to take, to protect the secrecy of magic."

"First, I shall address the benefits for Muggles and wizards."

"Please see the following exhibits for the progress reports of each of the three products respectively. We have included the reports on the clinical trials of each product. Each binder details what steps were taken to ensure the product's safety. It also includes the certifications and licenses necessary in the Muggle world to market the products. Finally, the binders contain ongoing studies of the progress of each drug."

"Once again, I have provided these materials to Healer Smethwyck. He has reviewed the materials and can answer any questions you may have. Mr. Malfoy, Master Snape, and Miss Malfoy are also available for questions."

Amos Diggory called Healer Smethwyck back to the stand. "Healer Smethwyck, please give us your opinions of these products."

"All three of the products that have been marketed by Malfoy industries have been extremely successful. Highly effective and safe, they have each improved the medical outcome for the recipients."

Several members of the Wizengamot had questions for Healer Smethwyck, which he answered to their satisfaction.

Hermione nodded her thanks to Healer Smethwyck before starting her next argument. "Next, I would like to address the benefits for wizards. Mr. Malfoy and Master Snape will provide testimony in this area."

Draco spoke of the research process that Severus had brought to Malfoy industries. He explained how all of his researchers were now charged with looking for answers from multiple cultures. He believed that Severus' research process had helped develop improved procedures in many other areas.

Severus spoke of the ways they had used the Muggle-based medicine to improve a number of wizarding potions. As he and Hermione had choreographed, he dropped names of several of his products that caught the attention of the members of the Wizengamot.

"Now in addition, I will also address the quality control process. Exhibit twenty-nine details information on some of the products developed that Black Pharmaceuticals has decided not to market on a broad basis."

"Master Snape, please explain why the blood restorative was not marketed directly to Muggle hospitals for use by Muggle doctors."

"Originally, Advocate Granger, it was intended that this product would be available in Muggle hospitals for broad use. The product is very safe; it is also very effective. However, in the clinical trials, we encountered a unique problem. The doctors involved in the trials reported that it worked 'magically.' Obviously, this proved a concern in terms of exposure. We didn't want any doctors, or rival pharmaceutical companies, digging too hard into the origin of the product. As a compromise, we opted to market it only to be used by Healers."

"What about the sedative?"

"It is a similar story, Advocate Granger. Patients commented on how remarkable the effects were compared to other products. It seemed a potential exposure risk. When managed by Healers, that was less of a concern. Many patients treated by Healers receive an Obliviate for other reasons."

"Can you tell us about the unreleased fertility potion?"

"Like the version that we distributed, that is a potion to help reduce the risk of premature birth. It was effective in its testing stage. However, due to the particular combination of magical ingredients, it may increase the likelihood of magical births. We did not want to upset the balance of magical births through artificial means. We are monitoring the children born on this medication to see if an unusual number exhibit magic."

"And the pain medication that was not released, Master Snape?"

"This was mildly addictive. We stopped the testing on it and helped the subjects. There were no long term effects, but again, we did not wish to market anything unless it was proven to be completely safe."

The members of the Wizengamot asked a few questions about how their standards compared to Muggle standards; they were all impressed that the company had even tighter standards before releasing a product.

"Finally, ladies and gentleman, I wish to address the issue of exposure. One of the primary concerns in this matter is the protection of the wizarding community. As a result, it is important that the magic present in the products cannot be identified. I would now like to address actions that were taken to protect the secrecy of wizardry.

"Master Snape, please explain what precautions were taken to prevent exposure."

"I developed a Concealment Charm that hides the existence of magic. If a Muggle tries to determine the ingredients in the medication, they are given the components of a mirror remedy with no magical ingredients. The mirror medicine is also safe and effective, though not as effective as the magical product."

Amos Diggory spoke up. "How do we know the charm is effective?"

Lyra addressed Mr. Diggory. "If I may, sir, we had Muggle scientists test each drug. All of them reported back the same list of ingredients. They all matched the non-magical mirror product."

Hermione handed the panel yet another stack of papers before she spoke. "In addition, we have submitted the charmed potion along with an uncharmed Muggle mirror product to a well-known Charms master. Master Flitwick is with us today."

"Master Flitwick, please come forward," Kingsley called to the tiny professor.

Hermione turned to Master Flitwick. "Please tell us what you discovered about the charm."

"The charm itself is very subtle. I could not detect its use through conventional magic. I was eventually able to break the Concealment Charm. However, there is a protection in the charm that is quite ingenious. Any use of magic against the Concealment Charm triggers a Finite Incantatem on the magic within the potion. Trying to identify the magic actually ends the use of the magic. I consulted with more than one other Charms master and one Gringotts Curse-Breaker. They all reported similar findings."

"Objection!" Percy called. "That is hearsay."

"Gentleman, I submit the following letters from several Charms masters to and from Master Flitwick regarding their experience with the potion. The letters were checked by court officials for potential forgery. I also would like to call Bill Weasley. He is the Curse-Breaker in question."

"Very well, Advocate Granger."

Bill stepped forward. Percy's jaw dropped. Hermione turned to Bill. "Curse-Breaker Weasley, please tell us what you found when you examined the potions."

"It took very advanced magic to break the Concealment Charm on the potion. The only way that I was able to identify that there was a charm on the potion was through a confidential Gringotts' spell. And even then, once the charm was broken, the magic lifted, and I was unable to identify what type of magic was used to create the potion."

"Thank you. That is all." She turned to Draco. "Mr. Malfoy, please explain the production process for these medications."

"Most of the labor is done by elves. We did not want a large number of wizards with the information about the Concealment Charm or the products themselves. The elves are not permitted to speak of their work to anyone outside the production staff except Lyra, Severus, me, or a Ministry official. We felt that elves would be less likely to betray the information, either accidentally or on purpose."

"How was the product distributed?"

"The products were distributed through Black Pharmaceuticals. After the appropriate licenses were obtained, the first product was released slowly. Again, we were trying to ensure safety and discretion."

"How long have these products been in circulation in the Muggle world?"

