

Damage Control

by karelia

The Muggle World is going crazy over some bestselling books. Which has implications for the Wizard World.

Strange Things Are Happening...

Chapter 1 of 9

The Muggle World is going crazy over some bestselling books. Which has implications for the Wizard World.

This is the response to Tatiana's WIKTT Challenge of the same title.

Damage Control - Chapter One

Strange Things Are Happening...

Hermione Granger was not happy. Not happy at all. On the very last day of her sixth year at Hogwarts, she received a somewhat disconcerting letter from her mother, and she was not quite sure what to make of it.

Dear Hermione,

I'm really sorry to write this late, but your father and I have been having some issues lately, which, quite frankly, demand to be sorted out if we are to stay together. We are going to Greece, to get away from everything for a while. Therefore, I have arranged for you to spend the first 3 weeks of your summer holiday with your Aunt Amelia, before you are to join Harry and Ron.

Not having had you around for years now, your father and I really feel it is more important to save our marriage, or rather, what's left of it. I do feel very guilty putting this on you, especially at such short notice. However, I also know that you're unlikely to return to us, or even our world, so I have made the decision this time to think more of myself rather than of my beloved daughter. I don't want to say anything negative about your father. I guess I could use the excuse of "midlife crisis" on his behalf, but if he doesn't change soon, I'm very afraid that our marriage might come to an end altogether. I can only hope for your understanding. I know that you are very young, but you are mature far beyond your years.

I know you are not keen on joining Aunt Amelia and her children, but it was the only choice I could come up with. I know she will look after you and ensure your well-being. And if worst comes to worst with Alana, then simply ignore her and enjoy plenty of reading material. I'm enclosing some wizard money for you, it's the least I can do. And I'm very sorry for this whole mess, I didn't choose it for myself, honestly.

Know that I love you, always.

Mum

A feeling of dread crept through Hermione and she shuddered at the thought of having to spend three long weeks with her cousin, Alana. Although Alana was only barely a year older than herself, they had never been particularly friendly with each other. Whilst Hermione had always been a bookworm, Alana was a typical tomboy, much preferring to climb trees or practice her martial art skills with the boys from the neighborhood.

Hermione sighed, *'Well, at least I'll have enough money to buy all the books I want. And Diagon Alley isn't far from where Aunt Amelia lives...and maybe Alana has changed.'* She thought wistfully, *'After all, I've not seen her for a few years...'*

Hermione had no idea just *how* absorbed she would be in books over the next few weeks.

Harry, Ron and Hermione boarded the Hogwarts Express together the next morning with the boys in much higher spirits than Hermione. Of course, they had more to be cheerful about than her. Both Harry and Ron would go straight to number twelve, Grimmauld Place for the entire summer holidays.

Ron broached the situation with caution, "Don't worry, 'Mione! Three weeks will fly past in no time and then you'll join us! And we'll owl you daily, right Harry?"

Harry nodded fiercely. "Yeah, 'Mione. We'll make sure you won't get bored and if your cousin is horrible let us know, and we'll tell Fred and George about it. They'll find a way to punish her." He grinned at her with a mischievous glint in his green eyes.

Hermione couldn't help but laugh at the thought of owls descending upon Aunt Amelia's home on a daily basis. She snorted at the thought of the look on Aunt Amelia's face.

They arrived at Kings Cross Station far too soon for Hermione and after gathering their luggage and various familiars, the trio made their way out to the main part of the station. Hermione couldn't believe the amount of people there, it had never been that busy before when they arrived. She looked sharply at Harry when she overheard some words uttered by a Muggle.

"Must be a witch there. She's wearing one of those cloaks instead of a proper jacket. Blimey, that one must be a wizard..."

Harry shrugged his shoulders. *'Must be coincidence.'* he thought.

Ron looked around in confusion as he heard a Muggle woman ask another, "Where is that ruddy Platform 9 3/4? It's gotta be around here somewhere."

Harry was caught by surprise when a boy, a few years younger than himself, poked him in the chest and asked loudly, "Are you ~~th~~real Harry Potter?"

All Harry could do was nod dumbly. How on earth did this boy -who was obviously Muggle- know about him? Thankfully, Remus Lupin and Tonks spotted the Trio at that moment and made their way quickly over to them.

Remus pulled Harry in a tight hug. "Harry, it's great to see you again!"

Harry beamed. At least he still had Remus. The loss of Sirius was still weighing heavily on him, but he was looking forward to spending time with Remus this summer. After more greetings were exchanged between Remus, Tonks and the three students, Remus went to find a taxi for Hermione. They parted company after promising to keep in touch until Hermione joined them 3 weeks later. The taxi ride didn't take long, as Aunt Amelia lived just behind the British Museum off Russell Square. She paid the driver with Muggle money and stepped up through the front garden to the door and rang the bell. She heard hurried foot steps just before the door was opened by Aunt Amelia.

"Oh darling, it's wonderful to see you! It's been years. Gosh, how you've grown up! I can't believe how time is flying. Come on in, don't just stand here. How was your journey? Do you still go to that boarding school up north? It's such a shame that Rachel and Daniel are having such problems. I bet they'll miss you, but it's just as well that they're trying to sort out their marriage."

Hermione stared at the woman in awe and thought to herself dryly, *'Does the woman breathe?'*

"Hi, Aunt Amelia, it's nice to see you again. And thank you for letting me stay with you."

"Oh, it's not a problem at all, dear. We love to have you around for a bit. Alana has been looking forward to your visit tremendously, as has Robin."

Was Aunt Amelia just trying to make her comfortable, Hermione wondered? The last time she had seen Robin, he was the typical spoiled prat of an upper middle class Muggle family, and they had not at all liked each other. And she and Alana were just way too different to be more than merely polite with each other. She mentally shrugged and followed Aunt Amelia to the guest room that she would occupy for the next three weeks.

Aunt Amelia opened the door to the guest room and ushered Hermione inside, "I'll leave you to sort out your luggage and all, and when you're ready come down to the kitchen. Would you prefer tea or coffee, dear?"

"I'd love a coffee, Aunt Amelia. Black and no sugar, please." Hermione replied.

"Of course, sugar wouldn't do for the daughter of two dentists!" Aunt Amelia countered, laughing.

Hermione let out a long sigh when her Aunt finally turned to exit the room.

'This was going to be great.' Hermione thought bitterly. Three weeks of incessant chatter from her Aunt and Merlin only knew how Alana and Robin would turn out. She shuddered at the idea of Alana being as talkative as her mother. All she could do now was hope that Harry and Ron would keep their promise of daily owls.

Hermione was motioned to take a seat at the table as soon as she entered the kitchen.

"Alana should be here any minute now. She's been at the dojo training for the championships, I'm so proud of her. She's just got her black belt, two days after she turned 18. And now she's been approved to participate in the National Championship. That's so exciting!" Her Aunt chattered on and Hermione nodded politely while inwardly rolling her eyes. Her mother tended to speak proudly of her as well, but never in such an inane way. Her thoughts were stopped abruptly when the door opened and a tall girl came flying through.

"Hi Mum. Hi Hermione." The girl eyed Hermione curiously.

Hermione returned her greeting with a polite "Hello, Alana," before returning her concentration on the cup of coffee in front of her rather than engage her cousin in idle conversation.

Unfortunately, Alana's next words caused Hermione to nearly choke on the coffee in her mouth. "So, Hermione, tell me...how are Harry and Ron? And is Professor Snape *really* such a greasy git?"

A/N

Big thanks to Tatiana without whose help I would never have managed to even get the formatting right, let alone make the story flow.

Reviews and constructive criticism greatly appreciated.

Reading and Talking

Chapter 2 of 9

Hermione and Alana talk. They pay a visit to the British Museum - and find possible ways how Harry was being tracked.

Disclaimer: If I owned any of it besides Aunt Amelia, Alana and Robin, then I'd have it printed in book form and make lots of money.

Damage Control - Chapter III

Reading and Talking

Hermione Granger was doing what she did best; she was reading and absorbing the contents. Occasionally she frowned, occasionally her eyes widened and occasionally she even looked decidedly uncomfortable. Reading through the *Philosopher's Stone* took her barely more than a few hours, and then she started on *The Chamber of Secrets*. Blushing, she felt eternally embarrassed reading about her silly schoolgirl crush on Gilderoy Lockhart. But she quickly dismissed the embarrassment as soon as it crept upon her.

Silently she chided herself, *'Come on, you were 12 years old, and he was handsome...at least to any twelve year old!!! Even Ron's mum admired him!'*

Alana entered the room and placed the pizza box next to Hermione on the bed. Then she settled in on the other side of the box, making herself comfortable.

"So... what do you think about the books so far?" she asked curiously.

"Hmm..." Hermione had just bitten into the first slice of pizza and finished chewing before speaking. "They are true. Everything I've read so far is fairly accurate, save for some very minor details. And from the way it's written, someone must have been keeping a constant and *very* close eye on Harry. Really, the only time Ron and I occur in the books is when we're together with Harry."

Alana's excitement was showing on her face, "Really?" she almost squeaked. "Goodness, Hermione, this is so exciting! Do you have any clues as to who could be behind all this?"

"No idea whatsoever. But I *will* find out if it's the last thing I do!" The determination was evident on Hermione's face.

Alana eyed her curiously. "And what exactly are you going to do about it?"

Hermione looked thoughtful. "I'm not sure. First of all, I need to owl Harry and Ron so that we can meet up and I'll tell them about the books face to face. And then... I don't know... I guess we'll have to tell Professor Dumbledore eventually." She sighed; the mere thought of these Muggle books' existence unnerved her.

"Where are you going to meet Harry and Ron?" Alana asked eagerly. "Would you mind if I came along?" She looked hopefully at Hermione.

"Somewhere in Diagon Alley, I guess, maybe Fortescue's, Harry and Ron love that place," Hermione replied, regarding her cousin carefully before agreeing against her better judgment, "And yes, I suppose you can come along. After all, it was you who enlightened me about the books," she added, more as an afterthought.

Alana looked delighted. "Oh, the ice cream parlour? I can't believe it really exists..."

The girls had finally finished eating and Alana moved to take the packaging and leftovers back to the kitchen while Hermione returned to the books to continue reading about her adventures at Hogwarts.

She stopped reading for a moment when she reached the account of herself, Harry and Ron in the Shrieking Shack when Professor Lupin praised her for being such a clever witch.

She chewed on her lip nervously. *'Someone must have followed us around constantly, to be able to pick everything up. Or maybe there was some kind of a charm that tracked us and another one that transmitted everything we ever said to each other...'* Her mind raced as she thought of all the possibilities, *'Time to hit the bookstore and find some information on tracking charms and the like.'* An idea suddenly struck her. *'The British Museum is only around the corner... I wonder if they have a wizarding section...'*

Hermione woke very late the next morning to Alana entering her room holding two steaming cups in her hands.

"Here, I thought you might need something to wake you up properly. I bet you didn't sleep much," Alana said as she handed her a cup of coffee.

Hermione grunted in thanks and tasted the black liquid. After stretching thoroughly and a few more sips of coffee she felt any remaining tiredness leave her body.

"Have you been to the British Museum lately, Alana?" Hermione asked her cousin.

Alana looked at her questioningly, "Not lately, no. Why are you asking?"

"I was wondering if there might be a section for witches and wizards in there that would help me with figuring out about these Muggle books. You see, when I read the Shrieking Shack scene in the *Prisoner of Azkaban*, I realized that someone either had to follow us around at all times, or rather, he or she followed Harry around at all times. But, we're often together most of the time, so they would get a good idea of what we're up to. And that just can't be possible. I mean, one of us would have noticed if we had been followed around, not just occasionally, but constantly for over 5 years, or who knows, it could have been even longer. The only other idea I came up with is that someone has been using a charm or a spell to track Harry, and another charm that would transmit every word Harry or anyone who is with him says." Hermione explained.

Alana nodded in agreement. "You have a point...but why the British Museum, of all places?" Like many people who lived in the area, Alana remembered one too many rainy days spent inside the British Museum during her childhood.

"I won't get to Flourish and Blotts until later this week," Hermione fell silent for a moment before vocalizing her thoughts, "Hedwig should be here some time today, then I can send a letter back with her for Harry. Then Harry will answer that and send her back here to me and by the time we've arranged anything it'll be tomorrow at the

earliest... but I don't want to just wait around idly, so I figured I'll see if the British Museum has a section or library where I might be able to find some information on the charms I suspect are being used on Harry." Hermione looked at her cousin questioningly, "So... want to go with me?"

Alana looked at her watch, "Let's go after 2 pm, it's nearly lunchtime now and the museum will be very busy."

The girls got ready, shared some food and left for the British Museum, chatting all the way until they entered the large building which was nearly empty. Hermione looked around carefully to see if she would recognize any signs of magic happening.

At first she could not see or feel anything and she was starting to feel disheartened when she suddenly caught a magic sparkle from the corner of her eye. She pulled Alana with her and together they moved towards the direction the sparkle had emitted. They were greeted by an elderly wizard whose clothes had seen better days; his robes might once have been purple but now they barely looked a washed-out gray with a purplish tint.

"You young beauties looking for the wizarding section?" he inquired casually.

"Yes sir," Hermione replied. "I'm doing some research on charms and was wondering if the wizarding section here might help me find some answers."

The wizard eyed her curiously. "You've never been here before." It was a statement rather than a question.

"No sir," Hermione answered politely, "I'm staying with relatives who live nearby, but I thought it couldn't hurt to see if I can find some information."

"You've come to the right place then," he told her proudly, "We hold every parchment of every study relating to charms ever published in Great Britain, and many that have been published overseas as well," the wizard stated, obviously delighted that he was able to be of help.

Hermione's face lit up when she heard the wizard's words, "Brilliant", she smiled at him and he motioned for the girls to follow him into the Ancient Egypt department where he stopped at the tomb statue of Tjeti.

He glanced around and spoke in a low voice, "First things first, make sure there are no Muggles around, then you tap on Tjeti's left shoulder and you'll be able to walk through the wall behind it straight into the wizarding section. Turn to your left and you'll be in the library."

The girls thanked him before he turned to leave then waited for a group of Muggle teenagers to disappear. Finally, the area was empty and Hermione took her wand out and tapped the statue as the wizard had instructed. She led the way through the wall behind the statue and noticed that it now showed a narrow archway through which both girls entered. Alana gasped in surprise upon entering the wizarding section. To her right was a vast display of paintings, statues and sculptures of different magical creatures. The first one Alana looked at was a painting of a big, golden phoenix with a few streaks of red plumage, perched on the branch of an oak tree. But when she looked closer, she noticed that the phoenix was blinking at her.

Alana gasped, "Look, Hermione, the phoenix is blinking!" she exclaimed. Hermione was amused by Alana's reaction.

"Yes Alana, paintings and pictures created with magic appear very much alive, just like you read in the books," she replied, laughing.

"Yes, I know... it's just - I've never thought there was an entirely different world out there," Alana mused. "I mean, I know that magic exists, without a shadow of a doubt, but this is an entirely different level!"

Hermione looked at her with interest, "What do you mean, you *know* that magic exists?" she prodded.

"Well...", Alana started hesitantly, "It's kind of difficult to explain. I've always been convinced that there is a lot more to our lives than what we can see with our eyes. After I read the first Harry Potter book, I started having some weird dreams. In one, I was meeting with Draco Malfoy, but he was quite friendly and not horrible at all. Maybe it was just an ordinary dream, but it seemed far more real than anything I've ever dreamed. At one point, while reading *Prisoner of Azkaban*, I got interested in ancient runes, so I started to read everything I could find about them. Then I started experimenting with them. Like, whenever I entered the Dojo for training I would visualize 'Uruz' above my head and after a few weeks, my Sensei commented on how much I'd improved. I really *had* improved, so I decided to test my success with visualizing a rune further. I stopped visualizing the rune and suddenly I seemed to get stuck on some Katas, and even dropped in sparring. I've been experimenting ever since with other runes and with meditation and Martial Arts. I even started reading about the ancient stuff, religions that Pagans, Heathens and the like follow. And all of that can't just have been made up."

Hermione was speechless. Her cousin, a Muggle no less, was talking about magic almost as if it were an integral part of her life. Her mind was racing; she absolutely had to find out more about Alana's magical experiences, but now was not the time.

She looked at her cousin earnestly, "Alana, I really want to talk to you about this further, but now I think it might be better if we do what we came here for, otherwise this place will close before we find anything." Alana agreed, and they both made their way to the other side of the archway where the library was situated.

There was a vast array of shelves just bursting with books of all sizes and upon closer inspection, Hermione realized that the books were not only ordered alphabetically, but they were also sorted by different subjects. There were sections where charms was combined with other disciplines, such as 'Charms and Potions', 'Charms and Transfiguration', there was even 'Charms and Arithmancy'. Other sections sounded scientific, like 'Applied Charms - Unproven Theories', 'Applied Charms - Proven Theories', and 'Charms in Mediwizardry'. Hermione paused when she read 'Charms and Aurory', this sounded promising. An Auror would have to know how to stealthily use tracking charms as well as voice transmission charms.

