

The Fifty Move Rule

by Mendota

She had never known exactly which side of the chessboard he had really played. But now, in the midst of war, he would give her fifty moves to the truth.

Part One

Chapter 1 of 3

She had never known exactly which side of the chessboard he had really played. But now, in the midst of war, he would give her fifty moves to the truth.

Disclaimer: I'm not, and never would claim to be J.K. Rowling. She is the queen, and I am but a pawn now let's play some chess, shall we?

Rating is for language, violence, and my penchant for possible naughtiness. Warnings: Character death (though I wouldn't touch the Golden Trio) and HBP compliant (read: spoilers).

Reviews: I would love if you would read and review!

A/N: I usually write L&O: SVU fic (on fanficnet and svufic). This is my first attempt at HP, though I have been a fan of the genre for quite awhile. Big thanks go out to my wonderful beta, SnarkyRoxy she is awesome!

Part One

It was an odd sensation, that of standing outside of her own body, detached, unfeeling. After all of these years of training, of preparation, she blindly engaged in all of those curses, deflecting the enemy at the same time she protected herself and those innocents around her. It didn't feel like it was actually her. She didn't feel at all.

"We have to get out of here, Hermione! Gods, where is Harry? Hermione!"

She looked at Ron through the smoldering remains of Hogsmeade. He stood several meters from her, a beacon with his bright red hair, though his face was blackened from dirt and smoke. Several frightened children huddled around him, one girl bleeding from a gash on her arm, the others relatively unscathed. The sun filtered through the haze in patches, its illumination no match to that of the nearby fires and the ominous Dark Mark that stained the sky above, its green light mocking them.

"Past Scrivenshaft's. Lupin was with him. I'll cover you. Just go!"

Ron paused, staring back at her and Lavender, the injured girl a huddled mass at Hermione's feet. There were villagers and Order members around them, some barely visible through the smoke as they fought back, some of their comrades and friends scattered like broken dolls along the cobbled High Street. On the outskirts of the once quaint village, she could see the Death Eaters advancing like some army from hell, their silvery masks lit by the green light as they delivered the most unforgivable of curses.

The attack had been sudden, shifting the jovial atmosphere of Hogsmeade into a battlefield in mere minutes. Harry, Ron and Hermione had been researching a possible lead on one of the missing Horcruxes and the endless underground secret passages of Hog's Head. Lupin, who had explored some of these corridors with the other Marauders nearly two decades ago, agreed it would be worth further investigation.

Someone had known they would be here. That Harry would be in town that day. Someone close to them had given them over to Voldemort's army.

"I can't leave you, Hermione!"

The Death Eaters were getting closer. Hermione deflected another curse, sending back a slicing hex through the smoke at the offender as Lavender made some strange mewing sound at her feet.

"Choose another time to debate me, Ron! Bloody go!"

He stood staring at her for a moment, his blue eyes wide as he pleaded silently with her. A tug at his robes by one of his unwilling charges reminded him of the children around him. And Harry. He had to protect Harry. They had all agreed that mattered more than anything else, hadn't they?

As promised, she covered him as he led the children through the smoke, disappearing down the hopefully deserted alley between Scrivenshaft's and Gladrags.

"*Avada Kedavra!*"

Hermione screamed, the sound coming out choked as her throat suddenly constricted with intense fear. It was too close, she hadn't seen the black-cloaked figure disengage from the others and move towards her, and now that green flash of light was all that was left...

Her gasped name was the last thing that Lavender spoke. Hermione flung back a slicing hex at the Death Eater even as she felt the clammy hold of the other girl's arms loosen from around her right calf. Her friend was crumpling, lifeless, to the cold stone road, her eyes wide, but unseeing.

"Lavender! Oh, Merlin!" She fell to her knees on the cobblestones next to Lavender's unmoving form, her shaky hands touching the other girl's face, the reality of her death pushing the fierce, fighting Hermione back into her own body, back into the bleak starkness of their current situation.

She looked up in time to see the injured Death Eater raise his wand once again to her. The cloaked figure jerked in response to a curse thrown at him from an Order member hidden somewhere in the hazy smoke that was becoming even thicker as the buildings continued to burn around them. But the slicing hex still found her.

Hermione gasped as pain ripped through her side, under her parted robes against the left side of her rib cage. Blood instantly soaked through her plain white, button-down school shirt, the crimson imprint visualizing the extent of her injury. She swallowed, her lips trembling at the sudden realization she was hurt. Badly.