"Five years for the oldest potion."

"Have there been any security breaches?"

"No."

"Any inquiries from the Ministry prior to this one?"

"No."

"Any use of Memory Charms on Muggles?"

"No."

"Thank you."

Amos Diggory chimed in. "Can you explain to us why you did not seek an exception from this court before marketing the product?"

"Sir, I accept full responsibility for the error. I was unaware that there was a procedure for applying for an exception. I was very excited about the possible positive implications of the discovery. The chance to help others while building the company and its sphere of influence was very alluring. We worked very hard to ensure that both the magical and Muggle world were fully protected and that the Muggle world would see only a scientific advance. It was our intent at all times to maintain secrecy, though I concede that we ventured into very grey areas of the law. Our error was not speaking to counsel before deploying the product. I assure you, sir, that our practical plan was very solid, even if our zeal caused a procedural problem."

The members of the Wizengamot asked a few more questions. After a few minutes, Amos Diggory turned to Percy.

"Advocate Weasley, have you any more evidence to introduce?"

"No, sir."

"Advocate Granger?"

"No, sir."

"Very well, then. Advocate Weasley, your closing argument, please?"

"Thank you sir. Ladies and Gentlemen, as you have heard, Malfoy Industries willfully violated the International Statute of Secrecy. They did so with arrogance and little respect for centuries-old procedures. The company must be held accountable for their actions. Further, we ask that the Wizengamot uphold the historical purpose of the International Statute of Secrecy."

"Advocate Granger, your closing statement."

"Malfoy Industries acknowledges that an error in judgment was made in not seeking a legal solution to the Statute before releasing their products. Therefore, we must consider the negative consequences of this error. The simple answer is that there have been no negative consequences. The evidence presented today has shown significant improvement in the lives of thousands of Muggles. We have learned that Malfoy Industries and Black Pharmaceuticals took extensive steps to ensure the safety of its customers. Many of these measures far exceed any legal requirements, either wizarding or Muggle. We have also seen how efforts were made to ensure the security of the wizarding world."

"Several years have passed without incident. The process is safe and secure. We ask that the Wizengamot formally approve the use of these products, nullifying the injunction against the production of these important medications. We ask that the Wizengamot look beyond the letter of the law and focus on the intent and potential to improve lives. Ladies and Gentlemen, we ask that you do not allow fear and prejudice to stand in the way of protection of human life."

Amos Diggory addressed the members of the Wizengamot. "Given the large amount of evidence before the Wizengamot, much of it written, we will adjourn for today. The members of the Wizengamot will meet this afternoon to discuss the case and a verdict will be handed down tomorrow morning. Thank you all."

Hermione moved to the Atrium. She saw Lyra speaking with her parents on one side of the room. Severus was with them; he looked as if he would rather be anywhere else. Her eyes scanned the area, looking for Draco. She had one more form requiring his signature before they could adjourn for the day. To Hermione's shock, she spied Draco talking with Oliver Wood. They were situated well away from the rest of the group.

She turned and walked over to the two men. She felt a pang of nervousness at approaching Oliver. She did not know how he would react to seeing her.

"Draco." She smiled as she approached. "I have some forms for you to sign when you get a moment. Hello, Oliver, it's good to see you. You're looking well," she said honestly. Oliver looked better than she'd seen him in years. He had regained the fire of his youth. He looked back the way she remembered him when he had been married to Katie. It pleased her immensely.

"Thank you, Hermione. I hear your case went well today." He gave her a friendly smile, but then his attention seemed to wander. Hermione looked over her shoulder to see what had caught his attention. Hermione saw Lyra talking to her parents. Looking stunning as always, Lyra looked over towards them; she gave the three of them a glowing smile. Oliver's eyes glazed over.

Hermione laughed inwardly. *Typical.*

"I hope so. We won't know until tomorrow. But all of the witnesses did better than I could have expected."

"That was good work in there, Granger," Draco drawled. "There's really no need for the false modesty in this crowd."

"Well, someone has to balance you and your bravado out, Malfoy," Hermione shot back, but her words were light and playful.

"Well, Hermione, I've never known you to lose an argument." Oliver gave her a friendly smile. She laughed. She and Oliver had never really quarreled, but they were both extremely competitive by nature and knew that about each other.

"It doesn't happen often," she offered.

"No, no it doesn't." Oliver was now looking over Hermione's shoulder, unhappily this time.

Curious, she glanced behind her to see what Oliver was looking at so intently. Hermione saw Severus talking with Professor Flitwick.

"Professor Snape looks well," Oliver commented coldly.

Hermione cringed. It wasn't like Oliver to be unkind. She reminded herself quietly that few people knew Severus as he was today. The Professor Snape of her childhood evoked that reaction in many of her peers.

"His research suits him," Hermione stated simply. "I think the quiet life he's been living over the past few years has done him much good."

"I'm sure," Oliver choked out. Hermione was again taken aback. Oliver noticed her reaction, and he quickly controlled his own.

"Well, I won't keep you two from your business." Oliver turned back to Draco for a moment. "Thank you for the advice, Draco. Have a good day."

"I mean what I said, Wood. This is a matter that should be dealt with soon." Draco's face was serious. Oliver nodded thoughtfully. Hermione was curious what they could be discussing, but knowing Draco and Oliver, it was probably some Quidditch situation that she wouldn't care about or understand. Oliver turned and left.

Hermione was aware that Draco was watching her face with some interest. Hermione opened her briefcase and pulled out some papers for Draco to sign. She explained to him that they were the request to lower the amount of the fines Percy had proposed. He read over them quickly and signed them for her.

"Thank you, Draco. I will see you tomorrow."

"Actually, Granger, Astoria wanted me to invite you to dinner this evening. Seven o' clock at the Manor."

Hermione nodded. She would enjoy seeing Astoria and Scorpius. Draco crossed over to his father, and they were soon engrossed in conversation. Looking across the

room, Hermione noticed that Lyra had disappeared. With a smile, Hermione observed Narcissa talking with her sister. Astoria had told her at one point that Narcissa and Andromeda had reconciled after the war. She was glad to see them rebuilding their relationship. Severus was still a bit removed from the group. He looked distinctly uncomfortable with the attention he was getting from the various members of the Wizengamot.