"Right, we want tracking charms, so I suggest we start with the 'Charms and Aurory' shelves," Hermione stopped to think for a moment, "I think it's best if you start on this end and I start here and we'll meet somewhere in the middle. That way we can get through as many books as possible."

Alana agreed and walked to the other end of the shelves and took out the first book, Hermione did the same at the other end. Each slowly worked their way through one book after another without success and after a while, Hermione looked at Alana, who had let out a small sigh. Alana had stopped looking at a book and instead seemed to be concentrating while focusing on the bookshelves. She slowly moved to a different shelf, as if drawn towards it, and then she ran her hands slowly over the books.

"The book we're looking for is in here somewhere," she said, still focused on the books which were in the section labeled 'Applied Charms Unproven Theories'.

Hermione looked at her oddly, "How do you know this?" she asked.

"I don't know for sure, but I was focusing with the intent of finding what we're looking for and was drawn to these few books." Alana shrugged, "It's not like we have anything to lose by looking, so we might as well check it out," she suggested.

Hermione agreed with her and Alana took a book out and handed it to her, then took another one out to read herself. The first few books did not yield any results; the very first one Hermione sifted through was a study of side effects in the user of semi-permanent cosmetic charms, which upon reading a few lines had her rolling her eyes.

'Oh Merlin, how could anyone be stupid enough to charm their nose straight every few weeks, or make their lips fuller...'

"I think I found something," Alana exclaimed and rushed over to where Hermione was sitting with a book in her hands. Hermione looked up and gasped as she read the title, *'Comparison of Stealth Magic and Muggle Spying methods'* by *Serena Secret*.

'This looks promising,' Hermione thought and immediately grabbed the book from Alana's hands to skim through the pages. Alana positioned herself behind Hermione so that she could read over her shoulder.

"Very little is known about Stealth Magic in general. Those who are skilled in the discipline tend to pass it on to their children, which is the reason why certain Ministry departments such as the Department of Mysteries and the Investigation Unit have been employing witches and wizards from the same families for generations. The author of this study had the great fortune to speak with a wizard who had been formally trained in Stealth Magic. This wizard explained (with an air of arrogance) that it is easy to track people and listen to their conversations, even across continents without the person knowing that they are being listened to, but only if one knows how to perform the charms properly. Unfortunately, this wizard was not the least forthcoming with more detailed information. However, it was sufficient to confirm to the author that Stealth Magic is by far superior to Muggle spying methods, even more so as Muggles are entirely dependent upon technology, whereas wizards trained in Stealth Magic will only ever require their wands."

Hermione's mind was reeling as she digested what she had just read.

Alana interrupted her thinking, "You know," she gazed at Hermione, "I wonder if your Professor Snape is trained in that discipline, what with his spying activities and all..."

Hermione suddenly looked aghast, "Oh Merlin, what if... what if the Death Eaters find out about the books?" She began to panic, "Then Voldemort will know in an instant that Professor Snape isn't on his side and he'll be killed in no time!"

Alana tried to calm her, "Look, let's go home and see if Hedwig is there. Harry promised you a daily letter so I'm sure that you'll get one and then you can send a note to Harry and tell him."

"Yes, that's a good idea," Hermione nodded. "Right now, there is nothing else we can do."

The girls made their way back out through the archway, which disappeared as soon as they entered the Muggle part of the British Museum. Hermione fervently hoped that Hedwig would indeed be waiting for her at her cousin's home and as soon as the girls opened the front door, a great, snowy white owl swooped down on Hermione.

A/N

Big thanks to Tatiana for beta reading and improving. You rock!!!

The statue of the Tjetj is real it can be found in the British Museum.

Reviews and constructive criticism greatly appreciated.

The Harry Potter Books

Chapter 3 of 9

Hermione and Alana talk. Hermione starts reading.

Disclaimer: Nope, I don't own any of it. I just take them out to play with. I promise I'll return them when I'm done.

Damage Control - Chapter II

The Harry Potter Books

Hermione stared at Alana open mouthed.

"How... How do you know of them?" she stuttered.

"Ah, been out of the Muggle world for such a long time that you don't even follow the bestseller book lists anymore?" Alana mocked her, basking in the knowledge that she had truly shocked Hermione.

"What do you mean bestseller book lists? What does that have to do with what you know about my friends and a teacher?" Hermione demanded to know.

Alana carefully looked around to make sure her mother was otherwise occupied and then quietly said to Hermione, "Let's go out in the garden and enjoy the afternoon sun. We can talk there."

Hermione gratefully followed her through the back door and they made themselves comfortable on the very recently cut lawn, facing each other. The idea of having Aunt Amelia involved in this whole issue was really not to her liking.

"Right," Hermione started in her bossiest voice, "Tell me what you know."

"Ah, cousin, not so fast," cautioned Alana. "I'll promise you absolute honesty if you are willing to answer all my questions about the Magical World with complete honesty."

Hermione thought for a moment but quickly realized she had little choice other than to indulge her cousin if she wanted to get to the bottom of this mystery. "Okay," she sighed, "you have a deal."

Alana started, "A few years ago, an unknown author published the first of what was to eventually become a series comprised of seven books in total. The first book was titled *'Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone'* and even though the author had never published as much as an article, let alone a book, this Harry Potter book went straight to Number 1 on the bestseller lists, and not just here in Britain, but all around the world. It was translated into I don't know how many different languages, and the entire world was hit by Harry Potter fever. And it's not just children; adults love the book just as much." Hermione looked at her intently. As unlikely as Alana's story sounded, she had no reason to doubt it was true. The sheer thought at the possible implications made her shudder.

Alana continued excitedly, "You know I've never been much into books unless they are related in one way or another to Martial Arts, but I got curious enough because everyone - and I mean *everyone*- talked about Harry Potter. So I read the first book and was totally captivated by the story. I don't think I've ever managed to finish reading a book so fast from cover to cover. I went to bed with a torch because I had to know what was happening next and I kept reading until I finished the entire book. Of course,

I was behind compared to the rest of the Harry Potter fans. By the time I had started *'The Philosopher's Stone'*, another two Harry Potter books had already been published and were bestsellers as well, just like the first book. They're called *'Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets'* and *'Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban'*." Alana paused and looked at Hermione, who was very still and very pale.

After a few moments, Hermione dreaded the answer but hesitantly asked, "And... what was the first book about?"

Alana smiled at the question. "I think you already know. There was this boy, Harry Potter, who was about to turn 11 years old and he received a letter. Not through the Royal Mail, no, he received a letter that was delivered by an owl. The family Harry lived with wasn't his parents, but his mum's sister. She and her husband used to tell Harry that his parents had died in a car accident, but it was revealed later that his parents had died at the hands of a bad person, a dark wizard." Alana caught a glimpse of the fear that flashed behind her cousin's brown eyes and continued, "Anyway, his aunt and uncle denied Harry the letter, but more owls delivered the same version of the letter. Eventually, Harry's uncle sealed the post box to make sure he wouldn't receive any more letters by owl, but the owls simply used the chimney and windows to deliver the letters. In the end, Harry got to see the letter with the help of a half-giant by the name of Hagrid, who turned up when Harry's Uncle decided to take a holiday to escape all the owl post. It turned out that Harry was a wizard-" Alana was interrupted by Hermione's gasp.

"Oh Merlin, Alana," Hermione whispered angrily, "Who is the author? What is their name? This is about my friend Harry!"

Alana looked amused, "I figured that much from your reaction to my first question. The author is a woman who goes by the name of J.K. Rowling. Not much is known about her, really. She rarely agrees to interviews and even when she does, she's fairly evasive and does not answer just any question."

Alana continued, somewhat thoughtfully, "You know, I didn't actually make the connection until about the third book. Yeah....," she sighed, "Sometimes I can be pretty thick. It took me until I read the exclamation about how clever you are, although I can't remember who said it exactly, Remus or Sirius." She looked at Hermione and insisted, "You know, when you were all in the Shrieking Shack. That's when it suddenly hit me. 'Gosh,' I thought, '*How many girls by the name of 'Hermione Granger' are there?*' I mean, come on, 'Hermione' is not exactly a common name. In fact, I've never come across anyone else with that name, it's much rarer even than my name!" Alana giggled at the thought and continued, "Then I put two and two together. I knew you were at some boarding school in Scotland, but whenever my mum came home from visits to your mum, she always used to mutter about how her sister was so not forthcoming with anything about your schooling. She even said once that she was sure Aunt Rachel was hiding something with regard to your schooling. Then I started to wonder if that author wasn't just making up things, but instead was following the adventures of very real people."

Hermione looked at her solemnly. "Do you have those books, Alana? Would you let me read them?"

Alana nodded, "Of course, I have all five of them now. The fourth is called *'Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire'* and the fifth is *'Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix'*." Hermione gasped at the last title, but Alana ignored her, unaware of the significance of the title and continued, "And yes, you can read them all. Let's go to my room, I have them there."

The girls left the garden and as soon as they entered Alana's room, she headed to her bookshelves and took the first book out, handing it to Hermione. Hermione eyed the sleeve curiously and was astounded by the resemblance between the boy on the cover and Harry! Whoever it was surely knew what the Hogwarts Express looked like!

Hermione randomly opened a page and started reading...

'You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potion-making,' he began. He spoke in barely more than a whisper, but they caught every word - like Professor McGonagall, Snape had the gift of keeping a class silent without effort. 'As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don't expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses ... I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death - if you aren't as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach.'

Hermione looked at Alana with wide eyes and whispered, "I... I can't believe this. This is the exact speech that Professor Snape gave to us in our first Potions Class!"

Alana looked at her curiously. "Really? That man must be quite a character! So tell me, did you really resolve his puzzle to help Harry get to the Philosopher's Stone?"

"Yes, I did," Hermione sighed, and offered further explanation, "I enjoy doing that kind of thing and find it quite easy." There was a short silence before Hermione hesitantly spoke again, "I... I'd really like to read all the books, if only to see if everything written is true. Reading Professor Snape's first year speech in a Muggle book is a bit unnerving. And..." her facial expression changed to one full of determination, "I really need to get to the bottom of this."

Then her face suddenly lit up. "Oh! I wonder how Harry and Ron will react to the news. I need to send them an owl as soon as possible."

"Let me guess..." Alana said dryly, "Harry and Ron promised to owl you every day, because you weren't very happy about your parents' hasty decision to go on a holiday."

Hermione looked at her, surprised. "How did you know?"

"I've read all five books, Hermione," Alana answered smugly before continuing, "And if the books tell it how it really is, then that is *exactly* what Harry and Ron would do!"

"You're right," Hermione said thoughtfully. "That also means that the books must be pretty correct in describing us, if you can predict us so well!"

Alana agreed with an unsure nod, "I guess... Hermione, I don't know how all of this must make you feel. I don't know how I would feel if I found out that someone has not only been following me around in great detail for years, and is making a killing by writing it all down for the whole world to read... If you want to take some time and read through the books, feel free."

Hermione looked at her cousin with an odd expression. "You know, I really wasn't looking forward to staying here, because... Well, we never did get on particularly well. But now I'm grateful. Thank you for your kindness."

Alana smiled. "You're welcome. Why don't you start on the books and I'll convince Mum to order us pizza for dinner. We'll eat in your room, kind of 'getting to know each other again' thing. What do you say?"

She looked at her cousin hopefully and now it was Hermione's turn to smile. "That sounds like an excellent idea. I'll start reading right away."

With that, Hermione grabbed all five books and exited Alana's room. She had some reading to do.

A/N

Big thanks to Tatiana for beta reading and correcting. You rock!!!

Reviews greatly appreciated.

Owl Post

Chapter 4 of 9

Letters between Hermione and Harry, then the meeting at Diagon Alley - with a few interruptions.

Disclaimer: The characters of the Harry Potter Universe belong to the goddess JKR. Only Alana, Robin and Amelia are mine.

Damage Control - Chapter Four

Owl Post

Hermione ducked as Hedwig missed her by only inches before settling herself on a nearby windowsill, ruffling her feathers.

Hermione quickly searched for some owl treats while greeting her, "Hedwig, it's so nice to see you again. I hope you haven't had to wait too long." Hedwig hooted softly and stuck out her leg for Hermione to take the parchment that she had carried from number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

"Please wait, Hedwig. I've a letter to write to Harry and Ron. I'm sure Alana will be happy to feed you some treats in the meantime."

Excited at the prospect of getting to know a real magical creature, Alana exclaimed, "Oh yes, I'd love to!" She took the treats from Hermione and started feeding the snowy owl carefully. Hedwig humoured the Muggle and ate the treats. They were, after all, rather tasty.

Hermione swiftly read through Harry's letter, which did not demand an immediate reply, and then sat down to write a quick note to him and Ron.

Dear Harry and Ron,

I have discovered why all those weird things were happening at Kings Cross Station. It has to do with some best-selling Muggle books that we really need to discuss, and quickly. Can we please meet at Diagon Alley as soon as possible? You, Ron, me. I'll bring Alana along, because she's involved, too. Write back soonest, when and where exactly you want to meet.

Love,

Hermione

She took the parchment and gently tied it to Hedwig's leg. "Thank you for waiting, Hedwig. Please take this back to Harry for me." Hedwig hooted softly and took off through the open window.

Hermione and Alana spent the rest of the day reading and discussing magic. Hermione was still very intrigued by Alana's perception of Magic. Muggle or not, she couldn't help thinking the idea had some merit.

The next morning, Hermione was awoken by an insistent tapping coming from the window. She got up quickly and rushed to the window to let Hedwig in. "Morning, Hedwig," she yawned and untied Harry's letter from the owl's leg.

Dear Hermione,

I'll admit I'm very curious! Meet tomorrow, 1pm at Fortescue's? Send yes or no with Hedwig.

Love,

Harry

Hermione quickly wrote YES on the parchment before rolling it back up and replacing it on Hedwig's outstretched leg. Opening the window, she watched as the owl took off, heading back to number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

She got ready for the day and was pleasantly surprised when she went to the kitchen in search of coffee, only to discover Alana already awake and pouring two cups of the black liquid. The two girls enjoyed breakfast in a companionable silence, but as soon as Hermione finished eating, she began to bombard her cousin with questions about her views on magic.

Alana took her time explaining since she had nowhere near mastered the entire subject. Quite to the contrary, the more she understood, the more she realized how much more there was to understand.

"My view is that yes, up until recently, there have been... let's say, alternative realities in the world, and one wasn't necessarily known to the other. Although I'm not certain whether this is an entirely correct term, it's the best I can come up with for now." She looked at Hermione who was listening carefully. "For example, until recently, there had not been a single report of any Muggles finding evidence of what to us has come to be known as the 'Harry Potter World'."

Hermione looked at her cousin curiously. "And what has happened recently?" she asked.

"Several photographs have been published in different papers of Platform nine and three-quarters as well as the Leaky Cauldron. And they're Muggle pictures." Alana took a deep breath, and upon looking at her cousin, held a hand up. "I know what you're going to say; any Muggle-born witch or wizard could have taken these photographs. It's possible, of course, but there is a lot more to it. Firstly, I know someone personally- who swears to have seen the Leaky Cauldron on one occasion. I have no reason to disbelieve him as he's been my Sensei for many years and I've *always* known him to be absolutely honest. But there seems to be more happening..." She paused, trying to find the right words. "On different levels, I'd say... you see, a lot of us, my friends, my mum's friends, and even online friends, we've all noticed that the energy is changing here. It's kind of shifting, slowly still, but at an increasing speed. More and more people are able to feel this."

Alana went quiet. She had never talked about this before except to those who she knew shared her views and she was not quite certain how Hermione, ~~a~~ witch, would react to her revelations.

Both girls digested what Alana had said and then Hermione spoke. "I've read a few books on this only fairly recently, although I'm sure at least one of those I read wasn't that new. Is time passing faster now as well; is that true for the Muggle world? And what about those children, who are different, like those '*Indigo Children*' and all the ones that make the Muggle headlines as '*Super psychics*'?"

Alana held up her hand to stop the questions Hermione was shooting out like rapid gunfire. "Yes, yes, and yes, but... if you're looking for scientific proof, well... none of us have found it yet." She let out a long sigh.

Hermione eyed Alana with a blank expression on her face before speaking. "You know, I wouldn't expect scientific proof in that area. The difference between wizard and Muggle science is that Muggle scientists mostly know the outcome of any research before they even start it, because it's all very biased and depends on who finances it. And whoever finances it has an agenda. In the wizard world, researchers are open-minded, and more importantly, they never know the outcome of their research until it's completed.

"I read this book in which a scientist witch was trying to justify introducing vaccines to the wizard world at a time when there was a dire shortage of mediwizards and witches. That witch read all the Muggle studies available from all the medical publications and she was aghast to learn that there is not a single study out there that concludes things as they were clearly shown in the study; vaccines actually cause a lot more diseases than they prevent. She then stated in her book that all the conclusions of the studies belied the actual findings."

"Blimey, Hermione, you know, especially in the past couple of years, a lot of Muggles have reached that conclusion as well," Alana commented dryly.