With shaky hands, she grabbed Lavender under the armpits, keeping low as she dragged the girl's lifeless body through the smoke to the nearest building, the area thankfully free of fire and other beings, good and bad. She pulled Lavender into a small dark inlet against the side of the building, propping her into a sitting position so they were both relatively hidden to the casual observer.

Hermione's breathing was shallow now, and her eyes were becoming wet, irritated by the smoke and burdened with the raw knowledge that she was dying. It was one of many things she had studied, had read about in her quest for knowledge. She was getting colder, even as the fire burned through the October sky. The blood was alternatively sticky and slick against her flesh, the cotton of her shirt rubbing abrasively into the wound. Light-headed, she thought of Ron. How his blue eyes lit up when discussing Quidditch, his red hair so soft, the way his mouth felt when he had kissed her. And her parents. How they would miss her. All of those books, all of those things left to learn, to uncover, to live.

And Harry. The Boy Who Lived, who lived for them all. He had been so selfless, giving so much of his childhood, possibly even his own life so that good would prevail.

Hermione bit her lower lip, trying to quell the trembling as she looked at Lavender. She reached into the pocket of the other girl's robes, pulling out her wand. A tear burned its way down her soot-covered cheek as she tucked Lavender's wand inside her own robes. Several more tears followed as she stared at her fallen comrade for a moment, the emotion choking at her heart, battling the pain that coursed through her torso.

"I'm sorry I couldn't save you," she whispered. "I don't want to leave, but I owe it to Harry. And I owe it to you."

She regarded the other girl for a moment longer, willing herself the strength to move. She couldn't die here. She had to find Harry. She wanted to be by his side, to help him to the very end.

Swallowing down the pain, trying to ease the shakiness in her own body, she slipped out of the shadows of the inlet, cautiously moving into the eerily lit haze at the side of the building. She could still hear the sounds of battle, of hexes, curses and screams, but it all seemed so far away. It didn't help that she had become dizzy; everything seemed so light, distant...

Her knees gave out and she fell to the ground again, her breathing rushed. *Get up, get up...*

Even through the smoke, the sight of her was unmistakable. He had thought this area deserted, the best location to Apparate himself and the boy back to the safe house. But here she was, covered with soot, with that unmistakable riotous mess of curls, her wand clutched in one hand, the other against the brick of the building next to them. She was turned away from them, but from her posture, he knew she was injured.

"Granger," the boy spoke from next to him, his voice low, but hard enough to reach her.

Hermione gasped at the sound of her name, turning even as her body protested vehemently at the sharp movement. Two Death Eaters stood in front of her in the haze, their silvery masks almost ethereal in their evil beauty.

Without thinking, she raised her wand swiftly, only to have the larger of the cloaked figures raise his hand and silently pull it from her. She sobbed, knowing this was the end.

Her school robes were parted, and he could see clearly the extent of her injury, the large crimson stain dark against her left side. Without attention, the girl would die.

"We need to leave," the boy spoke again, his voice low. The man ignored him, watching the girl's unstable movements, her head tilted even as her body wavered from her position on her knees. She was trying to place the voice; she recognized the boy, and surely would recognize him.

He strode forward, his Death Eater robes billowing around him in the smoke, the boy close behind him. Hermione flinched, but didn't turn away, facing upwards, her body still shaking with the onslaught of blood loss. She knew they would kill her, and she would try not to give them any more pleasure in her death. She would not show her fear.

He knelt down in front of her, nearly face to face save for the fact of his height. He reached one black, gloved hand out to touch her soot covered cheek, smoothing away some of the dirt to reveal her pale flesh. She stared back at him with dark eyes, unblinking even as her lips trembled.

"You're coming with us," he told her, his silky voice almost a whisper. Her eyes widened as she recognized him, all of her memories regarding him, the past, Harry, Dumbledore...

"Professor!"

One gloved finger pressed against her cold lips, silencing her. "Shush, girl. We're not safe yet."

"Severus, do you think it's wise?" Malfoy whispered next to him. He did not turn to acknowledge the boy, still staring down at the injured girl in front of him.

"She is dying, boy." His free hand pushed her school robes further open, exposing the large crimson stain. She fought him feebly and he grasped the offending hand. "If she doesn't die first, the Dark Lord will find her."

Malfoy stiffened next to him. There was no need to voice what would happen then.

He moved closer to her, and she pressed weakly against the front of his black Death Eater robes.

"Don't fight me, Miss Granger. Your body is already significantly damaged. I fear that a binding spell might kill you."