Hermione decided to take pity on him. As she approached, she adopted her official demeanor once again. "Master Snape," she said calmly and clearly, "if it isn't too much trouble, we have some official matters to discuss. If you could accompany me to my office, it would be appreciated."

He looked momentarily perplexed at her tone and her request. Comprehension quickly dawned, and he nodded imperceptibly before grousing mildly for the benefit of the onlookers. Hermione led him over to the Floo. She told him her office address and then stepped through the Floo.

Severus followed shortly thereafter and stepped out behind her. "Thank you, Hermione. I forget sometimes how much I loathe the Ministry."

"Not a problem, Severus. It must be quite a shock after the serenity of the Manor."

"Yes. There are few outside the Manor whose company I enjoy."

Hermione's face fell. "Well, I won't keep you. Feel free to use the Floo." She turned her back.

"Hermione, you can't think I meant you." She remained with her back facing him. "Hermione..."

"What?"

"Turn around."

She did not comply.

He crossed over and put his hand on her shoulder. "In case it is not clear to you, I enjoy your company very much. Over the past few weeks, I have come to value your friendship more than I want to admit."

She turned around. "You do? You consider me a friend?" Her eyes were hopeful.

Severus warred with himself. Oh, how he knew that was a lie. He did not view her as a friend at all. He saw an attractive, vibrant woman, who tested him and provoked him in ways he wasn't ready to admit to her or to himself. He chose the safest answer possible. "I enjoy our time together, Hermione."

"As do I, Severus." She looked at up at him again with those eyes. Those damn, beautiful, soft eyes that haunted his thoughts when he was alone. She bit her lip, and then she said with much caution, "I certainly hope that we will continue to have time to visit after the case is over."

"I would like that." He gave her a half smile.

"I'll be at the Manor tonight for dinner. Will I see you there?"

"No, I will be away from the Manor this evening."

"Oh, well, then I shall see you tomorrow." Hermione tried to hide her disappointment.

"Very well, Hermione. Thank you again for your help with this case. This work means a lot to all of us."

"You are welcome, Severus. It is important work; I can see that."

He nodded and stepped through the Floo.

Several hours later, Astoria greeted Hermione warmly in the parlor. "How are you, Hermione?"

"Good, thank you. How are you feeling?"

"Quite well, thank you. It will just be the five of us for dinner tonight. Lyra and Severus have plans this evening."

Hermione felt her stomach drop out. Her disappointment at not seeing Severus was nothing compared to the ache she felt at hearing that he had plans with Lyra.

"How is Scorpius?" Hermione changed the subject quickly.

"My-nee!" a tiny voice answered, and Scorpius ran into the room.

Draco followed, laughing. "I couldn't keep up with him. Once he heard your voice, Hermione, he was off. Between you and Severus, I'm not sure who he gets more excited to see."

Hermione bounced Scorpius about while she chatted with her friends. Lucius and Narcissa joined them a few minutes later. Astoria announced it was time for Scorpius to go up to bed a few minutes later. She was feeling fatigued from the pregnancy, so Narcissa offered to help her put little Scorpius to bed, which Astoria graciously accepted.

Lucius looked uncharacteristically uncomfortable. Draco smiled. "Father needs an extra drink this evening. It seems he had a conversation earlier this evening that has left him unsettled." Draco crossed to the sideboard and poured his father a drink.

Lucius shot his son a look. "Draco, your time will come, son. Even though I am happy about the turn of events, it still leaves one feeling nostalgic."

"I do not remember this type of fanfare when Astoria and I were courting."

"Well, son, I'm not sure what to say, except that it's different with a daughter. I know Lord and Lady Greengrass had similar feelings, even though they were thrilled at the union."

"I'm just glad he has finally decided to move forward. Whatever her hesitation, she loves him."

"Draco, this conversation has become unseemly in front of Miss Granger. Do forgive us." Lucius gave a polite nod.

She smiled weakly. Hermione had gone stark white. She was extremely grateful that Lucius had stopped that line of discussion. She really didn't need to hear the romantic tale of Severus Snape and Lyra Malfoy. She could feel her stomach turn at the thought.

"Granger, are you feeling ill?" Draco sounded concerned. Suddenly, his face fell. "Oh, Merlin. Granger, I'm sorry. I thought you knew they were an item."

She looked at Draco in shock. *How long had he known about her feelings for Severus?*

"I think I need to go home. I'm sorry for my rudeness. Draco, please give my apologies to Astoria and your mother. I'm not feeling well at all." Hermione bolted to the Floo.

Upon arriving in her flat, she collapsed onto the sofa, her heart heavy with the information she had obtained. After the exchange in her office, she had let herself start to hope. Now, she was crushed.

The Decision

Chapter 9 of 10

The Wizengamot shares their decision. Ginny and Harry go to a party.

The following morning, Hermione pulled herself together. She was a professional; she could handle this. When she entered the courtroom, she greeted her clients politely and sat down to wait for the members of the Wizengamot to enter.

Minister Shacklebolt addressed the room. "Ladies and gentlemen, the members of the Wizengamot have discussed the case extensively. We are prepared to issue our decision now."

Amos Diggory spoke to the group. "It is the opinion of this court that Malfoy Industries and Black Pharmaceuticals should be allowed to continue distribution of the products in question. The good done by the products should not be stifled by blind adherence to ancient laws. To stop their distribution would be disruptive to the Muggle medical world. Not only would it harm Muggles but it would also draw undesirable attention to our world.

"However, it cannot continue without monitoring and regulation. As this work is unprecedented, the Wizengamot hereby authorizes the creation of Regulation of Magical Product Distribution Office. This department will report through the Improper Use of Magic Office. Any product that any wizard wishes to market to Muggles will have to seek approval through this office. The office will work with the Muggle Liaison Office to ensure that all proper licenses are obtained through the Muggle authorities.