Hermione made an effort to summarize what had transpired between them. "So... you say the energy on earth is shifting? Could it be that the realities of Muggles and witches are slowly becoming blurred?"

Alana nodded vigorously. "That's exactly what I think."

"It is a possibility," Hermione said, then continued, "So, let's say it is true. The energy is shifting to some different dimension, maybe, and it manifests by people becoming more aware of what's happening, people uncovering conspiracies, time passing faster..."

Alana interrupted her, "You know about the medical drug conspiracy that some American revealed? Which made sick children even sicker after they took the drug?"

"Yes, although I don't read Muggle papers at school there are enough Muggle-borns who keep up with the news," Hermione replied. She glanced at her watch and cried out in surprise, "Merlin, it's already past three o'clock, where did the morning go?"

"Oh, you know, time passing faster and all that," Alana grinned. "Let's grab a bite to eat, shall we? All this talking has made me hungry." Hermione readily agreed and the two girls raided the fridge and prepared some sandwiches.

Hermione and Alana spent the rest of the day with Alana wanting to know anything and everything about Diagon Alley and Hermione answering every question patiently. Eventually, both girls grew tired from all the talking as well as from trying to digest what the other had said, but Alana couldn't resist one last question. "Hermione, what is Professor Snape *really* like?"

Hermione thought for a while before answering. "Well, that's not an easy question to answer, you know. He's not exactly a nice person; he always blatantly favours the Slytherins, and so he's not really fair either. But you know, I've suspected for at least a couple of years now that he favours his own house simply because he doesn't want to blow his cover as a spy." She paused before continuing, "He's saved our lives, you know, Harry's, Ron's, and mine, on more than one occasion. I don't think he hates us as much as he implies with his behaviour. He's not nice, but I have no doubt that he is a good person."

The girls finally said their goodnights and Hermione spent quite some time pondering over her Potions professor.

'Come to think of it, he really is an enigma...' was her last thought before sleep took over.

The next morning found both girls up bright and early. Alana was overexcited about visiting Diagon Alley and Hermione was relieved to finally be able to share the recent events with her closest friends. After a leisurely morning, mainly spent drinking innumerable cups of coffee and more talking, Hermione and Alana got ready to leave to meet up with Harry and Ron.

They caught a bus to Charing Cross and then Hermione led the way to the Leaky Cauldron, which was not far from the station.

"Hermione, I can see the Leaky Cauldron!" Alana exclaimed and pointed to the non-descript Pub.

Hermione giggled. "You mean you can actually see it? Oh my, Alana, that's incredible!" Hermione replied, the excitement evident in her voice, "Let's see what Harry and Ron have to say to that!"

The two girls ran towards the pub and after a very brief, "Hello," towards Tom the keeper, Hermione led Alana straight to the brick wall at the back. Hermione tapped the bricks with her wand causing the wall to shift and open wide enough to let them both through.

Alana took a deep breath and looked around in awe. "So this is what the real thing looks like, eh?"

"Yeah, this is the real thing, Alana," she replied, amused by her cousin's reaction. "Now, let's go to Fortescue's, it's nearly one o'clock."

As soon as they turned the corner, Hermione spotted Harry and Ron leisurely devouring a huge portion of ice cream and she increased her pace. The two girls were nearly running by the time they reached the ice cream parlour.

Harry grinned broadly as they hugged each other. "Long time, no see, eh, Hermione?"

Her reply was a happy laugh and a tight squeeze of her friend. "Oh Harry, I know it sounds ridiculous, but so much has happened in the last couple of days that it seems like weeks!"

Harry looked curiously from Hermione to Alana, prompting Hermione to introduce her cousin, "Harry, this is my cousin Alana. Alana, this is Harry and this is Ron."

"Hi there," she greeted them warmly. "I'm surprised, you both look exactly like the books describe!"

Alana's words were met with dumb expressions on the boys' faces and she looked sheepishly at Hermione. "Oops, sorry. I guess we should all sit down and Hermione and I will explain everything..."

Harry went inside to order ice cream for Hermione and Alana and then sat down to join Ron in looking at the girls expectantly. They took turns telling Harry and Ron everything, and in the end, the expression on Ron's face was priceless.

He stammered, "You... you mean..." he swallowed hard, "You mean, there are books in the Muggle world...about us?"

"Yes, Ron. That's exactly what we're telling you. Not only that, the books have been on the bestseller lists in several different countries!" Hermione explained patiently.

"Well, well, look what we've got here! Isn't it *Scarface*, *Weasel* and the *Mudblood*?" A smug voice drawled, interrupting them, "And, oh... am I seeing this right - a bloody *Muggle* in Diagon Alley?" The familiar blond sneered at them, "And I thought you could sink no lower; however, it doesn't surprise me." Draco Malfoy leered at Alana menacingly and immediately Harry, Ron and Hermione had their wands out, followed by Malfoy who leisurely drew out his own wand and pointed it at Alana.

"You coward," Harry growled, "Pointing your wand at a defenceless Muggle! Of course you *would* point it at her since you know you couldn't defend yourself against the

three of us," he added with anger in his voice.

Nobody could recall exactly what happened next; in a quick flash of movement Alana was on top of Malfoy who was lying with his back on the ground. She held his wand at him with one hand whilst holding both his hands with her other hand.

"I may be a Muggle, but that doesn't make me defenceless, you creep," she hissed.

Malfoy was speechless and the fear showed on his face. This was truly a first; a Muggle had never before attacked him. He was accustomed to Muggles cowering in fear whenever he made so much as a subtle threat and it usually didn't even take his wand to be effective.

"Get up and get out of my sight," Alana spoke quietly and deliberately, "And if you ever so much as bend a hair on anyone at this table, I will personally chase you to the ends of the earth and turn you into mash." She looked at him and added haughtily, "And I do *not* need a wand to do that."

At that, she let go of his hands and got off him, still holding on to his wand. When she saw him looking longingly at his wand in her hand, she added, "I believe I'll be sending this to Professor Dumbledore with a report of how I came into possession of it. Am I correct in assuming that you are not supposed to do magic outside of Hogwarts?" She looked smug and Malfoy quickly got up and walked as fast as his legs could carry him in an attempt to put as much distance as he could between the quartet and himself.

Alana sat down in her seat again and continued to eat her ice cream as if nothing had happened. The three others stared at her in awe, speechless at her skill.

Harry was the first to find his voice again. "Wow, Alana, how did you do that?"

Alana shrugged and grinned. "Ah well, I guess all that Martial Arts training is finally paying off..."

"That was... that was bloody brilliant, you know!" Ron exclaimed.

"It's a shame really that he's such a creepy git," Alana said thoughtfully. "He could be a really nice person if only he wanted to. Or maybe he wants to and his father is stopping him..."

"Getting philosophical on us, Alana?" Hermione grinned at her before adding, "I agree, though, he *could* be a nice person..."

The group spent most of the afternoon discussing the recent turn of events, as well as the possible implications for the wizarding world, before they were interrupted again.

"Miss Granger," a menacing voice hissed, "Unless you wish to be responsible for Mr. Malfoy's death, I would suggest that you hand over his wand to *me*ight *this instant*"

A/N

Big thanks to Tatiana and Cutie Pie who do so much more than merely checking for format, grammar, and punctuation.

As always, reviews are gratefully received.

Discussions

Chapter 5 of 9

Harry, Ron, Hermione and Alana finally meet up and discuss the girls' findings. With a few interruptions.

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Damage Control - Chapter Five

Discussions

Hermione, Harry and Ron looked at their Potions master, their faces showing both surprise and fear. Alana regarded him curiously before she spoke. "Hermione does not have Malfoy's wand, sir." Snape looked at her, partly in astonishment and partly impressed at the sheer boldness she displayed by speaking to him without being prompted to do so.

"Pray tell, what are *you* -a *Muggle*, doing here in Diagon Alley? This is a wizard's place?" he asked her sternly.

Hermione had finally regained her composure and began to explain. "This is my cousin, Alana Williams, she's here with me."

"Miss Granger," he hissed in a low voice, "you had better have a *very* good reason for bringing a Muggle into this place, whether she is your cousin or not!"

Before Hermione could say anything, Alana took the opportunity to speak again. "She does, sir, and I believe that there are recent events in the Muggle world that just might have an impact on your life. Perhaps you'd like to hear us out?"

He snorted derisively. "I'd rather face a blindfolded Neville Longbottom in an Advanced Potions class than be seen in public with the likes *of them*" he sneered at the Golden Trio and added sarcastically, "or you."

He turned to face Harry and Ron and continued, "Potter, Weasley, I expect the both of you at Headquarters no later than six o'clock this evening with a detailed report of exactly what is going on." And without waiting for their reply, he turned sharply and walked away, his long, black cloak billowing behind him.

Ron groaned loudly. "I don't want to face that greasy git! It's summer holidays, for crying out loud!"

"Ron!" Hermione chided him, "you know it's important that he of all people knows about the books! Imagine what would happen if the Death Eaters or Voldemort found out

before he does!"

"Good riddance, that's what would happen," Ron stated hotly as he shuddered at the sound of the Dark Lord's name.

"Oh come on, he can't be that bad," Alana interrupted. "I thought he was rather impressive, you know. Don't see that kind of bloke every day! He's quite an individual."

The trio looked at her incredulously. "You mean to say you believe he's actually human?" Harry asked with disbelief in his voice.

"He isn't, Alana, believe me, he's nothing but an overgrown bat," Ron chimed in ignoring the glare that Hermione was giving him.

The quartet spent a while longer bickering about their perception of the notorious Potions master before returning to the serious issue of the books and their possible implications to the wizarding world.

"Harry, Ron, you're going to have to tell Professor Snape everything," Hermione said sternly to the boys, then continued more thoughtfully, "Maybe you should have copies of the books for him to read, just so he knows we're not making anything up..."

"What? Spend money on the bat as well?" Ron exclaimed while shaking his head in disbelief, "Hermione, you've gone nutters!"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Use that brain you allegedly have once in a while, Ron," she suggested. "How would you feel if the man gets killed by Voldemort simply because some Death Eaters happened upon the books and discovered his spying activities? I know you don't like him, but I can't imagine that even you would have a clear conscience if Professor Snape died and you could have prevented it."

Ron blushed and went silent, knowing that his best friend was right. He sighed dramatically. "Okay, Hermione, point taken."

"If we leave now, we can go to the bookstore on the way back to Headquarters, Ron. I don't mind paying for the books," Harry said. It was no great secret that he liked Snape no more than Ron did; however, having spent the last few years in constant danger, he felt somewhat compassionate, even where the Potions master was concerned. And it didn't help that he had had his life saved on several occasions by said professor, which only added to his somewhat hesitant compassion.

The group walked together to the Leaky Cauldron and Hermione made Harry promise to send Hedwig with a report as soon as their meeting with Snape was concluded. As they exited the Pub through the door that would take them back to Muggle London, they said their goodbyes before the boys headed towards Charing Cross Road, which offered the largest number of bookstores in the smallest area. The girls walked leisurely to the bus stop to wait for the bus that would take them back home to Alana's house.

Severus Snape left Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour and made his way to Knockturn Alley as fast as he could. The fact that Draco was hiding in the cellar of one of the more notorious gentlemen's establishments that graced the already infamous Knockturn Alley did not sit well with him. However, he could not counter Draco's argument for hiding there. "You know that the last place my father would be looking for me is the place where he acquires his playthings," Draco had argued his point.

He sighed as his destination, *Madame Teresa's Adventurous Play Pen for the Tasteful Wizard* came into view and whispered inconspicuously "*Dissimulo*", just in case there happened to be unwelcome eyes watching. It would not do for him to be seen at this sort of place, especially not considering whom he was about to meet with. He entered the notorious establishment fairly certain that he had gone unseen and headed straight down the stairs. Only in the confines of the dimly lit corridor did he take off the concealment charm before entering the room he knew Draco was waiting in.

The relief on Draco's face was evident when Snape opened the door, holding out his wand to him. He took it and said, "Thank you so much, you've saved my life. I wouldn't have known what to tell Father if I had to return home without it... Surely the truth would sound too unbelievable, and even if he *did* believe me, the idea of him knowing that I had been overpowered by a mere Muggle...a *girl* Muggle..." His voice trailed off and the fear in his eyes shone brightly.

Snape had known for weeks, months even, that something was going on with his godson, but until now had been unable to put his finger on anything specific. He eyed Draco with a bland expression.

"What exactly is going on, Draco? Lucius has always fulfilled your every whim, no matter how trivial, no matter how unsuitable. And suddenly you fear for your life because you lost your wand?" Severus was unable to keep the sarcasm entirely out of his voice. Practically from birth, Draco had always given off an air of arrogance and superiority; however, nothing of that had shown when he had approached him after losing his wand to that Muggle girl.

Draco did not answer immediately, he looked lost, not only for words, but entirely lost, as if he suddenly no longer knew what was happening around him. When he started to speak, it was barely above a whisper. "I don't know what's going on... I mean, I do know. Father wants me to take the Dark Mark right after graduation... and don't get me wrong, I have always wanted to follow the Dark Lord, ever since I can remember... but now..." He looked at Severus for any reaction, but the man successfully masked any surprise behind his usual façade of boredom and disdain. Draco continued. "There isn't really that much difference between pureblood wizards and Mudbloods, is there... I mean, look at Granger! She's probably more intelligent than the whole House of Slytherin combined, and she's Muggle-born. Just look at Crabbe or Goyle, they sprout barely any more intelligence than a mountain troll, and I'm supposed to believe they're superior just because both their parents are wizards... It just... It just doesn't work that way, does it?" Draco was almost shouting by the time he finished.

Severus Snape was not sure how to react to Draco's revelation. He knew instinctively that the boy was telling the truth. However, he also knew the devious means that Lucius Malfoy employed when gathering information that might prove useful to him and Draco had always been very close to his father. For all Severus knew, Draco might be under the Imperius curse, or was being influenced otherwise to investigate his godfather. He looked blandly at his godson. "Why are you telling me this, Draco?" he asked. Although Severus knew that he no reason to believe that Draco suspected him to be a spy, he was not about to reveal the truth.

Draco shifted in his seat and groaned slightly, as if uncomfortable. "I don't know why I'm telling you this, but I do know that if there is anyone I can trust, it is you," he replied, and Severus nodded in agreement. Draco went on, "Last weekend..." he looked at the floor as if it was the most fascinating place to observe before finally gathering all his courage and continuing, "Last weekend, Father gave me a good whipping," he turned his back to Snape and lifted his shirt to show the evidence of Lucius' work. Snape sucked his breath in sharply at the sight of Draco's back; his once flawless skin was now covered with angry red welts; some of them split open with dried up blood crusting over and others looked still fresh and covered with pus. It was a horrific sight, even more so for Snape who had always known his godson to pride himself on nothing short of complete perfection where his appearance was concerned.

Before Snape could open his mouth, Draco started to speak again, this time with a fierce determination not to stop until he had said everything he wanted to say. "And you know *why* he did this to me? Because I was incapable of raping a Muggle girl! My own father whips me half to death because I could not commit an act of crime. But to him, my lack of action was a crime and a disgrace and therefore punishable by whipping and locking me into my room for two days; without food and without water." His voice was bitter as he continued, "Now I'm allowed to go out for a mere few hours a day but only if it suits him. For instance, today, I was picking up an artefact for him because the house elves are busy preparing for the annual Summer Ball. Merlin knows what dark '*artefact*' it really is." Draco slouched down further in his seat and when Snape looked at him, he saw the tears streaming down the boy's face, his voice trembling as he spoke, "I always wanted to be like my father. But... But now," he stammered, "I don't want to be like him, not at all. I can't go around raping girls. I don't want to follow his archaic beliefs that purebloods are superior to Muggle-borns, because I know that it's just not true..." He began to sob openly and Severus looked at him uncomfortably.

Before long his breathing returned to normal and Draco looked up at his godfather wearily. "Look, I don't expect you to believe me just like that. You can use Legilimency or give me Veritaserum." Although Severus had no doubt that the boy was speaking the truth, he decided that a little prodding into his mind would do no harm. It would also give him a little longer to come up with some idea as to how he could help his godson. His Legilimens proved Draco's honesty beyond the shadow of a doubt. Severus flinched when he saw the anger that Lucius had unleashed on his son for failing to follow his orders and rape a Muggle girl.

"The man is insane, how anyone could do this to his own child is beyond me..." Severus thought angrily. Surely, if Draco spent the remainder of the summer holidays with his father, he would either wind up broken and following any orders Lucius saw fit to give him, or he would be dead before much longer.

"What do you want to do, Draco?" Severus asked, almost sure of his godson's answer. He was not disappointed.

"I want to get away from him. No, I need to get away. If I stay, I'll either end up doing what he wants me to do, or he'll kill me. I just... I don't have any idea where I could go that he wouldn't find me."