He pulled her close, dragging her into his arms even as she went limp with sudden defeat. Hermione stared up at him with wet eyes, dark with a mixture of hate and fear.

"Traitor." The one word was so quiet, so soft, but held such vehemence that Malfoy jerked back from his position next to the older man.

His grasp tightened around her, his black, fathomless eyes hard behind his silvery mask.

"And don't forget it," he whispered back, his voice caressing her even as consciousness left her grasp, and the world fell into blackness as the three of them Apparated from the smoldering ruins of Hogsmeade.

Part Two

Chapter 2 of 3

She had never known exactly which side of the chessboard he had really played. But now, in the midst of war, he would give her fifty moves to the truth.

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Reviews: I would love it if you would read and review!

A/N: This chapter is heavy on Malfoy, but fear not, this is SS/HG story. Big love goes out to my beta, SnarkyRoxy without her, this would be utterly out of canon, among other horrible things. She truly is brilliant!

Chapter Two

The light seemed to be burning against her eyelids, beckoning her back into consciousness. She felt the softness of a bed beneath her, the clean smell and crisp texture of a thin sheet draped over her small frame. The tiny sense of comfort was torn away as the pain suddenly made itself known again, her left side throbbing with a dull, insistent ache.

It all came back in a rush, a twisted kaleidoscope of memories that she had for one split second convinced herself were just nightmares brought on after an evening drinking Butterbeer heavily spiked by the Weasley twins. But it had been real. *The Death Eaters, Hogsmeade burning to the ground, Lavender dead at her feet...*

And Snape and Malfoy. It didn't make sense; why they hadn't killed her? She had lost consciousness when her old professor had pulled her into his arms, waking again in a strange place, her shirt missing, Snape standing over her with a wand. Hermione had thought for sure that he would kill her then, but the light from his wand was blue, the large gash against her side tingling as the flesh knitted itself whole again. Snape had murmured a complicated healing spell, one she had researched but never had the opportunity to see used before that moment.

She had remembered vaguely that Malfoy had been standing behind the older wizard in the shadows. Rather than a smirk or a sneer, something she would have expected to see on his face, he looked withdrawn, almost distraught. The whole situation confused her, and she tried valiantly to focus, to take it all in and process it. But her mind was too fractured, and after swallowing the contents of the third potion vial Snape handed her, that of the Blood-Replenishing Potion of which she could still taste on her lips, she felt herself losing consciousness once again.

Hermione maintained absolute stillness in the bed, keeping her breathing even as she strained to listen. She was trying to gauge her surroundings without opening her eyes. The room was light, she could tell, and she was pretty sure it was sunlight, by the orange-yellow glow against her eyelids. There was a sound of fabric shifting, accompanied by a cool breeze that smelled distinctly like the sea. *A window, there was a window open somewhere.*

A bird called out in the distance, and she emptied her thoughts on all but the sound, trying to recognize the specific type. It was a Peregrine, a type of Muggle falcon, native, she knew, to Scotland.

Several more minutes passed by before she was satisfied that she was alone in the room, as she could not hear anyone's breathing but her own, or smell anything beyond the laundered sheets of the bed and the faint smoke scent of her own hair, spread out as it was on her pillow. Hermione slowly opened her eyes, her hands drawing up into fists above the coverlet.

The room was small. Other than the narrow bed she was lying on, there was a small side table with a gas lamp to her right, and a rocking chair with several missing spindles on the backrest sitting nearby. Across from her bed, there was a weathered oak chifferobe leaning against the opposite wall, the only other piece of furniture in the room. The one window to her left was half open, the yellowed lace curtains twisting lazily in the breeze. The pink rose wallpaper was peeling in places, and the hardwood floor had seen better days, its wear not hidden by the faded pink rug to the right of her bed.

There were two doorways; the smaller one was closed, the larger opening free of a door altogether, its unused hinges rusted, the lower one dangling by one screw. She could make out a bit of the hall through the doorway, seeing that the rather worn down, country feel continued beyond her bedroom.

The room had a certain lived-in feel to it, but a recent emptiness, as if it had been abandoned. It most definitely did not fit into any sort of decorating scheme Snape or Malfoy would ever use.

"Finally awake I see, Granger."

Her dark gaze shot back to the now occupied space of the larger doorway. She sat up in the bed, pulling the sheet up close around her chest.

"Bloody fantastic vision you have, Malfoy," she replied, glaring at him. He was smirking, his gray-blue eyes drifting from her face to the sheet covering her nearly nude torso.