"In addition, we must recognize that Malfoy Industries has broken the law. Regardless of the outcome, we cannot have companies or individuals taking the law into their own hands. As such, we will impose sanctions on Malfoy Industries for their past illegal actions.

"We have received both Advocate Weasley's proposal for sanctions and the counteroffer from Malfoy Industries. The Wizengamot is prepared to accept the counteroffer from Malfoy Industries.

"Thank you, ladies and gentlemen of the Wizengamot. Advocates Weasley and Granger, the Wizengamot thanks you for your service as well. This court is adjourned."

Hermione stood, but she didn't move at first from her spot. People started milling around her, shaking her hand and congratulating her. She smiled graciously, thankful for their kind words, but secretly aching to get away from this whole scene.

Hermione turned to Draco. He was beaming. Lyra also looked extremely pleased. Severus' face showed relief and, interestingly, determination.

"Draco, congratulations," Hermione stated warmly. "I am pleased that the work started by your business will be allowed to continue."

"We couldn't have done it without you, Granger. Tell me, what would it take to get you on my staff permanently?"

"Corporate law isn't my specialty, Draco. Defending the downtrodden is my area of expertise. Hopefully, this is the only time you meet that criteria." She managed a cheeky smile.

"Granger, the door's always open if you change your mind. Malfoy Industries or Malfoy Foundation, either one of them could use another good attorney."

Hermione raised her eyebrow. She hadn't realized he was offering her a position with the charitable organization now run by Mrs. Malfoy. "I'll keep it in mind, Ferret."

"You do that." Draco started to exit the room to catch up with his parents. Severus was standing right behind him.

"And Severus," she said, forcing a smile. "I suppose that means it is back to the lab for you. Good luck in the future, sir."

He was perplexed by her distance. "Thank you, Hermione." He turned and started to leave the courtroom.

"Lyra, it has been lovely to work with you." Hermione offered her hand to the blonde.

"Congratulations to you as well; you have done a great deal of good here today. You have set a wonderful example for non-magical people trying to live their lives in both worlds. I hope you continue to do so."

"Thank you, Hermione. You have been wonderful to all of us."

"Congratulations on your engagement as well," Hermione whispered, motioning to the beautiful ring that adorned Lyra's left ring finger.

Lyra paled. "Thank you; I didn't know what you would think. I was afraid it would be awkward."

Hermione struggled to find something positive to say. "You both deserve to be happy."

Lyra's smile turned genuine. "Please look for an owl from Mother and Father soon." Hermione felt like she was going to be ill. Lyra turned and exited the courtroom.

Hermione took a minute by herself. Or at least she thought she was alone. Severus remained in the doorway, watching her intently. He had watched the exchange with Lyra. He felt a pang of guilt for eavesdropping, but he found he couldn't look away. The news was obviously upsetting for Hermione. He heard something behind him, and he turned to see Harry Potter watching them both.

"Mr. Potter, can I help you?" Severus asked coolly.

"I was just coming back by to congratulate Hermione. It wasn't appropriate to say anything before with the other members of the Wizengamot present. I'm actually surprised she's still here. I would have thought she would have been celebrating. But she sure doesn't look like she's celebrating."

"Perhaps, Mr. Potter, as her oldest friend, you should go see what is bothering her."

"Why are you standing here watching her?"

"I was going to thank her for her help with the case, and I had also hoped to speak with her without an audience. However, given that she looks upset, I shall speak with her later. Go comfort her, Mr. Potter."

Harry smirked. Was it possible Snape actually had feelings for Hermione also? Harry thought he must, as he seemed genuinely concerned at Hermione's apparent distress. Harry shook his head to clear it and entered the courtroom to speak to Hermione again. Severus turned and walked away.

"Hermione, you were fantastic. Congratulations."

"Harry!" She gave him a hug, her face losing some of its prior gloom. "Thank you."

"Are you okay?" He frowned as he saw her face fall again.

"I...well, no, I'm not," she said, looking down at her hands and fidgeting.

"What's happened?"

"They're engaged." Her voice was low and pained.

"Who?"

Hermione looked irritated. "Severus and Lyra. He asked her last night. I had the distinct joy of listening to Lucius Malfoy wax poetic about his little girl getting married to the man I'm in love with. Lucius didn't know about my feelings, of course. Draco knows, though. I humiliated myself, running from the Manor like an embarrassed child. After yesterday, I really thought there was a chance."

"What happened yesterday?" Harry was incensed. It was one thing if her feelings had been hurt accidentally, but if someone had mistreated Hermione, there would be hell to pay.

"Nothing, really. We just had a good conversation. It felt like the door was open. Nothing was said about a romantic relationship, but there was a clear implication of spending more time together. And then I find out that he was going off to propose to her last night."

"Hermione, I'm so sorry. Let's get you out of here. " Harry wrapped his arms around his friend. She leaned into him for a moment, and he tried to comfort her. It didn't make sense. Snape wasn't the type to tease a woman. Why in the world would he have given her the impression that he wanted a deeper relationship with her if he did not?

"And then I have to watch her being all glowy today, and I have to try to be gracious. She even acknowledged that it might be awkward, and I had to lie and pretend I'm okay with it."

Harry led her to the Floo and to his home. Ginny greeted her husband and their friend. She tried to comfort Hermione, but Hermione was still reeling from the events of the past twenty-four hours. The children provided significant distraction, and she was able to pass the evening with no further tears.

The next morning, when she woke up in Harry and Ginny's guest room, she told herself she was fine. She was certainly disappointed and a little confused at how things had unfolded, but she could handle this. She'd survived a war, and she'd lost one great love; she was going to be just fine. This was just a setback.

Ginny watched her friend sadly. She didn't want to press Hermione for details, but she knew she was hurting. She had caught only snippets of the story. Hermione had feelings for Severus Snape; she had thought he returned them, but he had suddenly become engaged to another woman. Harry was right; it didn't make any sense. But Hermione was determined to push through it.