Severus carefully weighed the boy's options, knowing that if Draco did not return home, then Lucius would do everything in his power to find his son. He would most likely suspect Severus as well, knowing that Draco maintained a fairly close relationship with his godfather. Whilst Severus had no doubt that he would be able to keep Lucius at bay and keep his godson's secret, he considered the possibility that his actions may put other people in danger. Draco's closest friends Pansy Parkinson and Blaise Zabini had already managed to distance themselves from the Dark Lord and consequently from their families without anyone's but Severus' and Dumbledore's knowledge. However, Draco's disappearance and subsequent investigations that would follow might lead Lucius to find out these facts.

Severus knew what he had to do, and although it didn't sit well with him, his mind was made up. He would have to send Draco back to his father for now.

He spoke quietly, "Draco, you'll have to go back for now."

Draco started to protest, but Severus held his hand up to quiet the young man, "Hear me out. If you do not go back, you know as well as I do that your father will stop at nothing to locate you and no matter where you go, he *will* find you, make no mistake about it. And it will only be worse for you when he does."

Draco looked defeated upon hearing his godfather's words but knew that he was right.

"Turn around and let me apply some arnica salve, so at least your back will heal quickly." Severus ordered and Draco complied. While rubbing the salve carefully onto Draco's battered back, he continued talking, "I will do everything I can to come up with a reason for you to get away from there in the next couple of days but I need to first make some enquiries; I will need to have a proper plan so that Lucius doesn't grow suspicious. It will probably be best if Dumbledore sends an official letter requiring your assistance with tasks at Hogwarts prior to the start of the school year. I can't imagine Lucius arguing with that and it will ensure that he does not suspect anything unusual." Draco nodded and covered his back with his shirt again, feeling much relief as the pain immediately began to subside.

"How are you going to convince Dumbledore to do that? It's not as if he trusts you..." Draco inquired curiously.

Severus glared at him. "I have my ways, Mr. Malfoy, and I appreciate you not nosing around," he growled in a low voice. Draco smirked and let it go; he really didn't care how his godfather would pull it off, as long as he did.

Before they parted, Draco heading home, and Severus to Headquarters, Severus handed Draco a large coin with Chinese writing on it. "A Portkey, take it, just in case. If you are in danger, simply say '*Hogwarts*' and it will bring you directly to the castle. If nothing happens, wait for a letter with instructions and don't breathe a word to anyone." He then whispered '*Dissimulo*' to re-cast the concealment charm on both of them, giving Draco instructions to remove it as soon as he put a reasonable amount of distance between himself and the establishment they had spent the last hour in.

Draco felt overwhelmingly relieved after meeting with his godfather. Not only did his back feel much better, but it was also the first time that he felt a clear conscience, having made up his mind to not follow his family's steps into crime and racism. He could face his father now with his head held high, knowing that he would be able to fool him into believing that his muck-up with the Muggle girl had just been a bad case of beginner's nerves. After all, only a few days later, hopefully long before the next revel, he'd be out of his father's wrath.

Severus Snape decided to walk part of the way to number twelve, Grimmauld Place, so that he could do some thinking before facing two thirds of the bane of his existence, Potter and Weasley. Draco's revelation had not been entirely unexpected; however, he had not expected it to come so soon. After all, it was another eleven months before Draco would graduate and meet the requirements Voldemort imposed on everyone who wished to enter into his service. The Dark Lord did not accept any wizard who had not yet graduated, just as any Muggle heritage in a wizard's bloodline was unacceptable, despite his own half-Muggle parentage. Severus often thought to himself that those demands were just one of the more obvious signs of the Dark Lord's insanity. The demands on new recruits were seriously cutting into the number of new potentials as pureblood, powerful wizards and witches were becoming rarer every day. The interbreeding amongst a relatively small group of families over many generations had produced some seriously diminished magical abilities as well as intelligence levels, and having at least one squib in the family had become the norm rather than the oddity it once was.

'At least we don't have to fear that the number of Death Eaters will swell to a dangerous level these days', he thought dryly to himself.

He sighed as he approached the Green in the square that was Grimmauld Place, the walk had been too short and he had allowed his mind to wander instead of working out some formula on how to get his godson out of his misery. It was time to face Potter and Weasley and hear what their discovery was. He did not look forward to their meeting; after all, he couldn't care less for either of them. However, he was not so arrogant as to dismiss their wish to speak to him about whatever it was they wanted to speak to him. If Granger was involved, it was likely to be of importance. He had to credit her with the intelligence she possessed, despite the fact that he disliked her just as much as her friends, The-Boy-Who-Lived-To-Be-A-Pain-In-The-Arse and his red-haired, brain-lacking sidekick.

He entered number twelve the moment the house showed itself to him and walked straight through to the kitchen. Thankfully, his movements were silent enough to ensure that the portrait of Mrs. Black remained asleep. Potter and Weasley were already in the kitchen, waiting for him when he entered.

Severus attempted to suppress the sneer that for some reason immediately began to form whenever he set his sights on the two nuisances before him and as he settled into a chair at the long wooden table. He eyed the two boys with disdain before finally speaking with a hint of annoyance, "Well, get on with it, I haven't got all day."

A/N

"Dissimulo", Latin, means disguise, hide, ignore

Big Thanks to Tatiana for beta working. You rock!

A Muggle awakens

Alana has a premonition. Hermione panics. The girls have a night out.

Disclaimer: The characters of the Harry Potter Universe are not mine. I only take them out to play and promise to return them when I'm done.

Damage Control - Chapter Six

A Muggle Awakens

The two boys watched silently as their Potions master swooped into the dim kitchen at number twelve, Grimmauld Place and sat opposite them.

"Mr Potter, Mr Weasley, do stop gaping and tell me what's going on. It had better be worth my while as I do not approve of anyone wasting my time," he added with a sneer, "*especially* the two of you."

Harry ignored the scathing comments and began relating the events from the moment they got off the Hogwarts Express at King's Cross. Ron only occasionally chimed in with little tidbits that Harry had forgotten about and after a while Snape leaned forward, placing his elbows on the scarred tabletop and steeping his fingers below his chin. Without interrupting even once, he listened intently until both boys were silent having reached the time they parted company with the girls earlier this afternoon. Just as he was about to speak, Albus Dumbledore tumbled through the fireplace, a tangle of long, white beard and midnight blue robes.

"Severus, I got your message," the headmaster said in way of a greeting. "What is so urgent that can't wait till tomorrow?" Then he turned to Harry and Ron. "Harry, Ron, weren't you going to meet up with Miss Granger today?" Neither boy was surprised that the headmaster knew. Molly Weasley in all likelihood had told him and besides, Dumbledore always seemed omniscient.

"Yes, sir, we did meet, and we have just finished telling Professor Snape some news that might be of importance, or rather, news that might have implications for our world," Harry replied.

"Harry, Ron, I would like to speak with Professor Snape. If you'd be so kind as to wait here, I will return shortly and then we can discuss your news," Dumbledore suggested, his eyes twinkling. He then moved towards the kitchen door with Snape following him and the two men headed to the library where they would be undisturbed.

Snape spoke in great detail with Dumbledore of his meeting with Draco Malfoy and Dumbledore did not seem the least bit surprised to hear of Draco's change of heart as he had seen it coming for a while.

"Severus, of course we will help Draco. I will speak with Minerva this evening, I'm sure that we could use some additional assistance at the school in the coming days," he assured the Potions master with a knowing look. Before turning to the door to meet Harry and Ron in the kitchen Dumbledore spoke quietly, "It seems as though history does indeed repeat itself, wouldn't you agree Severus?"

Not waiting for a reply, the headmaster turned and headed for the kitchen where for the second time that evening, the two boys told him of their findings.

Alana was unusually quiet on the bus ride back to Russell Square. Hermione did not give it much thought, thinking her cousin was overwhelmed at getting a first taste of the Magical world in Diagon Alley. However, when they got home just in time for supper and Alana refused to eat claiming a headache as an excuse, Hermione wondered if something was wrong. She stayed at the dinner table just long enough to not appear impolite and then excused herself and headed straight to Alana's room.

"Alana, what is the matter? You haven't seemed quite yourself since we left Diagon Alley," Hermione enquired.

Alana avoided looking at Hermione and sighed deeply. "I don't quite know what's happening right now, let alone explain it."

"Why don't you try," Hermione suggested, trying to sound encouraging. "I don't know if I can help, but sometimes just talking about what's on your mind can help," she continued.

Alana looked at her thoughtfully, figuring that her cousin had a valid point. "Okay, I can't get Malfoy out of my mind." Seeing Hermione grin, she rolled her eyes. "No, Hermione, not like that! I think Malfoy is in danger. Don't ask me why, it's just a hunch I have but I've had this kind of feeling before and it turned out correct."

"Okay... so what kind of danger do you think he's in?" Hermione asked curiously, feeling a bit bewildered by her cousin's sudden abilities. In fact, she started to wonder to herself whether Alana might be a witch who had somehow slipped through the nets of the Ministry of Magic.

"I'm not sure, but I think the danger comes from within his family," Alana replied. She sighed, not sure what to make of that sudden urge to do something to get Draco out of danger. "Heck, Hermione, I don't know where this is coming from! I don't even like him, not from the books and certainly not from the way he behaved this afternoon! But something, *something* inside of me is urging me to do something," she said, with desperation in her voice. "I don't think I'd be able to have a clear conscience if I just ignored that hunch and then found out something happened to him. On the other hand, of course, I have no idea what to do!" She sounded defeated.

Hedwig's arrival interrupted the girls and Hermione untied Harry's letter from the owl's leg, asking her to wait. Turning to Alana, she said, "I think the best thing to do is for me to write to Professor Dumbledore. He will know what to make of it." Alana nodded in agreement and Hermione sat down, writing a quick reply to Harry and a letter for the headmaster.

'Dear Harry,

I need a favour. I'm enclosing a letter for Professor Dumbledore, could you please ask Hedwig to deliver it? It's fairly urgent. I'm leaving the letter open, so you can read it before sending it. I can't put my finger on it, but something seems to be happening with some Muggles, including my cousin. I'll reply to your letter in the morning.

Speak soon,

Love,

Hermione'

'Dear Professor Dumbledore,

My cousin Alana, with who I am staying with at the moment, thinks Draco Malfoy may in trouble, or rather, danger. She is the one who introduced us to the "Harry Potter" books, which Harry told you about. She also appears to be one of a number of Muggles who are rapidly awakening to Magic. She has experimented successfully with runes, studied other areas of magic; she even saw The Leaky Cauldron. And now she seems to have developed a sixth sense of sorts. Since meeting Draco Malfoy this afternoon in Diagon Alley, she has been sufficiently upset, believing him to be in danger. I told her that I would alert you, however, if you believe there is nothing to worry about then please accept my apologies for having bothered you.

Yours sincerely,

Hermione Granger'

Severus Snape sat in his favourite chair by the fireplace, so engrossed in *'Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone'* that even his brandy filled tumbler was left forgotten on the side table. Whilst the general description of his persona did not particularly bother him, he found himself feeling rather disconcerted after reading his very own first year speech word for word.

'Granger must be right.... There is no way anyone could have repeated everything so accurately without an advanced tracking charm...' He admitted to himself, albeit grudgingly.

A while later as he was just enjoying reading about Potter's trouble in his first Quidditch match, Gryffindor versus Slytherin Albus Dumbledore's head appeared in the fireplace, "Severus, so sorry to bother you at such a late hour. However, something has come up and I need your input, could you come to my office please?"

"Certainly, Albus, I'll be there in a moment," he replied, groaning inwardly. He was not sure what to make of the books or why they were published, but he wanted to solve this mystery and preferably without constantly being interrupted.

An hour later he was back in his chambers even more mystified than before he had left. Now they had a Muggle girl who appeared to have rapidly awakened to Magic on top of everything else.

'A series of bestselling Mugglenovels that would better qualify as a biography. A Muggle learning Magic...Merlin, what next...' He sighed, exasperated. The headmaster's parting words also rang in his mind.

"Severus, I would advise you not to punish anyone whose only crime was committed because of a wrong suspicion and the need to protect a dear friend." He hated it when Albus spoke in riddles.

Sometime later, that particular riddle was solved as he continued reading *The Philosopher's Stone*.

'...Hermione had fought her way across to the stand where Snape stood and was now racing along the row behind him; she didn't even stop to say sorry as she knocked Professor Quirrell headfirst into the row in front. Reaching Snape, she crouched down, pulled out her wand and whispered a few, well chosen words. Bright blue flames shot from her wand on to the hem of Snape's robes...'

The Granger child could count herself extremely lucky that it wasn't term time, or else he would have ignored the headmaster's request entirely. *'How dare she set fire on me...'* He was seething, completely ignoring her well-meant motive but deciding to put aside any plans for revenge for now. After all, he did have nearly an entire year before she would finally leave Hogwarts for good, and he had no doubt that he would find a way to get back at her without the headmaster finding out.

His mind wandered back to the news Albus had shared with him about Granger's cousin. So his great aunt had been correct with her prophecy after all. This fact alone would not be surprising; many seers had given correct prophecies over the centuries, but Aurelia Black was born a Squib and never showed an ounce of magical power until her niece, Maya Snape visited her to introduce her new husband. Aurelia seemed to lose consciousness briefly while the three sat near the fireplace, chatting and drinking tea. When she awoke, she uttered the words that would later become known as "The Squib's Prophecy".

'There will be desperate times, when the Reptilian races attempt to take over both the Magical and the Muggle worlds. The force will be evident only in the Magical world, and hidden in the Muggle world. But a few Muggles will awaken to our and other worlds and together will overthrow those who are not deserving of power and render them powerless... All will fall into place when the time comes.'

Aurelia then pulled her niece aside and urged her to look after her son. Maya looked at her confusedly. "Aunt, I have only just gotten married and we'd like to enjoy ourselves a little before we think of children." Aurelia insisted that she would soon bear a son and he needed looking after. "Do not ever lose faith in him, Maya. He may spend time walking the left path, but he'll return. And he will play a major role in bringing the Reptilians down. And Maya don't judge him for his choices - ever," Those were her last words to the bewildered young woman.

Neither Maya nor Septimus Snape paid much thought to the old lady's words until Maya found herself pregnant not even a year later, unexpected and unplanned. She quickly informed Albus Dumbledore of what her aunt had said and he had made note of the event, never mentioning it again until today, when he received Hermione's letter.

Maya had informed her son of the prophecy after he left Voldemort's ranks. *"Severus, I know you're on the right side now. Stay there and keep in mind Aunt Aurelia's prophecy."* He did not appreciate being reminded of the mistake he made in his recent youth and had brushed her words off impatiently.

Severus Snape rolled his eyes at the particular smugness the headmaster was displaying when he showed him Granger's letter. Unconvinced he snarled at the older man, "So one part of the bloody prophecy seems to be true. For all we know, it might be a completely unrelated event, the girl might be a witch who was simply overlooked," he suggested, not even entirely convinced of this himself.

Albus looked at him, the smug expression still plastered on his face. "We'll see, Severus, time will tell."

Severus' thoughts wandered back to the book in front of him. He'd finish reading it and start with the next one tomorrow, grateful that he had nearly two months left before the dunderheads arrived again for another term.

The girls had talked late into the night and Hermione was none too pleased when an owl's tapping sound woke her up in the morning. Sighing, she peeled herself out of bed and opened the window to let the strange owl in. She woke up instantly when she recognized the Hogwarts seal on the parchment tied to the owl's leg and quickly untied and ripped the letter open. She began reading impatiently and barely took notice as the tawny owl took flight through the still open window.

'Dear Miss Granger,

Thank you for alerting me to the new developments concerning your cousin, this event has been expected for many years. However, I am not presently in a position to divulge any further information. Your cousin Alana was correct in her fear for young Mr Malfoy and no doubt she will be relieved to know that we have taken appropriate steps to ensure his continued safety.

I find it safe to say you are already aware that this matter must be treated with the utmost confidentiality. I would therefore ask you not to discuss the recent events outside of your immediate circle of friends. In the meantime, I am relieved that your cousin has a competent witch on her side. Awakening to such powers is not easy but I have no doubt that you will guide her and aid in the development of said powers. Please do not hesitate to direct any questions or problems to me.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Albus Dumbledore

Headmaster'

"Alana, wake up," Hermione yelled at her cousin, having run from her own room to show her the headmaster's letter. "You were right, you know! Malfoy was in danger, but he's not now!" Alana yawned while grabbing the letter that Hermione waved in front of her. She looked very relieved, having taken Dumbledore's words in.

"Phew! I'm glad I'm not going mad, you know," Alana said to her cousin, a relieved grin showing on her face. "It feels like I'm in the middle of an adventure now, I rather like that," she added.

"Adventure? Yeah, I guess you're right," Hermione allowed, then continued, "Although I'm not sure I like the sound of that. Every time I got myself into an adventure with Harry and Ron, we seemed to find ourselves in deep trouble..." Her thoughts wandered back to the many adventures she and her two closest friends had lived through. Having just read the Harry Potter books made all the memories seem much fresher now; solving the puzzle to get to the Philosopher's Stone felt like only yesterday. Suddenly her blood ran cold, thinking of all the things she had done that she *didn't* want anyone to know about.