"Not like I didn't see it all last night," he laughed, leaning against the worn, wooden doorframe, crossing his arms across his chest.

Hermione tilted her head, staring back at him, finally taking in his appearance. He looked... odd. She realized with a start that it was because he was wearing Muggle clothing. She had never seen him in anything other than their school uniforms, or wizarding robes, and here he was, one of the most outspoken of "pure-bloods", wearing dark blue jeans, trainers, and a long-sleeved t-shirt. His white-blond hair wasn't slicked back, but uncombed, several stray strands constantly slipping down his forehead.

She blinked, her unease with the situation increasing. "What are you wearing?"

His smirk faded, and he shifted slightly against the doorframe. "Don't be daft, Granger. They're called clothes."

They stared at each other silently, and she unconsciously started chewing on her lower lip, not knowing what to say, what to expect.

"Where are we?" Her voice was soft, hesitant.

He looked across the room to the open window, staring out at nothing for all she knew, an unreadable expression crossing his angular face. "We're ten minutes south of Banchory."

"This is not Professor Snape's home," she replied with certainty.

"Of course not. Several Order members saw fit to burn his house at Spinner's End to the ground, coveted books and all. This is an abandoned farmhouse. Ugly as a troll's hovel, but safer than Hogwarts."

Unwittingly, Hermione felt a twinge of sadness. No one was hurt, but couldn't they have saved his books? Undoubtedly, she was sure the professor had quite a collection, one that could have benefited their fight against Voldemort.

"Malfoy."

The cold gaze of the eighteen-year-old Death Eater was back on her, his lips drawn out in a thin line.

"You had a chance. Why didn't you?" Whether she was talking about his chance to kill her, or the headmaster, neither of them really knew.

His lips parted, then closed again. He shook his head, a gesture that looked to be more for his benefit than hers.

"Severus made breakfast before he left. There's enough for you, if you get your lazy arse out of bed," Malfoy said quietly, a bitter undercurrent in the sentence. He pointed to the small, closed doorway. "There's a small water closet in there. Take a shower, and use soap. Lots of it. You smell like an overcooked Porlok, Mudblood."

Anger seared through her. The rest of his sentence, his taunt, was nothing compared to the derogatory term for her heritage he had never ceased to use against her. Even now, trapped and sore as she was, he still tormented her with it.

She rose up on her knees on the mattress, the sheet still clutched to her chest, but with less force than before, all of her emotion directed at him.

"The only way you ever got close enough to me to even try and smell me was because I was sliced open by a hex! Is that how you get under the girls' skirts, by hexing them first, ferret boy?"

He raised his wand so quickly towards her she flinched involuntarily, rocking back on the mattress, staring at him with wide eyes. His movement had jerked the long sleeve of his shirt back, exposing his forearm, and in turn, the black tattoo of the Death Eater. She had seen the Mark before, twice to be exact, but something about Malfoy's was different.

Across the Mark and surrounding skin, there were deep, angry slash marks cut into his flesh, distorting the image of the snake. They looked intentional, almost... self-inflicted.

Seeing her stare, her lips parted on a silent gasp, he yanked hard against the shirtsleeve, covering his forearm while lowering his wand. Her dark gaze met his cold eyes, and they regarded each other silently for several moments, the tension almost crackling between them.

He looked away from her, slipping his wand back into the deep, carpenter-style pocket of his dark blue jeans. He fumbled with his sleeves again before turning back to her.

"I'll never call you that again," he whispered, his voice thick with obvious hesitation. "If you swear you'll never mention my Mark to anyone else."

Her brown eyes lingered on his forearm, the Dark Mark safely covered. Wouldn't he have been proud of it? Wasn't that something they boasted about to other Slytherins, or showed to their victims to bring forth fear? And why on earth would he cut at it? She felt pity and confusion all in the same stream of consciousness.

But he had said... never again. He would never again call her that filthy name.

A slow grin spread across her pale face, the first true smile she could ever remember intentionally giving Malfoy. "Truce, then."

He mirrored her smile, though it seemed almost sickly. She would have laughed out loud if they were back at Hogwarts, but with his history, and the current situation, it was beyond inappropriate.

"Merlin, what has the world come to?" he muttered, pushing off of the doorframe and taking a few steps into the room.

She watched his movements unblinking. "You tell me, Malfoy. I have no idea, but I have a feeling you might."

He grunted. "It's... complicated." He shook his head again, sighing. He pointed to the chifferobe, changing the subject abruptly.