"Once a Gryffindor, always a Gryffindor, right?" Ginny gave Hermione an encouraging smile. Harry hugged his friend, and he and his wife watched her disappear into the Floo.

Hermione went back to her flat, put on her best suit and prepared to go to the office. For Hermione, work was a sanctuary for the brokenhearted; it was the place where Hermione had initially fled when Viktor had been killed. The champion of the downtrodden attacked her work like a woman possessed. She went through the pile of cases she had been working on, sending out a flurry of owls and memos to the various Ministry departments. She soon found herself looking at her pile of less urgent cases and ploughed through many of those as well. Rachel, Hermione's assistant, quietly placed a lunch on Hermione's desk. Hermione sighed and thanked Rachel shyly.

The next thing Hermione knew, Rachel was back again to say she was leaving for the day. "Shall I have dinner delivered for you, Hermione?"

"Yes, please."

Rachel headed back to her desk to order dinner for Hermione. *The poor dear*, Rachel thought sadly. *She's taking the news harder than expected.*

Hermione continued like this for several days. Harry showed up for lunch several times, as Rachel had secretly owled him asking him to help. At the beginning of the second week, the letter arrived that she'd been dreading. She saw the Malfoy crest, and immediately her heart sank again. She looked at the envelope, groaning when she saw Lucius and Narcissa's name, along with the formal lettering of a party invitation. She tossed the invitation unceremoniously into the trash bin and lit it on fire with her wand.

A few days later, Hermione was in Diagon Alley picking up a few supplies when she spotted Severus. He had the nerve to try to catch her eye. She felt the urge to run away, but her stubbornness kicked in. She had things she needed; she was not going to run away.

"Hermione," he said politely as she passed him.

"Severus, how are you?"

"Fine, thank you. Do you have a moment?"

"I am in a bit of a hurry, Severus. I can spare just a moment."

"Well, I'm sure you know the Malfoys are throwing a huge engagement party. I was wondering" He froze mid-sentence. He had seen the look of terror on her face. *Did she know what he was about to ask?*

"I'm not attending, Severus. I'm sure you can understand how that particular event would be a bit uncomfortable for me."

He gave her a sympathetic look, which only served to make her blood boil.

She steeled her reaction. He would not see how badly she was hurting. Her pride would see to that.

He continued. "Of course. Well, in that case, Hermione, I was hoping that we could have lunch sometime. I enjoyed talking with you when we were working together. I had hoped we could continue our friendship," he said. He reached out gently and tried to touch her hand. She pulled back forcefully, as if she had been burned. The look on her

face showed traces of both pain and anger.

"I don't think that's a good idea, Severus. Now, leave me be." She turned and stalked away quickly. Severus was stunned. Hermione Granger might lack tact, but Severus certainly didn't expect rude. Something wasn't adding up.

Ginny Potter applied her make-up charms and headed down the stairs where Harry was waiting for her. She was excited for a night out with her husband. The fact that it was going to be a high society party only made her slightly giddier. Harry had taken the kids to the Burrow; they were on their own for the night.

Harry was less thrilled about the party, but he knew how much Ginny needed a night out. And Oliver and Ginny had remained friends for a long time. Oliver had Floo-called Ginny a few days before, apologizing profusely that there had been a mix-up with their invitation. Ginny had happily accepted his verbal invitation. When Ginny walked into the kitchen, Harry's heart leapt. Mrs. Potter was a striking woman. Harry considered himself a very lucky man.

"Well, shall we?" He offered his arm to his wife.

"Absolutely," she said with a grin.

Harry Apparated them to Oliver's home. They entered the foyer and were greeted by a house-elf, who took their coats and brought them a drink. Ginny and Harry began to mingle. Neville and Hannah Longbottom were the first couple they recognized. Harry and Ginny approached them eagerly.

"Harry, Ginny! It's good to see you." Neville smiled.

"Hello, Neville. Good evening, Hannah." Harry greeted them with a smile. Ginny and Hannah had already launched into a conversation. Harry laughed quietly. Ginny really needed a night out among adults.

"Is Hermione going to be here tonight?" Neville asked Harry with mild concern in his voice.

"I don't think so." Harry lowered his voice. "She's had a rough couple of weeks; I think she's lying low for a while."

"Well," Neville said with a sad smile. "I can see how this would be a difficult night for her. I do hope she's okay."

Harry gave Neville a questioning look, wondering what Neville could mean. He decided to let it drop. "I haven't seen Oliver yet this evening," Harry offered, changing the subject.

"Neither have I. Nor have I seen his fiancée. What an interesting match."

"Interesting? How so?"

"Well, the difference in their backgrounds, if nothing else. Don't get me wrong; she's quite nice, and he seems very happy. Still, it was quite a shock to learn about her, given her family."

Harry didn't wish to be rude, but these words out of Neville's mouth were nothing short of shocking. Neville was never the type to turn up his nose at Muggles. "Well, Neville, I haven't made it to the bar yet. I think I'll go get Ginny and me a drink. It was good to see you."

Harry took Ginny by the arm gently, and he asked if she wanted to go get a drink. She nodded and politely excused herself from Hannah's company.

Neville stood confused, wondering what he had said to upset his old friend. Shaking it off, he turned back to Hannah and the party.

Harry was surprised to see Draco and Astoria Malfoy at the party. Then again, Astoria was Hermione's friend; it was possible that Draco and Oliver had become friends while Oliver and Hermione were together. However, that didn't explain why Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy were at the party dressed in their finest. Oliver and his mystery woman were nowhere to be seen. But perhaps the biggest shock came when Harry spotted Severus Snape, standing off to the side of the room, talking to Kingsley Shacklebolt. He appeared to be alone.

Harry leaned over to Ginny and whispered, "Look who's here."

Ginny looked surprised. "Why would Oliver invite him? Merlin knows he was never nice to any of us in school."

"I know. Of all people for Snape to have connected with after the war, I wouldn't have guessed Oliver."

"The Malfoys are here, too," Ginny whispered. "All of them. That's just strange."

"Oliver isn't a social climber, is he?" Harry asked.