"Oh Merlin, Alana!" she exclaimed, a look of terror on her face. "Professor Snape is probably reading the books as we speak." Her voice became little more than a whisper, "He'll know it was me that set fire to his robes. And not only that, he'll know I stole the Boomslang skin from his private stores! He is going to kill me..." She was absolutely horrified. "I'm such an idiot," she moaned. "I was the one who told Harry to give him the books. Oh Merlin, I am in so much trouble..."

Alana tried her best to calm her cousin. "Hermione, that was years ago! He's not going to punish you for something you did that long ago! And besides, the books explain well enough the reasons for your action; it's not as if you did it out of mischief!"

"You know his character from the books; do you seriously think he's going to care what my motives were, Alana? He'll see that his authority was seriously undermined and he'll punish me for that, no doubt." She sighed deeply.

For the next few hours, nothing Alana said or did could cheer her up. Hermione was constantly entertaining horrific visions of how the Potions master would punish her for all her misdeeds. The more engrossed she became in the scenario, the worse the punishment. First, detention for the remainder of her days at Hogwarts was the worst she could imagine. A few hours later, simple detention and cleaning cauldrons without magic seemed like a dream. No, he would ensure she'd be expelled at the least. Her wand would probably be broken in two and she'd end up living like a Muggle, disgraced and abandoned by the Magical world. She could just picture the look of triumph in his eyes.

Eventually, Alana had enough of her cousin's horror scenarios and snapped at her, "Look, there's nothing you can do right now. Professor Dumbledore surely knows what you've done and he won't allow having you banned from the Magic world! Now, take your mind off it; you'll have plenty of time to worry when you face Snape if he really decides to punish you!"

"I guess you're right," Hermione sighed, thankful that her attention was finally diverted entirely when Aunt Amelia called both girls downstairs, having just returned from town.

"Girls, how would you like to see a West End Show? I thought since Hermione doesn't usually spend any time in London, she might enjoy it?"

Alana looked excited. "Oh Mum, brilliant idea, did you get tickets already?"

Her mother looked smug and chuckled. "I happened to be near Leicester Square at lunchtime, so I popped over to The Booth and managed to get a couple of tickets for *'Phantom'*. You have plenty of time to get ready."

Alana almost squealed, whilst her cousin looked in awe. "Wow, *'Phantom of the Opera'*! It's one I've always wanted to see. The music is so brilliant!"

"Oh you're gonna love it, Hermione! It's my all time favourite musical, and I've seen a lot of them. The music is brilliant, the cast is fantastic, and the story is simply awesome," Alana said.

"Merlin, this was so, so, so incredible, Alana. I'll be forever grateful to your mum for getting us the tickets!" Hermione was still in awe of the performance as they headed back towards Russell Square.

"It's brilliant, isn't it," Alana agreed. "So, who is your favourite character?" she asked.

Hermione thought for a moment, before replying, "I think it's got to be Madame Giry. She has so much presence, even though she's not one of the main characters. Her voice is brilliant and she commands the whole ballet corps by sheer presence, she's simply incredible. And I loved her dress, so... individual, bringing out the best in her figure and completely ignoring the fashion of the day. I really liked that."

Alana was surprised. "Since when are you interested in clothes, Hermione? That's a totally new trait!"

Hermione shook her head. "I'm not interested in fashion. But that doesn't mean I'm not interested in nice clothing. I just don't like being dictated what I can wear or not wear just because some fashion guru says so."

"You mean, you like individuality...sort of like Snape?" Alana couldn't help snickering.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Please, don't remind me! I managed to forget about him for the entire evening and I'd rather dream of *'Phantom of the Opera'* than of the punishments he's going to make up for me!"

"You'll dream of *'Phantom'*, don't worry," Alana assured her. She looked at Hermione sideways. "You know... The Phantom's character reminds me of Snape in the books."

Hermione gave her a hard look. "You're joking, right? How on earth could you possibly compare the two? The Phantom looks rather dashing as long as his mask is on, and besides, he's quite charming at least at the beginning!"

"Don't go by looks, or charm. Look at the character, the wicked sense of humour might be more evident in the show than in the ~~the~~ *Harry Potter* books, but couldn't you just imagine Snape doing exactly the things Eric does?" Alana warmed up to the subject at hand and continued talking excitedly. "Couldn't you imagine Snape suddenly turning up somewhere, totally unexpected? Okay, he might not smash a chandelier on an entire cast of performers, but he could surely think of something equally dramatic. Or take the scene where the Phantom takes Christine to the dungeons. Couldn't you imagine Snape doing that with some beautiful girl? And his voice! Have you ever noticed Snape's voice? I find it just as captivating as the Phantom's!" Alana groaned. "Gods, Hermione, I don't think I could ever concentrate if my teacher had such a voice. And I've only heard it once, but it surely sent shivers down my spine."

Hermione shook her head in disbelief. "You. Have. Gone. Utterly. Mad." She could not believe her cousin's analysis of her Potions professor. "Alana, please. Can we talk about something not involving that particular professor? I'm really not in the mood to think of his character - or the punishments he'll no doubt find for me."

Alana heeded her cousin's wish and the rest of the short walk was spent discussing the differences between Muggle schools and Hogwarts.

A/N

The passage about Hermione setting fire on Snape is directly quoted from "Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone", Bloomsbury paper back

The reference to the Phantom of the Opera is to the current cast (Spring 2005) in London's West End (Her Majesty's Theatre). Madame Giry is performed by Heather Jackson.

"The Booth" is really located in Leicester Square and sells cut price tickets for West End Shows on the day.

Big thanks to my beta Tatiana. You rock!

Reviews are greatly appreciated.

One's Nightmare is Another's Dream

Chapter 7 of 9

Hermione has a nightmare. Alana makes fun of her mum. The girls spend time on the internet

Disclaimer: The characters of the Harry Potter Universe are not mine. I only take them out to play and promise to return them when I'm done.

Damage Control - Chapter Seven

One's Nightmare is Another's Dream

Hermione heard the music from far away and strained her ears. It was beautiful, and it came slowly closer.

'Night time sharpens, heightens each sensation

Darkness stirs and wakes imagination

Silently the senses abandon their defences

Slowly, gently night unfurls its splendour

Grasp it, sense it, tremulous and tender

Turn your face away from the garish light of day

Turn your thoughts away from cold and feeling light

And listen to the music of the night'

She looked around and found herself not in her bed, but in front of a mirror in a room that was typical of Hogwarts. She looked at it and saw the Phantom come close. *must be dreaming. What is the Phantom of the Opera doing at Hogwarts? In a mirror of all places! Am I at Hogwarts at all?' she thought.*

He reached towards her with his hand and she took it, completely mesmerized by his singing. He led her down a long staircase, one she had never seen at Hogwarts before, caressing her senses with his singing of "Music of the Night".

'Close your eyes and surrender to your darkest dreams

Put the thoughts of the life in you before

Close your eyes let your spirit start to soar

And you'll live as you've never lived before'

She closed her eyes, treasuring the feeling of her spirit soaring. The sensation she felt was unlike anything she had ever experienced before and she felt as if she were in the centre of the universe. It was an indescribable feeling. She looked forward to living, as she had never lived before, whatever that entailed. At that moment, Hermione was entirely lost in the music and this mysterious stranger, the Phantom, who was effortlessly seducing her with his singing alone.

'Softly, deftly, music shall surround you

Feel it, hear it, closing in around you

Open up your mind, let your fantasies unwind

In this darkness, which you know you cannot fight

The darkness of the music of the night.'

Yes, he was right. She could not fight it, this darkness of the music of the night. As long as the music continued, she would do anything he asked of her. Her whole being was entirely absorbed in the music; like her small hand was absorbed in his large hand, her soul was absorbed in his.

'Let your mind start a journey through a strange new world

Leave off thoughts of the world you knew before

Let your soul take you where you long to be

Only then can you belong to me'

She sighed contentedly at his words. Yes, she would do anything it took for her to belong to him. With him, it was easy to leave off thoughts of any world she knew before, Muggle or magic, it did not matter. As long as she belonged to him, nothing mattered.

'Floating, falling, sweet intoxication

Touch me, trust me, savour each sensation

Let the dream begin, let your darker side give in

To the power of the music that I light

The power of the music of the night'

She acutely felt the power of the music. No longer did it matter what was light or what was dark. Giving in to the music was all that mattered. She trusted him. She wanted to touch him. Oh, how she longed to feel him.

'You alone can make my song take flight

Help me make the music of the night'

When the last note was sung they reached the bottom of the long, winding staircase. "That was the most beautiful music I've ever heard," Hermione whispered, feeling far too reverred to speak in a full voice.

Suddenly, a different music sounded. She recognised it as another song from the show she had seen a mere few hours ago. But when the Phantom's words sank in, she turned to look at him and any sound she was about to utter died in her throat.

'Why so silent, young lady?

Did you think that I had forgotten?

Have you missed me, young lady?

I have written you a manual

Here I bring you the instructions

Miss Granger working hard

I advise you to comply

My instructions should be clear

Remember there are worse things than merely a detention

Your chains are still mine

You'll clean cauldrons for me'

The Phantom had at some point changed into Professor Snape and with his last words he waved to an area off to the side. Hermione followed with her eyes and saw cauldrons everywhere. There were thousands of dirty cauldrons. Small ones, large ones, massive ones, silver cauldrons, iron cauldrons, steel cauldrons, gold cauldrons, some blackened with soot, others crusted over with whatever potion had boiled over, yet others displaying the whole spectrum of the rainbow.

"Start right away, Miss Granger, and you might finish in time to sit your NEWTs," Snape sneered, pointing to a large sink in a corner that held sponges, rags and Muggle cleaning solution.

Hermione's eyes filled with tears. "How will I be able to study for the NEWTs if I have to clean thousands of cauldrons?"

"Ah, Miss Granger, maybe you should have considered that when you set fire to my robes in your first year." His chuckle was so dark and sinister, Hermione shivered. She did not dare say anymore and instead walked towards the sink and picked up the first cauldron to clean.

A bell sounded somewhere. *'Strange to hear a bell so far below Hogwarts,*' she thought to herself and then concentrated on the task before her again. If she could speed up the cleaning, she might be able to get a few days or even weeks of studying done before the NEWTs. But it would never be sufficient for her to gain top scores. She was devastated. *'I don't know what's worse, not having any time to study and failing my NEWTs, or being entirely banned from the Magic world...'* She sighed to herself. Then she felt angry. *'How could I have been so stupid and not recognize him? Oh Merlin, and he made me feel like, I don't know..'* Realising with a jolt that he had awakened desires within her that she had not been aware of before, she felt embarrassed and blushed. She looked timidly around to see if Snape was anywhere nearby and blushed even harder when she saw him watching her intently, with a smirk on his face.

The same bell sounded again and she realised with a start that this was unlike the Hogwarts bells that alerted the start and finish of lessons. She felt defeated. *Great, now I'm stuck here with thousands of dirty cauldrons and I don't even have any clue as to where I am! If only he disappeared now, I can't concentrate...*

"Hermione, are you going to wake up today at all? What have you two girls been up to that you need to sleep that long?" Never before was the sound of Aunt Amelia's voice so welcome.

"Argh... You could have splashed cold water on me hours ago, you know. Might have rescued me," Hermione mumbled and gratefully took the proffered mug of steaming black coffee from her aunt.

"Oh, poor dear! Nightmare? I thought you were a bit preoccupied and worried yesterday. Was it bad?" Aunt Amelia enquired compassionately.

"Hm. I was stuck in a huge room with thousands of pots to clean and didn't have any time for studying," Hermione said glumly. She thought for a moment that there was something else she should remember about the nightmare. It hadn't started off as a nightmare, she was certain of it, but couldn't for the life of her remember any details of the beginning.

Aunt Amelia laughed. "You are so much like your dad, you know. If it hadn't been for him, both your mother and I would have failed all our exams. Ah well, not to worry, it was only a dream. I'm making pancakes for breakfast, come on down when you're ready."

Hermione's mood lightened. Pancakes sounded good.

Severus Snape stretched luxuriously upon waking up in his dark green, silk sheets. Summer holidays truly were bliss. No hopeless dunderheads to teach, no know-it-alls who asked constant streams of never ending questions, and he could laze around in bed completely undisturbed.

He remembered the dream from which he had awoken and chuckled to himself. He loved the idea of luring Granger into the deepest corners of the dungeons under the disguise of a seductive *Phantom of the Opera* only to make her clean all the cauldrons that had ever been used in his classroom at Hogwarts. Indeed, she would be busy at least until the NEWTs were due, if not longer, before those cauldrons were cleaned.

She had looked rather attractive in his dream, so aroused by his singing. And then she looked like the stupid little girl she truly was when he showed her all the cauldrons. He snorted. *'Attractive my arse... Am I getting that desperate that I'm lusting after a student? Especially that student...'* He shook his head at his own weakness and decided it was time for some diversion.

Maybe he'd venture into Muggle London, it had been years that he indulged in some culture, like a musical. Dreaming of being the *Phantom of the Opera* made him want to see the performance again.

Lucius Malfoy was seething. The old codger, Hogwarts' headmaster, had effectively spoiled the grandiose plans he had for his son by inviting him to participate in an Advanced Potions summer class. As much as he loathed Albus Dumbledore, he did not dare cross him. He preferred his plans for Draco to remain unknown to the crowd around Dumbledore. Draco would emerge as the Dark Lord's right hand as soon as he graduated and in order to realize such a plan, he needed to be trained accordingly. Lucius did not see too big a problem with that and he headed to Draco's quarters to inform him.

"Draco, that imbecile of a headmaster has crossed my plans for you. But fear not, I will find a way to continue your training, so all will go well."

"What does the letter say, Father?" Draco asked. He felt relieved beyond belief with the knowledge that he would soon be away from his father's clutches; everything else was not important right now. As long as he could act as if he was as bothered as Lucius about the change of plans, all would be well.

"You've been chosen to participate in a summer class for Advanced Potions," Lucius sighed dramatically. "Oh well, perhaps Severus will be able to teach you a dose of Potions that will come in useful; something that will impress our Lord..." He could see it before his eyes; his son, proudly concocting the potion that would guarantee his Lord to gain immortality.

"Oh..." Draco managed to look surprised. "Does it say who else is taking part?"

"No... I'm sure that neither Crabbe nor Goyle are invited," Lucius snickered. "As far as I know, Blaise and Pansy are quite adept at Potions, so maybe they will be there. And I have no doubt that Mudblood has been invited," he continued with a sneer.

Draco watched as his father's eyes took on a familiar gleam, "Draco... I have the most brilliant idea. What if we could present the Mudblood girl to the Dark Lord as a gift? Imagine...the best friend of Harry Potter..." His eyes glittered malevolently, "You will help me by separating the Mudblood from her friends and when the time is right, we'll take her. It should actually be fairly simple, what with the school being mostly empty for the holidays..."

Draco was not sure how to react to Lucius' idea, but decided it would be in his best interest to play along for now. He made a mental note to inform Severus of his father's plans as soon as he arrived safely at the school. "Brilliant, Father," he said, trying to sound confident, "just let me know what you would like me to do."

Hermione and Alana spent a relaxing day chatting and reading and Alana laughed when Hermione told her about the nightmare. "Maybe you won't think about it so much now that you've dreamed about it..." she suggested.

Hermione still felt something nagging in the back of her mind, something she *should* remember, but couldn't. She eventually put it aside as there was no use dwelling on it if she couldn't think of what it was. Whilst Alana checked her e-mail, Hermione decided to write a letter to Harry. She knew Hedwig would turn up at some stage during the day and figured the owl might be pleased if she was not made to wait for once.

With her letter finally finished, Hermione peered over Alana's shoulder to see what her cousin was up to at the computer. Having spent the last few years mainly at Hogwarts where electrical items did not work, she had never had a chance to familiarize herself with computers, let alone the internet.

"So, explain this internet thing, please," she asked Alana.

"Oh, I forgot, you don't have electricity at Hogwarts!" Alana exclaimed. "Well, every Muggle nowadays uses the internet, for communication, for learning, for entertainment, for everything, really. You can write letters that get delivered within seconds to the person you send it to. You can do online courses about any subject; it's like doing a long-distance learning course. You can read e-books; stories, non-fiction, jokes." She showed Hermione her mailbox, and then went to the Google site. "Just give me anything you want to find out about, and let's see what comes up," she suggested.

"Hm, do you think there's anything about Hogwarts?" Hermione asked.

"Let's see..." Alana typed in '*Hogwarts*'

There were thousands, no millions of websites that included the word '*Hogwarts*'. Alana clicked on a random site, and landed on *Mugglenet*. She started reading something about the cast of the movie '*Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*', with Hermione reading over her shoulder. "Oh, wow, they cast Alan Rickman for the movie, I wonder if Mum knows!" Alana exclaimed, delighted. "He's my mum's favourite actor," she added, and then gulped, evidently having read a few more lines. "Oh, goodness, gracious me, he's playing Professor Snape, Hermione, I can't believe it!" She got up to find her mother to tell her the news. Hermione followed her, wondering what could be so exciting about an actor playing a role.

"That doesn't surprise me, love, he's a brilliant actor and he'll do a fantastic job of playing Professor Snape." Aunt Amelia looked flustered. "What else does Mugglenet say about the movie?" she asked.