"Your shirt's ruined. The rest of your clothes reek, so don't change back into them," he ordered her, one side of his mouth twitching as she spared him a scowl. "There's a bunch of female Muggle clothing in this wardrobe thing. It's all clean, just Transfigure it if you have to. I'm sure that won't be a problem for you, Granger."

"Why are we dressing like Muggles? I don't understand..."

"For the love of Circe, stop asking questions!" Malfoy cut her off, exasperated. "Why don't you just nod and agree with me for a change? After all, we saved your life..."

"What?" Her scowl deepened as indignation sparked within her. "You were going to leave me if it weren't for the professor!"

Without even realizing it, she had whipped around, picking up the only weapon she had within reach. Malfoy jerked backwards in the doorway, deflecting the thrown pillow, flustered.

"You better be thankful I don't have my wand, Malfoy!"

He snorted. "I am *quite* thankful, actually." The smirk was back on his face as he regarded her one last time where she was sitting, fuming with crossness on the bed.

"There's a jar of salve on the side of the bathroom sink. Severus says you need to rub it onto your injury after your shower. The vial next to it is a pain potion. And don't try and sneak out the window. Severus personally warded this house tighter than Azkaban, which along with keeping unwanted visitors out, now also keeps a special visitor in."

He turned, shouting back at her as he disappeared through the entrance. "Don't take more than fifteen minutes or I'll feed your breakfast to the sink monster."

Hermione stared at the empty doorway, wishing she had another pillow to throw. "It's called a garbage disposal, you prat!"

She heard the distant bark of his laughter and sighed, looking around her surroundings dejectedly. This was all unreal; she really had no clue what to do, where to begin. Take a shower? The idea seemed ludicrous.

But she had to grudgingly agree with him; the smoke from Hogsmeade had permeated her hair, not to mention she was sure her brassiere, school skirt and socks were affected, if not covered with soot as well.

She peeked under the covers and sighed, looking down at what was left of her uniform.

"Okay, let's be practical." Her voice sounded odd in the small room, and she bit her lip. She tied the sheet tight around her chest and crawled off the bed, walking over to the weathered chifferobe.

She pulled hard on the lowest drawer, the wood creaking in protest as she jerked it open. *Merlin's beard. Had this house been abandoned in the forties?*

Hermione looked down at the assorted underthings, girdles and garters, sturdy stockings and a corset that almost looked Victorian. The drawer smelled like mothballs. She snorted, suddenly taken in by the absurdity of the whole situation.

Well, it's not like she would wear someone else's knickers anyway, even if they were clean and free of moths She smirked at the thought, shoving the drawer closed.

She opened the doors to the upper wardrobe, peering inside to all of the hanging clothes. Her suspicions were confirmed. If this previous resident hadn't abandoned the house in the forties, then the woman who had occupied this room had a serious thing for retro apparel.

She sighed again, staring at all of the dresses in front of her. What did it matter, really? What was the point of trying to find something respectable to wear around Malfoy of all people? And where had Professor Snape gone? Weren't they both Death Eaters? Hadn't Malfoy run away, or disappeared, or had been killed by Voldemort after failing in his mission to kill Dumbledore?

And Lavender. Poor Lavender. And Ron, and Harry...

Hermione reached in and yanked one of the long sundresses off a wire hanger, banging the doors shut and walking into the small bathroom, closing the door behind her. She muttered a quick locking spell, not nearly complicated enough to keep out a determined wizard, but it would give Malfoy pause if he tried to sneak in on her.

The bathroom was ancient. The toilet had a pull chain, the water tank suspended from above. There was a claw-footed tub with a showerhead attachment hooked onto the worn tile wall. Two rather dingy looking, but thankfully fresh smelling, bath towels hung over the lone rung. As promised, the salve jar and potion vial were to the edge of the sink. There was also a hairbrush, a rolled, half used tube of toothpaste and a toothbrush.

Her parents would never forgive her if she skipped brushing her teeth, a task she usually performed with wand magic now. She wondered if it had been the professor or Malfoy who had been thoughtful. Though she couldn't imagine why either of them would bother.

She peeled off her clothes slowly, her body still achy and tired. Leaning against the side of the tub, she twisted the prehistoric faucet handles, the water pipes groaning to life. Thankfully, clear water started to gush into the ancient tub, and she waited for it to warm before turning the main faucet over to shower mode and stepping under the spray.