Ginny shot Harry a scathing look. "Of course not, Harry."

"Well, I didn't think so. I mean, Draco, I could see. He's a big Quidditch fan, and Hermione is close to Astoria. So, they probably were thrown together a lot. But his parents? I hope they behave themselves around Oliver's girlfriend. After that comment from Neville..."

"Fiancée."

"What?"

"Oliver's fiancée. He proposed to her a couple of weeks ago. This is their engagement party. Speaking of, I want to get a look at Snape's fiancée. Surely, she's here. I want to know what the mysterious Malfoy looks like."

"I don't think you ever told me Oliver's fiancée's name."

Ginny paused. "You are right. And you know what is even more interesting? I'm not sure I know her last name. I only met her the one time. She's nice, very intelligent, extremely pretty and reasonably funny. Her first name is Lyra."

Harry, who had just taken a drink, swallowed hard to keep from choking. "What does she look like?"

Ginny's eyes narrowed. "Tall, willowy, blonde, very pretty. A bit of a snobby air, but overall, a nice person."

Harry's confusion was reaching a fevered level. "You said she is a Muggle. Are you sure she's not a Squib?"

Ginny stopped and thought. "I don't remember what he said about her that made me think she is a Muggle. He may have said it directly, or I may have inferred it. What are you getting at?"

"You know Draco's sister, the one Hermione defended along with Snape and Draco?"

"Well, I never met her, but I heard you and Hermione talk about her. She's the one marrying Snape, right?"

"I'm beginning to think not," Harry said. "Her name is Lyra. She's a Squib."

"Oh, my." Ginny clapped her hand over her mouth. "If that's true, then ..."

"Then Hermione's confused ..."

"It can't be."

"Why else would the elder Malfoys be here?"

Just then, Lucius Malfoy walked to the center of the room and cast a Sonorous Charm. Harry and Ginny looked on in shock as he began to address the crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming here tonight. Mrs. Malfoy and I, along with Mr. and Mrs. Wood, are so pleased you could join us to celebrate the engagement of our children. As many of you know, they have been courting for just over a year now. We are very pleased with the union, and we welcome Oliver into our family. May I have a round of applause for the happy couple!"

Oliver Wood walked into the room with Lyra Malfoy on his arm. Harry's jaw dropped. It all made sense now. Lyra was engaged. Snape was not. Snape was interested in Hermione. Lyra was concerned about Hermione's reaction, but for an entirely different reason than Hermione thought. Hermione was Oliver's longtime ex-girlfriend. That was why Neville had said this night would be hard for her. He thought she was still pining for Oliver. And the comment about her family had nothing to do with her being a Muggle, because she wasn't a Muggle. She was a Malfoy. Draco had also guessed wrong about Hermione's feelings. When she had run from the Manor, Draco had thought she was weeping for her former lover.

Heavens, this was a mess. Severus and Hermione, while both intelligent people, were both inexperienced in matters of the heart. She had always been oblivious to attention from the opposite sex, and Harry doubted Snape had actually received much of that type of attention. Something had to be done.

Harry waited impatiently through the toasts. His eyes scanned the room for Snape. Harry knew he probably wasn't the one to talk to Snape about Hermione; he couldn't imagine that would go well. But he couldn't let this continue. Who could help him? He spotted Astoria Malfoy. She was his answer. She, or perhaps Draco, would be able to talk to Severus, and she cared about Hermione's happiness, too.

"Ginny, please come with me." Harry wrapped his arm around his wife and began moving quickly through the crowd.

"What are you up to?" Ginny was taken aback by Harry's sudden determination, but she knew how Harry was when there was a problem to solve.

"I'm going to talk to Astoria and Draco. We need to help Hermione."

Ginny and Harry crossed over to Astoria and Draco. "Astoria," Ginny said sweetly. "It's good to see you."

"We need help," Harry stated bluntly. "Actually, we need your help." He looked at Draco pointedly. Draco's eyebrow shot up. He and Harry were civil now, but he was shocked to hear Harry ask for a favor.

"It's about Hermione, Astoria," Ginny said, knowing who the correct target was. Draco was dedicated to his wife, and Astoria was dedicated to her friend.

"Is she well? She hasn't returned any of my owls in two weeks. And Lyra was upset that she declined the party invitation."

"Astoria," Draco cut in, "she didn't take the news of the engagement well. She's not over Oliver, apparently."

"That's just it," Ginny said quickly and quietly. "She is completely over Oliver. She's really happy for him. I have no doubt she would be here tonight if she knew the truth. She thinks your sister is marrying someone else, someone who she is interested in now."

"What? Who?"

"Snape," Harry stated gravely. Draco looked shocked. "I know, I know, Malfoy. But Hermione and Snape were becoming close during the case. She thought there was a spark, and then somehow she got the mixed up message that Lyra was marrying him. She's devastated. She thinks Snape was toying with her."

"That makes no sense. Severus would never..."

"I don't know how it happened either, Draco," Ginny responded, "but she's seriously a mess."

"And he's been back to his old bat-like self for the past two weeks. He didn't say why, but" Draco rolled his eyes.

"She told me that he approached her in Diagon Alley and invited her to lunch. It made her angry, and she was quite rude to him," Harry explained, piecing it together.

"Snape asked her on a date? And then she turned him down rudely, not understanding the situation?" Draco turned to Ginny to make sure he was finally understanding.

"Right," Ginny said.

"What should we do?" Astoria asked, "Send a Patronus?"

A few minutes later, after a great deal of whispering between Harry, Ginny, Astoria and Draco, Draco Malfoy crossed the room to his godfather. More whispering followed. Shortly thereafter, Severus Snape gave his apologies to the party hosts and left quietly. Severus Snape was a known recluse, so nobody thought much of him making a quick appearance and then leaving. Well, nobody except the Potters and the Malfoys. Lucius and Narcissa didn't fully understand the urgency of his departure, but Draco's determined look told his parents that they should not pry. All would be revealed in good time.