Alana dragged her to the computer. "Read!"

Aunt Amelia sat down and started reading, blushing every now and then and fidgeting in her chair. Alana rolled her eyes at her mother. "You'd think she is a teenager with a crush," she sighed. Hermione grinned. She didn't know this side of her aunt and found it highly amusing that Aunt Amelia would have a crush on some actor.

"Alana, stop it!" Aunt Amelia chided her daughter. "I don't have a crush on him, I merely appreciate his acting abilities," she insisted.

Alana and Hermione both giggled. "Right, Mom, that's why you've watched every one of his movies a million times. Because his *acting* is so fantastic. And because you are

so interested in acting..." Alana mocked.

"Loud-mouthed teenagers..." Aunt Amelia groused. "Now, stop it! No more of actors, or do I need to remind you of your opinion of Draco Malfoy in the Harry Potter books? How many times did you read all the parts with him in it?" she asked her daughter smugly. It was Alana's turn to blush deeply. Hermione's ears perked up at her aunt's words.

"So... you *do* like Draco then?" Hermione grinned at her cousin.

"Oh, she does, Hermione! She went from someone who hated books to a bookworm who savours every word written about on *Draco Malfoy*!" Amelia teased, very happy that she had managed to divert the attention of the girls away from her interests and to the subject of her daughter's love interest. "She even admitted that she'd go out of her way to meet him if he was real. Oh how she wishes he was real!" Hermione realized that her aunt had no idea just how real Draco was.

"So, Aunt Amelia, have you read the Harry Potter books?" she asked, more out of the need to say something rather than real interest.

"Yes, of course I have. Who hasn't, besides some religious fanatics?" Aunt Amelia looked fondly at Alana's bookshelf. "They are good books. So realistic, as if all of it really happened..."

"Do tell Hermione who's your favourite character, Mum," Alana chimed in.

"Oh, that has to be Professor Snape! He's such an intriguing personality!" Aunt Amelia stated. Hermione rolled her eyes. *'Like mother, like daughter,'* she thought, Alana's analysis of her Potions professor still fresh in her mind.

"See, Hermione, I'm not the only one with that opinion of the Potions master!" Alana laughed upon seeing Hermione's reaction to her mother's revelation.

Hermione groaned. "That's only because you don't know what he's really like," she stated, completely forgetting that her aunt had no idea about the reality of Harry Potter and the Magic world. She realized it almost immediately and looked at Alana, horrified. Luckily, Aunt Amelia mistook her niece's slip and horrified expression as guilt for spending too much time on the Internet.

"You haven't been spending too much time with role playing games and fan fiction, Alana, have you? Don't you corrupt your cousin with such wastes of time!" she chided her daughter sternly.

Alana looked calm and put an innocent expression on. "No, mum. I don't *do* fan fiction, and there hasn't been much going on with RPG since most people are on holiday now!" Her mother was sufficiently mollified by her daughter's assurances, and her mind drifted elsewhere.

"Oh! I wonder what kind of fan fiction will be written now that Alan Rickman is cast for the movie! I bet there'll be some good ones out there soon!" She exclaimed. Hermione looked at her blankly.

"Fan fiction?"

"Harry Potter fan fiction is *huge* on the internet! It's the best entertainment if you find one that's well written, and there are some really good authors out there. They're stories about the Harry Potter characters that people invent," Aunt Amelia explained.

"Yes, and mum's favourite ones always involve Professor Snape," Alana snickered. "She spends hours on the internet reading," she added, to her mother's dismay.

Aunt Amelia was clearly uncomfortable. "I do *not* spend hours reading that stuff," she huffed at her daughter. "I'll have you know that your role playing games take up far more time than my occasional escape into the Harry Potter world!" She added hotly and left the room, not in the least pleased with her daughter.

Hermione was intrigued. "You mean, there are people who write stories about us?" she asked her cousin.

"Yes, lots of them. I've only read a few where Draco pairs up with an *Original Character*, that is a character made up by the author, who is not in the books, but there are many stories around. Some revolve around Harry and Ginny, Ron and you, Draco and Ginny; some are even about a relationship between Dumbledore and McGonagall," she wrinkled her nose in distaste, "and then of course there are a lot about Professor Snape and an original character."

"About me and Ron?" Hermione asked incredulously. "Eeewww, that's disgusting! We're like brother and sister!" She shook her head at such a distasteful idea.

Alana eyed her cousin with a calculating look. "I agree, I don't find the idea of you and Ron together suitable at all. You definitely need someone older. Ron is such a baby in the books." Then she shot her a mischievous grin. "Hey, how about you and Snape?"

Hermione looked furious. "No thanks! Ugh. He's about twice my age, he's got greasy hair and he acts like a git most of the time!"

Alana looked thoughtful. She had only suggested Snape to infuriate Hermione, but they really did not seem to be so different when she thought about it. "You know, I don't think that idea is so far fetched. I mean, come on, you both love books, neither of you is very social, and I can't imagine either of you to ever get enthusiastic over a Quidditch match!"

"I'd rather live a life in celibacy I'll have you know. And now I'll thank you for changing the subject!" Hermione's tone of voice left no room for negotiation. Alana dropped the subject and silently vowed to find a fan fiction involving Hermione and her Potions master to hold under her cousin's nose, if only to prove that her idea was not that far fetched.

Severus Snape let out a long sigh. His godson had just told him about the conversation he had with his father in the morning before coming back to Hogwarts under the guise of an Advanced Potions summer class.

He would have to inform the headmaster of Lucius' latest devious plan. As much as he disliked the Know-it-All, he could not justify being at least partly responsible for her demise should Lucius succeed. The sight of her with her hand trustingly in his, aroused by his seductive singing sprang up unbidden in his mind.

'For crying out loud, get a grip, old man...' he thought, annoyed with himself. *'She is a student, she is a Know-it-All, and not least, she represents one third of the Golden Trio! Get her the fuck out of your mind!'*

He was in dire need of a stiff drink before facing the headmaster to inform him of the latest developments. Firewhiskey wouldn't do on this occasion. As much as he despised most things Muggle, he appreciated their knack for making fine liqueurs, such as brandy, as well as their abilities in the Arts. No wizard had ever out-composed Handel's *'Harpsichord concertos'*, or Sibelius' *'Karelia Suite'*, or, indeed, Lloyd-Webber's *'Phantom of the Opera'*. The same was applicable in his opinion, to literature. There simply was no wizard equivalent to Shakespeare. Had he been more aware of Muggle cultural developments, he would have snortingly compared the latest Bollywood projects with Hollywood Classics.

After carefully choosing one of the finer brandies, he sat down with his tumbler in front of the fireplace to contemplate the events that had transpired over the past few days.

A/N

Big thanks to my beta, Tatiana. Blessed be the day I met you!

Reviews gratefully received.

Revelations

Chapter 8 of 9

A short meeting with the Potions professor, talks between different people, and... Hermione reads a fanfiction.

Disclaimer: Still not mine *sigh*

Damage Control - Chapter Eight

Revelations

"Severus, I'd like you to put a tracking charm on Miss Granger. If Lucius cannot get to her with his son's help, he may attempt to kidnap her from other places. And she can only spend so much time confined to her aunt's house," Dumbledore said.

Severus Snape smirked. There was a way to get back at the Granger chit, presented to him on a golden platter. He would follow the headmaster's request, but the headmaster did not tell him which tracking charm to use. He envisioned the fun he would soon have with her, after putting the *Remitto Sermo* charm on her. This way, he would not only know her whereabouts at all times, he would also know every single word she uttered while the charm was in place.

Hermione was surprised to be woken up by another school owl. She untied the letter with the Hogwarts seal from the owl's leg and opened it.

'Dear Miss Granger,

Whilst I am weary of interrupting your well-earned holiday, recent developments demand a face to face meeting. Enclosed please find a Portkey, it will activate when you say the name of the person you recently met unexpectedly in Diagon Alley and will bring you directly to my office at Hogwarts.

I look forward to seeing you at some point today.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Albus Dumbledore

Headmaster

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Hermione was curious what the *'recent developments'* were, and why she was being summoned by Professor Dumbledore. Figuring that it must be something of importance by the tone of the letter, she decided to go sooner rather than later and set out to let Alana know of her whereabouts.

Hermione was correct in assuming that Draco's name would activate the Portkey and within moments she arrived in the headmaster's office as he was enjoying a late morning tea with the Deputy Headmistress, Minerva McGonagall.

They exchanged pleasantries before Dumbledore relayed the recent events that potentially involved Hermione. Professor McGonagall was listening aptly, having missed some of the finer details as she had not been present when the headmaster had spoken with the Potions master.

McGonagall was aghast when she heard Lucius Malfoy's plans to present Hermione to Voldemort.

"Albus, you can't put Hermione in such danger! Surely, it would be in her best interest to find a Secret Keeper and send her into hiding until the danger is over!"

Hermione shook her head. "I don't think that will solve the problem. If they don't focus on me they'll turn to Ron or even Harry to cause havoc. It was probably sheer convenience that Malfoy chose me since he's assuming that I will be taking part in the Summer Potions project. I don't want to run away from any danger. If I do that it will only prolong the war!" Hermione was adamant that she would not go into hiding.

"Miss Granger is right, Minerva. If we hide her, the war will continue to drag on and on. Instead, we should put our efforts into finding a way to force Voldemort out in the open so that we have a fair chance of winning the confrontation. This has been going on for far too long already and particularly now, with Harry's life being completely out in the open for everyone to read about, the time has come for us to conclude the matter. And I dare say we have a better chance by *not* going on the defensive," Dumbledore evidently agreed with Hogwarts' top student. He continued, "I've asked Severus to put a tracking charm on Miss Granger and we will take measures to secure her aunt's house where she is staying at present. She will not return to Hogwarts until the school year begins, ensuring that Lucius will lose some of the control he has over Draco."

An idea hit Hermione. Not only would it ensure her safety at her aunt's house but she could also involve Alana and her emerging magical abilities *'is it really magic? Or might it be something else entirely, something big, involving all races?'* - thus making certain that her relatives would have protection from Death Eaters at least while at home.

"Professor Dumbledore, I could apply protective Runes around the house, I'm sure my cousin would appreciate the learning experience," Hermione suggested, "and that

way I'd feel like I'm contributing..." Her thoughts trailed briefly to the knowledge she had acquired over the past few years from several books on the subject and her Ancient Runes classes.

Dumbledore smiled at her benignly over his glasses. "Splendid idea, Miss Granger. Would three days be enough for you? Once you've done your part, let me know and we'll come and reinforce the protection."

"Yes, that should be sufficient, thank you, Sir," she replied.

"Good, that's sorted then. Now, Miss Granger, if you could go down to the dungeons to meet with Professor Snape so that he can place a tracking charm on you. After that you'll be free to return to your well earned holidays." Dumbledore handed her the Portkey to return her to Aunt Amelia's home and ushered her to the door.

Hermione said her good-byes to the headmaster and her Head of House, and left for the dungeons. The long walk downstairs brought back the memories of her nightmare as well as Alana's words about her Potions professor. She shuddered before shaking off the thoughts determinedly. *'Reality check here, Granger. Alana doesn't know him, and the nightmare was just that, nothing to do with reality'*, she admonished herself.

Severus Snape was leisurely reading the latest issue of *Ratio Potiarum* in his office when Granger knocked at the door. He let her wait just long enough to increase her discomfort before opening the door.

"Miss Granger," he drawled, "to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?" He was thoroughly enjoying making her uncomfortable by feigning ignorance as to the reason why she was here.

"Professor Snape," she said politely, "Professor Dumbledore asked me to see you so that you could place a tracking charm on me." Her nervousness was evident.

"Ah, yes, the tracking charm..." Snape said thoughtfully. "I suppose now that I will be aware of every movement you make, you will have to be much more careful when choosing your *extracurricular* activities." He paused momentarily, "I would also advise you to think twice before deciding to set a member of the staff's robes ablaze..." Hermione blanched. "...or where you steal ingredients from for a potion that you are nowhere near qualified to brew...I will be watching you Miss Granger," his eyes narrowed and he leaned towards her slightly before hissing quietly, "*every* move that you make." He conveniently forgot to mention that he would also hear every word she uttered whilst the charm was in place.

Hermione nodded, at a complete loss for words. Severus stood upright and arched an eyebrow at the young woman before him, "Miss Know-it-all, speechless? Clearly, this day is to be marked on the calendar," his voice was dripping with sarcasm.

"I... I'm sorry, sir," Hermione stammered before falling silent again, twisting her fingers nervously.

"Well, Miss Granger, if you're done fidgeting perhaps you would be so kind as to turn around so that I may place the charm on you. I haven't got all day," Snape drawled, his black eyes glittering.

Hermione complied, suddenly feeling even more uncomfortable as she turned her back to him and listened as he whispered a brief incantation, spoken too softly for her to make out exactly what he was saying. She then felt a cold shiver travel down her spine and she knew that the spell had been cast.

"One last word of advice Miss Granger, should you do anything you are not supposed to, I will know about it. And rest assured, I *will* take appropriate action," he sneered. "Dismissed."

Hermione let out a breath that she didn't even know she had been holding and didn't even bother to look back at Professor Snape as she exited the Dungeon/*Phew, that was... typical. Am I glad it's over or what...*' she thought to herself on her way out of the castle.

Hermione had just reached the entrance hall when she heard someone call her, "Hey Granger!" She turned around and was face to face with Draco Malfoy.

"Malfoy. What do you want?" She was not happy to see him. Just because she now knew that he had chosen to follow a different path than his father did not mean that he was suddenly all benign and harmless. She had six years worth of experience with a nasty Draco Malfoy and that had left her weary of him.

"Umh... Granger... Look..." Draco took a deep breath. "I just want to say... I guess it would sound kind of unbelievable if I said I wanted to apologize for my past behaviour..." He sighed and gathered all his courage before looking right into Hermione's eyes. "Look, I'm sorry. I know I've been an arsehole. I don't think I can ever make up for it, but I want you to know that I disagree with most of what my father says and does." He looked relieved now that he managed to say what he felt.

Hermione looked at him in disbelief. "Where is Draco Malfoy and what have you done with him?" She couldn't quite hide a smirk at the thought of how Alana would react when she told her of the conversation.

"Seriously, Granger, I don't expect us to become best friends, but maybe we can come to some sort of truce. Of course, I would have to be careful once school is on again. If Crabbe and Goyle get wind of me switching to Dumbledore's side, they'll drag me to the Dark Lord straight away," he said, and probably for the first time since Hermione had known him, he sounded sincere.

"I know what you mean. I'm happy with a truce, and I'll make sure not to be friendly once the thugs are back." Hermione was not sure what else to say, but Draco looked at her expectantly. So she continued, and spoke from her heart. "I think you are very courageous, Draco. Not many people have the guts to go against their parents, especially a father as powerful and influential as Lucius. But I'm sure you'll find it worthwhile. A clear conscience, I find, far outweighs the feeling that comes with unfairly gained power."

"I know what you mean," he replied quietly. "Right now I feel more fear than I ever have before, but it feels good to actually not be responsible for anyone's death..." His thoughts seemed to trail off, before he pulled himself together. "Oh, and please tell that Muggle girl that I'm sorry I threatened her. I have a great deal to thank her for because until she knocked me down, I was only considering switching sides. It was her actions combined with the fact that she's a Muggle that finally made me decide to change something."

"Alana is my cousin, and she'll be delighted when I tell her what you said, Draco," Hermione grinned. "Anyway, I better get going. All the best, Draco, and I'll see you around." Hermione left a slightly bewildered Draco behind. He was not sure why she had been grinning, and why would the Muggle girl be delighted to hear what he had said?

As soon as she reached the lawn in front of the castle's entrance doors, Hermione touched the Portkey and seconds later found herself in front of her aunt's house.

"How did it go?" Alana asked excitedly.

Hermione groaned. "Don't ask... Snape knows, of course, and now he's placed a tracking charm on me. He'll know wherever I am and Merlin only knows what else..." Hermione replied gloomily. "I don't trust him; he didn't even threaten me with expulsion... Anyway, I don't want to talk about it," she said before grinning slyly at her cousin. "I have a message for you, from Draco Malfoy," she continued smugly, and then went on to repeat her conversation with the blond.

Alana squealed. "I *knew* he had it in him, what did I tell you!"

"Yeah, we agreed that he was able..." Hermione rolled her eyes at her cousin's behaviour. *You'd think there's only one guy in the world, and a character out of a book at that*, she thought wryly.

Hermione finally managed to get Alana's mind off Malfoy when she informed her of the Runes project she had discussed with Dumbledore and the two girls immediately got to work.

Choosing the right Runes for each door, window, and corner of both the house and the gardens took them the better part of two days. Alana had a good basic knowledge; however, she had never known just how powerful the application of Runes could be. She greedily took in every bit of information Hermione offered and cleverly utilized her newly found knowledge to place the protective wards on her own room - with marginal help from her magical cousin, of course. Towards the evening, Alana finally let herself fall into bed exhausted, while Hermione searched for some parchment and a quill to notify the headmaster that their part of the project was completed.