Hermione went to the task of cleaning her thick mass of hair, grateful that there was both shampoo and cream rinse on the side of the tub in unmarked bottles, both smelling like ylang ylang and rose. The bar of soap had actual rose petals throughout, reminding her of a similar bar she had purchased for Ginny several holidays ago from a little Muggle cosmetics shop in Glasgow.

She pushed her memories aside, cleaning her hair as she tried to focus. She found it safe to assume at this point that Harry and Voldemort were still alive. Malfoy hadn't mentioned any of the others, but if the Boy Who Lived or the Dark Lord had died in the battle of Hogsmeade, she knew she wouldn't be here, in the place she considered Snape's "safe house".

Professor Snape had killed Dumbledore. Harry had seen it. So what was he doing saving her? Was he protecting Malfoy?

She turned around to rinse her hair, thoughts speeding through her head, different theories alternately presented and discounted. Was she worth something more to them alive than dead? She knew she was highly intelligent; she never wanted to be narcissistic to the fact, but she studied fiercely over the years in her quest for knowledge, and it was no secret that it was the main talent she brought to the Golden Trio.

But even if Voldemort accepted that she was an extremely talented witch, her Muggle-born status would outweigh any use she could bring him. She was only another pawn, in the way of the ultimate checkmate.

She turned off the water, standing naked, dripping in the bathtub, her eyes open but unseeing. If not the Dark Lord, then what would Professor Snape have to benefit from her? Had he brought her here to protect her? That made no sense.

He killed Dumbledore. Snape was a traitor, a *murderer*. So why he had healed her? *She didn't understand.*

She pulled one towel off the rung to wrap around her hair and used the other to dry off. Without her wand, it took her some while to get ready, towel drying her hair to a point where she could braid it loosely. She knew she was well past the fifteen minutes Malfoy had threatened her with, but she cared less at this point about the arrogant prat, even though her stomach growled in disagreement.

Hermione downed the unpleasant tasting potion in one practiced gulp, corking the vial and setting it back down on the sink's edge. She picked up the jar of salve and worked the sandalwood smelling mixture into the red and somewhat splotchy area of skin where the slicing hex had been.

She slipped the flowery sundress over her head, zipping up the back and turning around to look in the cracked mirror of the bathroom. It was obviously made for someone taller than her, as the hem hit her mid-calf, but she was pleased with the length considering she had no knickers. The waist was loose, but without her wand, she couldn't Transfigure it, as Malfoy had so *helpfully* suggested.

The top was sleeveless, the pattern busy enough, and her own stature small, that she didn't fret about not having another brassiere to change into. She would need to talk to the professor about getting her wand back.

She looked back at the mirror, scowling back at her fractured image. Somehow, she didn't think he would just hand it over if she asked. She needed to use that big brain of hers and come up with a plan. But she needed more information first.

Hermione walked hesitantly out of her bedroom into the deserted hallway. She moved slowly, her bare feet shuffling across the tattered carpet soundlessly. At the edge of the hallway there was a set of stairs going down.

She stood there for a moment, taking in the situation and just listening. The mouth-watering smell of bacon and eggs tickled her nose, the faint scent of chamomile tea underneath that. She could hear the clank of dishes, a muttered spell, and the residual light of said spell. Then a low singing voice, a lullaby in French...

She bit her lip, holding back the giggle. *Merlin, was that Malfoy singing?* Smirking, but still careful, she descended the steps, entering the living room of the house.

Like her bedroom, the main area of the house also had a worn-down, lived-in country feel to it. There were two overstuffed blue couches that had seen better days, a dark navy recliner nearly hidden in the shadows of the far corner, a low wooden coffee table, a rather large mahogany framed fireplace, and a lamb's wool rug covering part of the wood planked floor. Books upon books were stacked in piles well over a meter high along the walls. Perhaps Professor Snape had been able to save some of his extensive library after all.

She walked through the living room and into the kitchen, pausing at the entrance. At least this area of the house had been updated somewhat. All of the appliances were white, not the avocado green she had been expecting. It was an L-shaped set up, with a small, four person dinette set giving the kitchen an added feeling of hominess.

Malfoy's back was to her, but he had stopped mid-verse in his lullaby, flicking his wand so the plate that he had levitated fluttered gently back down to the counter. "Are you trying to sneak up on me, Granger?"

"Why would I do that?"

He turned then, his gray-blue eyes widening slightly as his attention was drawn to her dress. She crossed her arms across her chest, her chin raising a fraction at the look he was giving her.