Hermione felt the wards shift outside her flat moments before she heard the knock at the door. She glanced at herself in the mirror. She looked an absolute fright. She knew the party was tonight, and that fact had broken through the walls she'd been building with her work. Tonight she wasn't able to soldier through it. Her eyes were red, and her hair was a wild mess. She crossed over to the door.

"Who is it?"

"It's Severus. Hermione, we need to talk." He heard the lock click definitively.

"No, Severus, we don't. You need to leave me alone."

"Hermione, you don't understand. I didn't either until a little while ago. Open the door. I need to explain something." He leaned against the door.

"You need to be at the party."

"No, I don't. I need to talk to you."

She flung the door open. "What could you possibly have to say to me? Haven't you embarrassed me enough? Is this fun for you? Really, Severus, is it? Was it fun to watch me fall for you and make me think you had feelings for me as well, only to learn you are marrying someone else? Is this some bizarre holdover from when I was a bratty student?"

She paused, her eyes aflame. Her hair seemed to be growing wilder by the second. She was an absolute mess. He thought she was the most gorgeous mess he'd ever laid eyes on. He was torn between guilt over her pain, amusement at the absurdity of the situation, and raw desire to show her just how wrong she was about his feelings for her.

"Hermione, stop."

"No, I will not stop! You hurt me, Severus. You led me on. And then when I finally learned the truth, you continue to make a mockery of my disappointment and embarrassment!"

"Hermione, listen to me."

"Why? Why should I listen to you? So you can make some ridiculous excuse for making me think you had feelings for me?"

Her words were cut off by his lips on hers. She squealed and fought against him for a moment, but he did not yield. He wrapped an arm around her waist, and his other hand tangled into that wild hair. He felt her melt into the kiss. She felt exquisite in his arms. Her small hands were pressed against his chest in a very weak sign of protest, but she was no longer resisting. He didn't want to break the kiss, but he knew he must.

"I'm sorry. That probably wasn't the best way to get you to stop talking, considering how angry you are with me. But, now that I have your attention, let me explain something." She looked up at him, breathless. He could see that she was thoroughly confused.

"I am not engaged to Lyra. I am not involved with her romantically. I have not been for years. We are still close, and I still care for her very much, but it isn't a romantic love. It never really was. I won't deny that there was an attraction, but it has long since evolved into a companionable working relationship."

"But Lucius said...and the ring...and the party? I don't understand."

"Lyra is engaged. But not to me."

"Then who? Why would they think I would be upset? Why did she think it would be awkward?"

Severus hesitated. He thought that the news that it was Oliver would be welcome to her, but given all of the confusion, he wasn't sure anymore. "Lyra is marrying Oliver Wood. Draco dragged her to one of the Quidditch games Oliver was coaching a while ago. I think it was a month or two after you and he ended your relationship. Astoria was concerned about you because you and Oliver have history. She shared this concern with Draco. With the amount of time that you and Oliver were together, Draco expected someone would have residual feelings."

"No. Oliver's girlfriend is a Muggle. That's what he told Ginny."

"Oliver told Ginevra Potter that Lyra was non-magical. Ginevra assumed Muggle. That was back when Lyra was reluctant to get serious with Oliver because she thought that her family wouldn't approve. He didn't want to deal with Weasley ire over being involved with a Muggle if Lyra wasn't prepared to take their relationship public."

"Why wouldn't they approve of Oliver? He's pureblood, well-mannered, wealthy, and a former professional athlete."

"Who knows, Hermione? Lyra always expects her parents to disapprove of her choices. She still faults them for not knowing all the answers when she was a girl."

"It can't have been easy growing up as a Squib and a Muggle."

He groaned. "I don't want to argue about the Malfoys and their parenting skills, Hermione." He continued more softly, "I have tried, on more than one occasion, to approach you about a social relationship. Obviously, if you thought I was involved with someone else, my advances were confusing to you. So, I'm here to clear things up, once and for all."

He tilted her face up to look at him. "Look, Hermione, I'm attracted to you, I enjoy your company, and I'd like to see if there's a chance that can lead to more. I'm not romantically involved with anyone. You're an adult, I'm an adult, and neither of us is beholden to anyone. If you aren't interested, I will leave you alone. But I'm not going to allow this ridiculous comedy of errors to continue. Yes or no, Hermione? Did you mean what you said earlier? Do you have feelings for me that you want to pursue?"

"I...yes...I still don't understand how things got so messed up. But yes, I am also attracted to you and want to see where this might go."

"Excellent." He leaned in and kissed her again, this time much more deliberately. There was no resistance this time; she leaned into him and enjoyed every moment of the kiss. She pressed her petite body up against his, and he had to fight the urge to moan out loud right then and there. He reluctantly tried to disentangle himself from her.

"Come inside," she said. She was shocked at herself, but there was nothing more right at this moment than the two of them being together.

He sighed and took a breath. "I don't think I should." She looked disappointed and slightly hurt. "Oh, trust me, the desire is there. But we've started things off on the wrong foot here. As much as I want to, I don't think we should take this any further tonight. Have dinner with me tomorrow. Let me take you out properly when your head is clear of thoughts of Lyra and Oliver and all of this confusion."

She nodded shyly. He was right. The last thing they needed was to make a rash decision they might regret later. He was interested. She was interested. For now, it was enough.

"That sounds lovely, Severus. What time tomorrow?"

"I will owl you, if that is acceptable."

She nodded. "Thank you for coming by and clearing things up. I am sorry for attacking you like that."

"I am sorry that I hurt you. Please know that it was unintentional. I will talk to you tomorrow."

She leaned up and kissed him again, this time on the cheek. She knew that another intense kiss would test her resolve more than she could probably handle, and she suspected that he might feel the same. "Have a good evening, Severus."

"Until tomorrow, Hermione."

Moving Forward

Chapter 10 of 10

After resolving the misunderstandings, Hermione and Severus are able to move forward.

Hermione was at her breakfast table the following morning when the Floo call came through.

"Hermione?" Harry's voice was tentative.

"Good morning, Harry. Would you like to come through?"

"Um, are you alone?" Harry's blush was obvious even through the flames.