"Gods, I'm bushed," Alana groaned. "I never thought finding the right Runes and applying them could be so exhausting!"

"It's because it's a fairly new subject for you, and it's been a very intense learning session," Hermione consoled her cousin. "I bet if you studied Runes a few hours a week, you wouldn't find it half as exhausting. If I suddenly spent a day and a half learning Martial Arts, I'd be no less exhausted!"

"Yeah, I guess you're right. All I'm good for tonight is to vegetate in front of the computer," Alana said.

Hermione laughed. "See, I'd find that extremely tiring! But then, I'm not used to staring at a computer screen."

Alana giggled. "Oh, I don't stare at it, you know! I read the interesting stuff," she said smugly. Hermione rolled her eyes at her cousin and decided to have an early night. Maybe she'd read up on the training to become an Animagus. It was already nearly a week into the holidays and she had not done any useful reading, except the Harry Potter books, the usefulness of which could be debated, strictly speaking.

While Hermione Granger delved into the subject of Animagus Transfiguration in the guest room, and Alana chilled in front of her computer in her bedroom, Draco Malfoy sat in the empty Slytherin Common Room, pondering how he ended up at Hogwarts in the middle of the summer holidays. He was finally able to admit to himself that the encounter with the fearless Muggle girl was what pushed him to talk to his godfather about his conscience. Since he had blurted it out to Granger, he was unable to think of anything else.

She was the complete opposite of everything that he had been taught about Muggles. Muggles were supposed to be inferior, even more so than Mudbloods. He had been harbouring doubts about his father's view of Mudbloods for quite some time and his own, really - ever since he had met Granger. She was a Mudblood, yet she was at the top of their class and excelled at everything she set her mind to with the exception of riding a broom and taming that mass of bushy hair.

And now, since meeting the Muggle girl who had bravely stood up to him and struck him down - without using Magic or even being malicious, well, it had simply pulled the entire carpet of his beliefs from out from underneath him. The experience scared and intrigued him at the same time.

"Contemplating, Draco?" his godfather asked silkily from behind, causing Draco to startle.

Severus Snape had come through the portrait in the Common Room that linked directly to his own quarters. He had spent the past hour in his ~~investisieve~~ watching the Granger chit teach her cousin how to protect her home with Runes and he couldn't help being impressed by her competence. Nevertheless, he was a bit disappointed that he not yet found any information that he might utilize against her at a later date.

Draco allowed a sigh to escape before he replied. "Just thinking..."

His godfather regarded him with a stern expression on his face. "Draco, if you've changed your mind and wish to return to your father and follow in his steps, you better tell me now and I will perform a memory charm and send you on your way. If you choose to do it at a later time I will have no choice but to turn you over to the Aurors. Is that clear?" He hated to threaten his godson, however he could not jeopardize all the years he had spent as a spy for the Order. Severus had no doubt that Draco would not change his mind again and from what he could gather from the conversation he had witnessed earlier with the know-it-all, Draco himself did not even doubt that he had made the right decision.

For a moment, Draco looked crestfallen but then quickly pulled himself together. "I don't want to go back. I know that I've put not only myself in danger but you as well and probably countless others, but I would rather die than be forced to kill," he replied, his conviction evident in his voice. "And I know it won't be easy, that's for sure," he added, more as an afterthought.

Severus Snape released an inaudible sigh of relief. Despite his certainty of his godson's decision, it felt good to have it confirmed by the boy himself. *There is hope after all...* he thought. *Three youngsters I was certain would become Death Eaters have switched and perhaps more will follow.* For the first time in many years, he felt a surge of real hope running through his veins.

"You're right, Draco, it won't be easy. But I personally find that I sleep a bit better with a clear conscience rather than pretending not to have one."

Draco gave his godfather a sharp look. "What are you saying, Severus?" Then it dawned on him. "You mean... you're not on the Dark Lord's side, are you?"

"That, Draco, is not your concern. What you don't know, you can't tell." He fixed his godson with a malevolent glare, "And if you breathe a word of this conversation to anyone other than Dumbledore, you will find yourself without a memory." Confident that he had made himself quite clear, Severus left the Common Room to return to his quarters.

It took Draco a long time to find sleep that night. Too much had changed in his life recently, not to the outside, but certainly in himself.

Draco was not the only one to stay awake most of the night. His sleeping hours were spent instead contemplating his decision, thinking of how his father would react when he learned of his son's decision to turn his back on the Dark Lord and wondering about the first Muggle girl he had ever met in person. She was quite pretty, he thought, before his eyes drooped and he fell asleep, dreaming of a tall girl who knocked him down at every corner without using any weapons.

Hermione Granger was busy once again doing what she did best and simply forgot that the night was usually spent sleeping. She was entirely entranced in the study of Animagus Transfiguration and if she continued her foray into the subject at this speed, she might well be the first, if not only one, in her year to become an Animagus. In the early morning hours, when her eyelids finally refused to remain open, she fell into an uneasy sleep and dreamed of first turning into a Flobberworm and then a dolphin beached at the front gates of Hogwarts.

Alana was in seventh heaven. She spent her time well, surfing Harry Potter fan fiction sites and not only did she find a rather intriguing story that she could hold gleefully under her cousin's nose, she also found a story where Draco was the hero. She lost herself in the universe of magic where Draco Malfoy fell in love with a Muggle girl and the happy ending saw the two getting married in the wedding ceremony of the century, with the blessing of both wizard and Muggle parents before Draco and his bride rode into a beautiful sunset on a sparkling white unicorn no less. Her dreams that night pulled her to the side of Draco Malfoy who lost his heart to her. *I wish that dream would have continued,* she sighed to herself. *But the real Draco Malfoy wouldn't even look twice at a Muggle, despite what Hermione was telling me about him...*

Hermione woke up the next morning as her cousin entered her room, holding a steaming mug of black coffee and a stack of printed paper. "I found something for you to read. Wake up, Hermione. Drink coffee. Or maybe not in that particular order," Alana said cheerfully.

Hermione groaned. How on earth anyone could be in such a good mood before having coffee and some time to wake up in peace was beyond her. "Alana! Leave me alone! Imposing a good mood on anyone who had less than enough sleep and before coffee should be illegal," she snarled at her cousin.

Alana laughed at her cousin. "I'm going, I'm going! Just... read this," she dropped the thick stack of papers on the nightstand, "I promise you'll find it *very* interesting," she said smugly before exiting the room.

Hermione enjoyed the blissful silence while sipping her coffee, glad that her buoyant cousin had exited so quickly. She glanced at the papers beside her and curiosity got the better of her so she decided to have a look.

Chapter One

Things as they are---

Hermione rolled her eyes. *Oh no... she didn't print out one of her silly fan fictions for me to read..* She let her eyes fly over the first page and caught snippets such as *Harry, Hogwarts, Voldemort, Snape downright poisonous, cauldron exploded. So. It must be some fan fiction,* Hermione sighed inwardly. *No way am I going to read that! Alana should know me better than to assume I'd waste my time reading silly stuff like this!*

She was about to discard the script when one sentence grabbed her attention.

And in the middle of all this sat Hermione. Neither flesh nor fowl nor good red herring.

Hermione decided it would do no harm to read a little bit of this story. After all, it was the summer holidays and she had spent a great deal the previous evening and night studying, never mind applying her knowledge of Ancient Runes in the last couple of days.

So Hermione delved into her first fan fiction and quickly forgot about the world around her.

"Hermione!" Aunt Amelia called from far away. Hermione slowly came out of her fan fiction world. "Hermione! Aren't you coming out of your room today? Are you not feeling well?"

The door opened and her aunt gave her a scrutinizing look. "Ah. You don't seem to be ill. What are you reading that's so interesting?" She came closer to see what her niece was so engrossed in. When she saw it was a computer printout she started to laugh. "Oh, it's not fan fiction you're getting into, is it?" Hermione had the grace to look guilty, which evoked more laughter from her aunt. "Oh, don't worry, dear. We're all into it. Well, I like to read the ones about Snape pairing up with either Hermione or an original character, and Alana might not admit it, but I know for a fact that she reads all the stories that involve Draco Malfoy!" Hermione gave her an incredulous look, but before she got a word in, her aunt continued chatting. "Isn't it funny that you have such a rare name, and now the Harry Potter books have made your name all famous! I bet nobody teases you about your name these days!" All Hermione could do was nod.

"You mean there are more stories about Snape and Hermione?" She utilized Aunt Amelia's need for taking a breath to ask this question.

"Oh yes, there are loads around! I like them because the majority of these stories are very well written, you know. A lot of others leave much to be desired where the writing quality is concerned... So, which one are you reading?"

"It's called '*Ordinary People*', by someone called *Hayseed*," Hermione replied, then added, "it's rather well written, I have to say."

"Oh, I love that story! Whereabouts have you reached?" Aunt Amelia was very enthusiastic about the subject at hand, Hermione noted wryly.

"I'm just reading where she suggests to him to apologize and that he should treat her as an equal rather than a child, since it's her reputation that is at stake and not his," Hermione replied, getting impatient with her aunt. She wanted to continue reading to find out the outcome. All the interaction between her own character and Snape was rather intriguing, and she was curious how the author was going to conclude the story. She also wondered if the author knew Professor Snape personally. She was describing him very detailed, and very correctly from what Hermione knew of her Potions professor.

Thankfully, Aunt Amelia's curiosity was satisfied and her worry about her niece was laid to rest. She left Hermione's room after reminding her to eat something and Hermione returned to '*Ordinary People*'.

She snorted at the thought of Snape telling her she looks beautiful. *Nope, that's not like him at all. He might tell some woman, but he probably would prefer a round of Crucio from Voldemort's own hand before he tells me I'm beautiful... Besides, I'm not. Hayseed got that one right..* She sighed wistfully and her thoughts wandered for a moment to her nonexistent love life before she chided herself. *Get real, Granger, it's not as if there's anyone at Hogwarts who would even remotely meet your expectations!* Then she turned back to read the rest of '*Ordinary People*'.

The story left Hermione strangely content. She could absolutely not imagine ever having a relationship with Professor Snape, nor could she picture herself demanding him to treat her as an equal, but all in all, the characters were depicted just as they were in real life and the story was written beautifully.

A/N

"Remitto Sermo", Latin, 'send back talk'

"Investisieve" is very similar to a Pensieve, except that instead of memories, it shows the scenes of the person who is being tracked with the *Remitto Sermo* charm.

Hayseed kindly gave me permission to let Hermione read *Ordinary People*. If you've not read this brilliantly written, beautiful story, go read now.
<http://www.obscurusbooks.org/html/Hayseed/OrdinaryPeople/index.html>

As usual, big thanks to Tatiana who beta-reads this story for me and not only reins in the over-zealous use of commas, but also makes sure that the plot runs along without any holes.

Why Didn't Anyone Tell Me?

Chapter 9 of 9

The wizards visit. And Aunt Amelia is devastated. Alana and Draco find each other.

Disclaimer: The characters are the property of JKR, I think. Not mine, in any case. I only take them out to play and promise to return them all tidy when I'm done. The story is mine, and so are the original characters interacting with the world of magic.

Damage Control - Chapter Nine

Why Didn't Anyone Tell Me?

"Leave me alone! Imposing a good mood on anyone who had less than enough sleep and before coffee should be illegal."

Severus Snape smirked as he listened to Hermione's words. He was comfortably seated, a glass of brandy in his hand, while viewing Hermione's day in the ~~investisieve~~. He thought contemplatively that it was probably the first time in his life that he agreed wholeheartedly with Granger's opinion. All of his own colleagues, even the headmaster, knew better than to approach him before he had at least two cups of strong coffee, unless they felt decidedly suicidal.

The next sentence he heard wiped the smirk right off his face. *"You mean there are more stories about Snape and Hermione?"* What on earth was the chit on about? Stories about himself and Granger? He could not quite fathom the idea. Snape continued to view the events of the day, perplexed by the mention of something called, 'Ordinary People' by 'Hayseed'.

Snape scowled, *'Who was Hayseed... And why would someone write a story about him? And of all people?'*

The Potions professor sighed. It would have been much easier if he could have placed tracking charms on that entire blasted family of hers. That way he could at least hear what the others were saying, rather than just Granger. He felt an unsurprising urge to investigate the correct meaning of *'more stories about Snape and Hermione.'* It was bad enough having this J. K. Rowling person of whom he had never heard write best-selling books that told the entire Muggle world about his life, but to have others write about him? And someone writing that *he* should apologise to *her*? It was inconceivable. Yes, the notion definitely required further investigation, he decided.

For once, fate was kind to Severus Snape. He sighed at the sight of the headmaster's head in his fireplace, but was almost immediately mollified with what Albus Dumbledore said.

"Severus, are you free tomorrow? I could do with your expertise at Miss Granger's aunt's home. Miss Granger has already applied protective Runes all over the property, but I'd like to reinforce them to ensure that Lucius cannot get close to any member of her family."

"Yes, Albus," he replied sardonically. "I'm usually very busy during the holidays, but I'll make myself available for this task."

"Ah, thank you, Severus," Dumbledore said in a friendly manner, completely ignoring his Potions master's sarcasm. "I was curious as to what you thought we should do with Draco in the meantime? Minerva has left to visit her relatives, and nobody has returned from their holidays yet, so except for Argus, he is unsupervised and unprotected. I would hate for Lucius to get hold of him while we're out, even if it's unlikely. I'd rather err on the side of caution."

"Why, Headmaster, we'll take him along with us. A dose of Muggle life will not harm him, I'm certain. If anything, it will be educational for Draco... and Granger's cousin will be *delighted*, I'm sure, to see young Mr Malfoy," Severus replied, his black eyes glinting. It would be fun indeed to watch two hormonal teenagers from such different backgrounds. And he might be able to place tracing charms on Granger's relatives, so that he could follow entire conversations rather than just snippets. Then, he might be able to learn more about those mysterious stories the chit had mentioned.

Hermione felt relieved that she had spent the day in such a relaxing manner, when she received Professor Dumbledore's note informing her of his arrival the next morning. She wanted to be alert when he set to work on reinforcing the protective Runes, so she could follow his every step and learn the process.

Alana was excited at the prospect of meeting the greatest wizard alive. "Do you think he'll let me watch when he does magic?" she asked her cousin tentatively.

"Sure, I don't see why not. He knows that you already know about the magic world, and you are in as much need of protection as I am, so I would think he would appreciate your thirst for magical knowledge," Hermione assured her cousin.

She wondered who the headmaster would bring along. His letter had stated, *'We will arrive... '*

'Maybe he'll bring Professor Flitwick. I'm sure that as a master of Charms, he'll know the best way to ward a home,' she thought contemplatively.

Both Hermione and Alana were up early the following morning, and Hermione walked into the kitchen to be greeted enthusiastically by her aunt. "Ah, good morning, young lady! Up bright and early! You haven't spent the night reading, then, I take it?"

Hermione murmured a greeting and sat down at the table to enjoy her coffee. "Mum made pancakes again," Alana noted. "Why do I have a feeling she enjoys having you here for the summer... She never makes pancakes more often than once in a blue moon." Taking a sideways glance at her cousin, she added, sighing, "Although how anyone can possibly enjoy your company first thing in the morning is beyond me..."

Hermione glared at her and continued to sip her coffee. Slowly, the caffeine kicked in, and her brain was brought into gear. A thought entered her mind like a bolt of lightning, and she looked at Alana in horror. "She doesn't know," she mouthed, glancing at her aunt who was just exiting the kitchen.

"Oh. My. Goodness," Alana groaned, her expression equally horrified. Abandoning her breakfast, she hurriedly got up from the table and yelled, "Mum!" At that moment, the doorbell rang, causing both girls to utter loud groans. Alana's mother was heading straight for the entrance door.

Hermione positioned herself at the far end of the corridor, hoping fervently to get Dumbledore's attention somehow, as her aunt opened the door.

The headmaster greeted Amelia pleasantly. "Good morning. You must be Hermione's aunt. I'm Albus Dumbledore, and these," pointing towards his two companions, "are Professor Severus Snape, Hogwarts' Potions master, and his godson, Draco Malfoy, who is also a pupil at Hogwarts."

"Very funny! And you really do look authentic!" Amelia said, impressed. She looked the three wizards up and down, taking in their appearance. "Now, who are you really, and what do you want?" she asked sharply, her face taking on a stern expression.

Dumbledore finally noticed Hermione who was mouthing, "She doesn't know about us."

He allowed a small sigh to escape. "Ah. I see. Hermione might have forgotten to mention that we do, indeed, exist. I believe your daughter has had the pleasure of meeting both Draco and Professor Snape already. Why don't you ask her?" he suggested nonchalantly, his eyes twinkling to Hermione's relief. It was bad enough having to face Professor Snape again, and unexpected at that. She did not think she could have coped with the headmaster's wrath.

The said professor utilised the fact that his employer was busy, intently watching the interaction between one mother and her daughter. He silently, discreetly, and wandlessly applied a tracking charm on the mother. One task was out of the way.