"I told you to Transfigure anything you needed."

"That would have been nice. With a wand," she added darkly.

His lips pursed briefly. She rolled her eyes, shaking her head soundlessly.

"Your breakfast is on the table with a warming charm," he told her, his voice quiet as he turned once again to the sink. She stared at his back, blinking in surprise.

"You said..."

"Severus ordered me to feed you, or I would have let you starve," Malfoy grunted. "Why did it take you so long, anyway? I didn't think you were the sort of girl that took forever on her hair..."

"Please tell me, when is the last time you readied in the morning without your wand?" She cut him off, her tone strained with anger. He didn't turn around.

"Just eat your breakfast, Granger."

She glared at his back a few moments longer. When he continued to clean and stack the dishes with his wand, effectively ignoring her, she sighed, sitting down at the dinette. There was a plate upside down over another plate, a teacup to the left, a lone fork to the right. She noticed with dark humor he hadn't provided her with a knife. *Perhaps he was smarter than she gave him credit for.*

Hermione pulled off the top plate, uncovering two steaming eggs sunny side up, bacon, and toast with a single pat of butter. Her stomach growled, and she remembered with a start that the last thing she had eaten was a couple of chocolate frogs while walking down High Street yesterday afternoon.

She dug into the food ravenously, so caught up in the meal that she barely acknowledged Malfoy as he sat down at the table across from her. He was watching her with faint amusement, following her movements as she soaked part of the toast in a broken yolk on the plate.

"This... is... fantastic," she murmured between bites, glancing up at him briefly. "I had no idea Professor Snape could cook."

Malfoy set his elbows on the table top, resting his chin in his hands. "You know, he's not the epitome of evil you think he is. He saved my life. And he saved yours."

Traitor. Killer of Dumbledore. And she was eating his food. Her stomach suddenly felt sour, and she set down the piece of bacon she had been chewing on. She stared across the table at Malfoy, her mouth pulled into a thin line.

"I want my wand back, Malfoy." Her voice was low, her tone serious and sharp.

He exhaled heavily, pushing up from the table. "I don't have it. You'll have to talk to Severus."

Malfoy walked out of the kitchen, and Hermione stumbled out of her chair, her plan to stash the fork as a future weapon forgotten in her haste to follow him.

"Malfoy..."

He was on his knees in front of one of the couches in the living room, pulling a large, mahogany box from under the frame. She stood still in the entryway, watching as he heaved the box onto the low coffee table, working the latches to open it.

Pulling the two panels back, he revealed a gleaming, lacquered chessboard, a large velveteen bag containing what she assumed were the pieces falling out to the side of the board.

She was silent, tracing his movements as he set up the board in speedy precision, glancing up at her through several strands of his white blond hair when he was done.

"Severus will be home later. For now, you have nowhere to go. And neither do I. I don't know if you've figured it out yet, but I'm stuck here too." He frowned, staring hard at the antique, soapstone pieces before looking back at her. "I know it's not Wizard's Chess, but the game's the same."

Her mouth quirked up slightly. Had he forgotten so easily that she would be more used to the Muggle type of chess anyway?

Seeing her hesitation, his frown deepened. "Listen, I know I'm supposedly this Death Eater, and you're... *Muggle-born*, but can't we pretend to be friends for the next couple of hours and just play chess?"

She walked around the coffee table, kneeling down carefully on the other side of the chessboard. "You know, I'm really not very good at this game."

He glanced back at her, a slow smile creasing his angular face. "I guess this game might last awhile then, because I can't claim expertise either. For some reason, I don't think either of us have to worry about that fact leaving the room."

She mirrored his smirk, and he gestured back to the chessboard in front of them.

"Witches first."

They started the game, forgetting years of animosity as they played, both awaiting Snape's return.

Part Three

Chapter 3 of 3

She had never known exactly which side of the chessboard he had really played. But now, in the midst of war, he would give her fifty moves to the truth.

Disclaimer: I'm not and never would claim to be J.K. Rowling. She is the queen, and I am but a pawn now let's play some chess, shall we?

Rating is for language, violence, and my penchant for possible naughtiness. If it does head down that path, I will change the rating accordingly.

Reviews: I would love it if you would read and review! Each one I savor like chocolate cake!

A/N: And now here is my continued attempt to authentically replicate one of the best, multi-dimensional characters ever created in my own nefarious storyline!! Big love goes out to my beta, SnarkyRoxxy without her, this would be utterly out of canon, among other horrible things. She is truly the cat's pajamas!