"Yes, Harry, I am alone. Although, that tells me that you know about my visitor yesterday evening."

"Hold on, I'm coming through." Harry stepped through the flames. He dusted himself off and took a good look at his friend. She looked like herself again. Gone was the haze of sadness he'd seen over the past couple of weeks.

"Hermione, did you get everything sorted out?"

"If you are asking if Severus and I talked, yes, we did. I don't know how everything got so confused. But I understand now that he and Lyra were in the past, and she's marrying Oliver. Of all people, isn't that crazy?"

"How do you feel about that?"

"About Oliver and Lyra?" She shrugged. "It's not a match I would have thought about, but if they are happy, that's great." Hermione's tone was light and airy. Harry breathed a sigh of relief that his friend seemed so relaxed.

"So, is there a next step for you and Snape?" he continued cautiously.

Hermione smiled shyly. Harry realized that he wasn't sure he wanted to hear her response.

"We're going to dinner tonight," she said simply. "We'll see where it goes from there."

Harry nodded. "Well, I'm glad you figured out the misunderstanding. I was afraid Snape wouldn't listen to us."

"Us?"

"Yeah," Harry said, messing up his hair in the back, "Draco helped. There's no way Snape would have listened to Ginny or me."

"So, The Boy Who Meddled had to work with his old nemesis?" Hermione laughed heartily as Harry's eyes grew wide at the nickname. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. I suppose Ginny's rubbing off on you."

Harry grinned sheepishly. "You seem better, Hermione. I hope it works out the way you want."

"Well, thank you, Harry. I'm still not sure how it got so tangled up, but I'm happy to put that behind me."

He nodded in acknowledgement. "I need to get to work. Ginny wants you to come by for lunch next week. I just wanted to make sure you were okay." Harry excused himself and stepped back into the Floo.

Severus' owl arrived at Hermione's office a few minutes after she arrived. She was surprised that he had selected a quaint little restaurant in Diagon Alley. She had expected that he would want to avoid the more common destinations, but the restaurant itself was quite charming. He asked her to meet him at 7:30. The message was efficient and polite, but it revealed nothing of his feelings about what he hoped for the evening. This didn't surprise Hermione; her reaction, on the other hand, was quite surprising. She found that she was getting quite nervous about the prospect of an evening alone with Severus. What if after all the buildup, they found they had little in common? She shook that thought from her head. This was just her nerves speaking. She sent back an equally polite confirmation. She returned to work in an effort to make the hours pass more quickly.

Severus smoothed his robes after he arrived at the Apparition point. He rounded the corner and walked calmly into the restaurant. Hermione was at the bar, waiting with a glass of wine. He thought she looked mildly nervous as well. After he spoke to the hostess, he walked over to Hermione and offered his arm. She smiled shyly before accepting the gesture. The hostess led the couple to a table near the back of the restaurant.

"How are you tonight, Severus?" she asked after the hostess left them.

"I'm good, and you?"

"I'm good. Busy. It seems that everyone has an idea of how to improve Muggle culture now and wants my representation." She rolled her eyes. "Very few of the ideas have any merit, and many are downright dangerous. But what about you? How have you been?"

"Draco wants to expand the research department. He and Lyra are both a bit overly enthusiastic about this. I'm barely getting any time in the lab. It all feels like paper pushing."

"Could you hire someone to help run the department and just focus on the actual research?"

"I could, but finding someone capable is a challenge."

"I understand that. I went through three assistants before I found Rachel."

"So, what are you going to do about all these requests for your representation?"

"We'll turn down most of them flat. I meant it when I told Draco I'm not interested in corporate law. Besides, there's going to be a department for this; they probably won't need an advocate anymore. Are you working on anything interesting?"

"The Wolfsbane testing went well this month. I'm still struggling with the improved Blood-Replenishing potion."

He continued talking about his work. The conversation flowed easily between them. They shared stories, thoughts and ideas. Neither held back; there were a few tense moments when one challenged the other a bit more aggressively than one would expect of a first date. But both knew that such spirited discourse was appreciated,

provided it was well-intended, which of course was the case.

After dinner, neither was ready for the evening to end. However, they both felt some apprehension about their next step for the evening. In an uncharacteristic display of affection, he took her by the hand and led her out onto the street. When it was time to retire for the evening, he escorted her back to her flat. Several minutes of intense kissing ensued on her porch, leaving them both breathless. They both wanted the evening to continue, but they refrained from giving in so soon. She stumbled into the flat in a pleasant fog. He headed down the street with a distinct confidence in his long strides.

Several more pleasant evenings passed between the two over the next few weeks. One cold night, she offered for him to stay yet again, and this time he did not hesitate to accept. They spent the next few hours exploring and enjoying each other before collapsing in an exhausted yet satisfied heap in her bed.

Not long after that night, he began making inquiries into houses away from the Manor. He knew the time had come for him to fully rejoin the rest of the world, and finding a new home was an important step. She would never come to him while he lived on the Manor grounds, and he needed to re-establish himself separately from his old friends. He was grateful for them of course, but that normal life he sought demanded this.

She was pleased with the cottage he selected in Hogsmeade. They connected their fireplaces via Floo. While they split their time between the two residences, they were soon spending most of their time together.

The relationship did not move quickly, and it likely appeared strange to outsiders. To the untrained eye, they were not an overly affectionate couple. Publicly, they expressed their regard for one another with quiet, subtle considerations. Though both could be impatient and stubborn, towards one another there was a fierce protectiveness as well as surprising level of understanding. There were, of course, subtle hints that a more passionate relationship was hidden beneath the surface. Those that knew them well had little doubt that the relationship was every bit as affectionate as it needed to be.

They married about two years after the relationship began. Over the next several years, they welcomed three children: two daughters and one son. He still desired a quiet life, but he made peace with spending time with their small circle of close friends. From time to time, though, he still enjoyed frightening some of his former students when he found them particularly frustrating. He continued his research; she continued to use her practice to help those in need. The happy little family thrived in this simple, quiet existence for many, many years.