"Alana! What on earth! How could you not have said anything? What has gotten into you? How could you get me into such an embarrassing situation? Did you think if you told me, I would try to prevent you from meeting Draco Malfoy? Have I ever stopped you from meeting any boy you fancied?" Aunt Amelia was as distressed as she was embarrassed. Remembering the conversation about Professor Snape at that moment did not help in the least, either. She turned to face her niece. "Hermione! How could you keep quiet, especially after those conversations we've had? Why didn't anyone tell me?" she wailed in utter despair.

Draco and Alana used her mother's outburst to study each other with open curiosity. Alana knew she should feel embarrassed about her mother's words regarding Draco, as well as the fact that it had never occurred to her to inform her of the expected visit from Hogwarts' professors. But she knew that Amelia would soon enough get over her embarrassment. She also decided it was just as well that Draco knew she liked him. That way, if he did not like her, she would at least find out soon.

Draco was not sure what to make of the Muggle girl. He was used to Slytherins, who tended to act in twisted and hidden behaviours. He sensed more than knew that there was something about her that he just could not quite place his finger on. Surely, it was worth investigating. If he ended up making a fool of himself, well, she was only a Muggle, and nobody in the magical world would be the wiser. There were plenty of Slytherin girls who fought for his attention.

Hermione felt deeply embarrassed. She had fooled her aunt, who had given her shelter and a loving welcome when her own parents had failed because of their personal problems. She knew that she had been unfair by not letting Aunt Amelia in on the secret in the first place. And yet, she could not have done so with a clear conscience. Ever since first year, it had been drummed into her that the world of magic was to remain as secret as possible. However, she felt that forgetting until it was too late to inform her aunt was unforgivable.

To ease the situation for her distressed aunt, she cleared her throat and suggested pleasantly, "Why don't we go inside? Surely, there is no need to entertain the neighbourhood."

"If Mr Malfoy and Miss Williams have quite finished their staring contest, perhaps we should proceed inside. Preferably *before* a Death Eater walks past," Snape sneered, glaring from Draco to Alana and back to his godson.

"Splendid idea," Dumbledore remarked good-naturedly and turned to Alana's mother. "Mrs Williams, my sincere apologies for disturbing your peace, but I will explain everything to you. If you don't mind, I would prefer the privacy of somewhere indoors... with no prying ears."

Aunt Amelia finally recovered from her shock and, muttering excuses, led the visitors to the living room. After making sure everyone had coffee, tea and biscuits, she sat down and looked expectantly at Dumbledore.

The headmaster wasted no time in explaining the situation, the recent events, and the need to protect Hermione and her loved ones. "I'm very sorry that you got unwittingly involved in all this mess, Mrs Williams," he said sincerely. "And now, with your permission, I would like to inspect the fine work these two young ladies have done with their protective Runes," he finished in a more cheerful tone.

Hermione got up and led the two professors around the house to show them the work, which she and Alana had undertaken. As soon as Snape had left the room, Aunt Amelia left to busy herself in the kitchen, too flustered from the most recent events to worry about leaving her daughter alone with a potential love interest.

Draco took to staring at Alana again. "How did you do it?" he blurted out, too fascinated by the alien situation he found himself in to care about etiquette. Besides, he had no idea about Muggle etiquette...for all he knew, it might be completely the opposite of the wizard world. He did not notice the sudden mischievous glint in Alana's eyes, nor the fact that she had moved, until he found himself on the floor on his back with her perched on top of him.

"This, you mean?" She grinned at him, looking all mischievous and pretty.

Draco felt himself harden. Damn, but she was attractive, Muggle or not. And, her skill was good. To put him on his back in a split second without magic was quite an achievement. His father would kill him if he knew the thoughts drifting through Draco's mind, but Draco decided that if knowing *her* was part of being on Dumbledore's side, it was worth the risk.

"Teach me!" he demanded and found himself being scrutinised, before she burst into laughter.

"Sure. If you're willing to train about ten hours a week, stop eating meat, and meditate half an hour a day, you *might* be able to do it in a year or three," she replied, her voice sincere, although her amusement at his demand was still evident.

"What's so funny?" he grumbled. "You think I can't do it? You don't know me!"

"Well," she drawled, still amused. "Let's say, I know you better than you know me, courtesy of J.K. Rowling. I didn't say you couldn't do it. But if you want me to teach you, then you have to know that it's not something you can learn in just a few days like, say, Apparating. Martial Arts is a complex subject; it's not about winning a fight, and it's not about being able to knock someone on the ground," she explained, her speech becoming more passionate as she went on.

The way she spoke with passion about the subject, which was obviously close to her heart, besotted Draco. Suddenly, Lucius no longer mattered. Nothing and no one was important but her. He looked at the young woman intently, savouring the feel of her lithe body on top of his own.

"I want to learn this. I want to learn you. I want to be with you," he said slowly, emphasising every single syllable.

Alana looked at him in disbelief. Unsure as to whether she was dreaming, she let out an uncertain giggle, not quite knowing what to do or say. Finally, she decided that as always, truth worked best for her.

"You know... I want to get to know you, too. And be with you." She paused for a moment, gathering courage before continuing boldly, "Ever since I started reading the Harry Potter books, Draco Malfoy has fascinated me. *You* have fascinated me. I've been dreaming of how it would be if you were real, and I got the chance to know you..." She looked straight at him and started to laugh. "Heck, Draco, I've been spending my free time reading fan fiction stories about you and a girl, and I imagined I'd be that girl." She had moved off him and placed herself next to him on the floor.

Draco grinned, his face radiating happiness. He had no idea what she meant about fan fiction stories, but he would ask her later. Right now, it was not important.

Alana looked at him oddly. "You know, you look totally gorgeous looking so happy."

Draco slowly got up, her words ringing in his mind. Gorgeous? He moved towards her and bent his head toward hers, and sure enough, she moved her head towards his. They kissed. And kissed some more. Not stopping until the dire need for air left neither of them a choice but to stop.

"Mmm... you taste delicious, and I love your smell. Vanilla... peach. It's... exquisite," Draco stated, leaning his forehead against hers.

"You taste good, too. And if I hadn't known it before, I'd be sure now...the dungeons must be full of herbs! I mean, with the Potions classroom there, it's no wonder, but you really do smell of the most delicious herbs... like parsley... a sprig of basil, some oregano, a bit of thyme, mint... all combined. Absolutely d-e-l-i-c-i-o-u-s." Alana replied, rather contentedly.

"Right," Draco said, getting up. "Now, I'd like my first Martial Arts lesson," he demanded. "That way I'll know what exercises I need to do while I'm at Hogwarts."

He pulled her up, looked at her and added, "But not until I've had another taste of that delicious mouth of yours." And he kissed her again.

Hermione watched in fascination as Professor Dumbledore reinforced the Runes, and then Professor Snape applied protective ward layers. "I never knew the process could be as complex as this," she said, almost breathless from her intense observation.

"It doesn't have to be, Miss Granger," allowed Dumbledore. "The Runes you worked would protect any ordinary home from burglaries and such, or even from attacks. But unfortunately, the wards on this home may have to withstand the power of Death Eaters... And even with a tracking charm on you, I'll feel better if the entire place is well guarded." Then, he added as an afterthought, "I would also like you to continue to refrain from using magic, except for emergencies, of course. Although you are of age and allowed to use magic, and your relatives know that you are a witch, it will be safer if no magic is used in this house."

The headmaster's words made Hermione shudder. Although she was ready to face trouble any time, the thought of Lucius Malfoy being after her did leave her feeling disconcerted and uneasy.

"Not so courageous now, Miss Granger?" Snape drawled, interrupting her thoughts. "Should have thought twice about being friends with Potter and the Weasleys."

Hermione looked at him and retorted indignantly, "That's like saying I should have thought twice about being born a witch! Sometimes, friendships just happen." How dare he question her choice of friends! And in her home, however temporary it might be, no less.

"Severus!" Albus Dumbledore admonished his Potions master. "There is no need to bait Miss Granger! This situation is far too grave!"

Snape kept quiet. He would have plenty of time to wind her up without Albus being present.

"Severus," Dumbledore said warningly. He was no fool when it came to the youngest member of the staff and knew exactly his train of thought.

"No, Headmaster," Severus sighed. "There was no need, although the temptation was too great to resist on this occasion," he allowed.

"May I remind you..." started Dumbledore, only to be interrupted.

"No, you may not," Snape said firmly. There was no need to bring up the damn prophecy in front of the chit. He continued, "Since we are done here, perhaps we should go and see what trouble Mr Malfoy has got himself into." He turned around and headed for the living room without waiting for either the headmaster or Hermione to follow.

Hermione sighed inwardly while following him and thought, *'At least he doesn't have double standards...he's as rude here as he is at school.'*

She nearly bumped into him when he stopped abruptly at the door to the living room.

Neither Dumbledore nor Snape and certainly not Hermione had ever witnessed a sporty side to Draco Malfoy besides Quidditch. Nor had any of them ever known Draco to accept instructions and corrections from someone his own age, and a Muggle no less. The young and normally impeccable looking wizard was covered in sweat, his hair almost as lank as Snape's, and he was panting heavily, obviously having spent quite a while doing what he was doing when the professors arrived back at the living room.

Neither he nor Alana noticed the people leaning into the room, watching them in utter surprise. "No, Draco, you need to hold your thumb straight. Rest it on your bent finger, or else you'll end up injured very quickly. And punch like this," she instructed and showed him with her right arm. She then continued, "Don't get into bad habits from the start. Bad habits are really hard to lose, believe me. I'm talking from experience." She smirked, remembering her training sessions at the beginning.

She held her hands up again for him to punch, and he did it correctly this time. "Right. Now do it once more. You've got two kicks and two punches to practice until we meet again," she said approvingly. He was a very willing and able student when he set his mind to something, and he wanted to learn her ways of defence. Whether it was all about defence or something entirely different, it did not matter to him.

The loud ringing of the phone startled everyone, and Alana and Draco finally noticed their audience. Draco was visibly embarrassed, having been caught learning a Muggle skill by his godfather who was smirking at him in a faintly amused fashion.

Dumbledore looked mildly curious and asked, "What is this you are trying to learn here, Draco?"

After receiving a short explanation from the two young people, he looked impressed. "Interesting," he murmured, turning to face Alana, "Miss Williams, do you mean to tell me that anybody can learn your skills?"

"Absolutely," Alana confirmed. "All that is needed is the willingness to learn. Obviously, the more you train, the better your skills will be. But it's not just that. By simply having Martial Arts skills, you become far less likely to ever be attacked in the first place. It's almost as if your aura gives out a warning that you're *not* a potential victim," she explained, and again, Draco noticed her passion about the subject surfacing. He felt a surge of affection for her well up inside of him like he had never felt for anyone in his life before. The sheer force of the emotion made him shudder.

Professor Snape, in the meantime, utilised the headmaster's and Alana's concentration to unobtrusively, silently, and wandlessly cast another tracking charm, this time on his godson's new-found love interest. His personal mission accomplished, Severus leaned back in his chair in a relaxed manner and idly followed the conversation about Martial Arts.

Alana's mother had entered the living room again, and overhearing the last of Alana's passionate explanation, she suggested to her daughter, "Do tell about the Tai Chi group at your dojo, Alana. That should be enough to convince anyone that the art is suitable for absolutely everyone."

"Oh, yes," Alana smirked, pleased to be given a reason to go on. "Where I train, there is a group of elderly people. All of them were quite frail when they started with Tai Chi, which is a very gentle and passive form of Martial Arts. After a few months, every single one of them was in much better health overall, and those who were prone to injuries reported far less incidents."

Dumbledore looked thoughtful. "I wonder if a Muggle could defend him or herself with Martial Arts against a wizard..."

"Alana did, in Diagon Alley," Draco spoke up, with not even a trace of embarrassment for being defeated by a mere Muggle girl. Muggle she was, but an incredible one, too, as far as he was concerned.

"I dare say, there is a considerable difference between your skills in magic and those of a Death Eater," Snape commented.

Sensitive to her environment and the people around her, Alana suddenly knew what was coming and started to breathe slowly, deeply, and deliberately. Draco, still sitting close to her, looked up, surprised at the apparent sudden change in her, but she did not appear to notice. Gradually, her breathing gathered the spiritual power she required for the task she sensed the headmaster was about to ask of her.

"You are right, of course, Severus," Dumbledore agreed. Then, facing Alana who was looking at him intently and expectantly, he started, "I wonder, Miss Williams, if you might be willing to give a demonstration of your skills." She nodded, and he continued, "Only, maybe this time not against Draco but instead, a fully grown wizard with considerably more power? I'd like to see the outcome...."

He turned to his Potions master and asked, "Severus, would you mind? Only mild hexes and spells please, and no wandless magic."

Snape snorted and drawled, "Certainly, headmaster. Wouldn't want to injure a Muggle, would we?"

Alana stood up, ready to face him. She realised her defence would be harder than it had been with Draco, mostly because the effect of surprise was missing this time. On the other hand, she knew that her years of training, starting in early childhood, had prepared her for situations like this one.

Snape stood up. "Ready to be bashed by a wizard, Miss Williams?" he asked sardonically.

Her eyes blazing, she replied with a quiet voice, "I'm ready to defend myself against you."

She dodged his first spell, a casually thrown *Petrificus Totalus*, by ducking. Then, she jumped three feet high over a slicing hex directed at her feet. Next, she averted his pimple curse by bending down, all in quick succession. Her mind working as fast as her body, Alana decided it was time to change tactics. She returned his next curse by picking up a book from the coffee table and hurling it at the curse and him. Snape only just managed to deflect it. He made the mistake of showing his surprise, and Alana used it to her advantage. Before he could even think of his next curse, he found himself facing her with his wand now in her hand and pointed directly at him.

"Not bad," he conceded unwillingly and then sneered, "But a Death Eater would not use fair techniques, nor would he refrain from using wandless magic if he had that skill. So don't think too highly of yourself."

Stung by his last words, she snarled, "I wasn't looking for your approval. But now that you've mentioned it, why don't you try me, *Professor?* Surely, *you* know how a Death Eater would attack?"

Hermione gasped at her cousin. "Alana, stop it!" she pleaded.

Snape looked at Alana, his eyes glinting dangerously. In a low voice, he hissed, "You'd be well to follow your cousin's advice. You don't know what you're asking for, girl." He held out his hand, and Alana returned his wand, shrugging her shoulders.

Dumbledore rose to deflate the suddenly tense atmosphere, "Well done, Miss Williams! Your skills are impressive, indeed." Alana nodded in acknowledgement and glanced at Draco, who looked at her as if she were some prize trophy.

The headmaster looked from the Muggle girl to Draco and added, "I think it would do Draco very well to learn this art, if you are willing to teach him, Miss Williams. And maybe Miss Granger and Messrs Potter and Weasley as well. Would you be willing to do that?" Not waiting for her reply, he turned to his Potions master. "Severus, wouldn't you agree that it would be good for Harry to learn such a skill? It might prove useful when he has to face Tom."

Snape reluctantly agreed. Sighing, he said, "Any additional skill would help the Boy-Wonder, Headmaster. Even more so if it involves learning some measure of discipline."

After motioning for Snape and Draco to get ready to leave, Dumbledore turned to Alana. "I would like you to think about teaching your skills to a few witches and wizards, Miss Williams. I must leave now, but if you could owl me your answer within the next few days, together with some ideas of the how and where and when, that would be wonderful. I have no doubt Harry would be willing to lend you his owl for the task."

They said their good-byes, Snape looking less unfriendly than usual, his mind on his evening session in the *Investisieve*, which he anticipated to be very entertaining after this morning's events. Besides, he was hoping to get to the bottom of the stories Granger had mentioned in his *Investisieve* viewing the previous evening.

Draco and Alana gazed at each other, oblivious to the two professors waiting for him. "I'll owl you," Draco said.

"Okay," replied Alana. "Bye, then. Visit soon, okay?" she added.

"I'll try my best. Bye." He kissed her, briefly this time as he heard Dumbledore clear his throat, and left to join his teachers to return to Hogwarts.

A/N

Thanks to Tatiana who beta-read this for me.

And many thanks to NSS for hosting this archive and Southern for being an admin. You two truly rock!

My sincere apologies for the delay with this chapter. Apart from RL interfering and the fact that I've been travelling half way around the world since about chapter 3, I've also written another story in the meantime ("Play, Outcast, Play" - complete), have started one more ("Without Magic") and have posted an original short story ("Everything is fine"). All are posted here at TPP - have a look at my author page if you're interested. Add to that an original story that I'm writing as an ongoing project and the fact that I unschool my children.... Anyways, now that you know what you didn't really want to know, I solemnly promise that at least one chapter more will be posted before the end of the year, if not two. I'm aiming to do at least one chapter per month, but it honestly depends on the muse - if the muse decides to take me elsewhere, then, alas, I might have to write as the muse dictates... :-)

The next chapter will see more of Draco/Alana interaction, more mention of fanfiction, and possibly more interaction of Severus and Hermione. I'm almost certain that Severus will get a kick out of returning to the *Investisieve*.