Chapter Three

It was rather unsettling how easy it was to fall into somewhat friendly banter with Malfoy. It had started out awkwardly of course, the young wizard across from her choking several times on the now forbidden derogatory term for her bloodline. After the first few moves across the chessboard, he had tried to engage her in a discussion about the recent happenings with Quidditch. She changed the topic, not wanting to talk about anything that would painfully remind her of Ron, and Harry, and her current situation.

She mentioned the N.E.W.T.s; it would be refreshing to discuss magical theory and practice with someone of moderate intelligence. After all, she and Malfoy had been neck and neck as the most intelligent of their peers since first year. But he had plaintively ignored this dialogue, and she realized with sudden pity that he would never see Hogwarts again, let alone finish his N.E.W.T.s and study as an apprentice under a master of his chosen field. These were her dreams, and she was achingly aware that she might not make it out to see them into fruition either.

Hermione dared not to mention his Dark Mark and the self-inflicted wounds, even as she burned with curiosity. It was something completely unexpected and changed what she had always known and expected of him into something unfamiliar. He was foreign to her, and it made her more wary and guarded than she would have felt if he had been holding his wand, spitting the word *Mudblood* in her face again.

They had finally settled on discussing art of all things, the conversation shifting from Hermione describing the Tate and National Galleries of London to Malfoy illustrating his knowledge of the galleries of Paris, Prague and New York. She felt a pang of jealousy that he had been so well-traveled during his holidays in all of those summers away from Hogwarts. But the feeling was forgotten with the realization that he had actually spent time, *voluntarily* no less, in a place Muggles visited and adored. And he seemed to be enamored with it, relishing the memories with an enthusiasm that matched hers towards Arithmancy.

She realized with a start that she didn't really know this boy sitting across from her *No, no more a boy than she was still just a girl* Malfoy was a young man now, the once soft lines of childhood hardened from age and war; he resembled his father more than ever, his beauty nearly angelic, but not quite covering the cold callousness underneath. Lucius Malfoy scared her more than most, and she found if she overlooked the unkempt platinum hair and the out-of-place Muggle clothes, she was playing chess with a near-perfect replica of the feared Death Eater, Voldemort's right-hand wizard, next to the professor.

"Granger? Are you going to move this century?"

She blinked, flushing slightly when she realized she had been staring off into space for several minutes now.

"Just... thinking."

"Obviously," he returned, smirking. "Though for some reason, I doubt it was about your next move. Just take my knight, already."

She looked at him, the dizzy feeling of being lost in her own head once again taking over. He was staring at her, his wintry gray-blue eyes sparkling with mirth. She imagined he had given his Slytherin friends that same look over the years, one of uncalculated amusement in the midst of some ordinary conversation.

She was suddenly starved for her friends, hungry for the feeling of rightness, of knowing what the next day, even what the next hour, would hold for her. She needed the roughness of Ron's hand in hers, Harry's barking laughter as they shared jokes in the Great Hall at breakfast. Hermione wanted to feel safe again.

"When do you think the war will end?" The question shocked even her, and she moved back slightly, moistening her lower lip with the tip of her tongue. His eyes widened, the twinkle fading. He was looking at her hard, really looking, and she shifted, her arms instinctively crossing over her chest.

"I don't know," he whispered. He continued to watch her openly as if seeing her for the first time. The minutes dragged past, and she unconsciously took in the sounds of their breathing, the nervous rhythm occasionally pierced by the distant sound of the peregrine falcon's call drifting through the open windows upstairs.

"I used to wish for it, you know."

Hermione's head tilted with her silent question. The smile he gave her this time was humorless, almost dark. She understood then, the realization clawing into her stomach like the chilly talons of a Dementor.

"The war was a story at bedtime, a fairy tale weaved by my parents and continued by their friends. I thought I understood it all. The pure-bloods would rule like they were meant to. It was simple, really. We were the masters of this world; Muggles and Muggle-borns were of inferior blood."

She felt the heat in her face, the anger causing her arms to uncross, hands in tight fists by her sides, pressed hard into the fabric of her sundress. A sharp retort stung the back of her throat, burning to be released on the blond wizard in front of her. But his next words held her back.

"I didn't know how wrong I was. There's a difference, you see, between that ideal fairy tale of being better than everyone else, being the chosen master race and that of actually having to kill to achieve it. I couldn't..."

Malfoy's jaw twitched, and he tore his gaze from her, staring hard at the chessboard. She continued to look at him, speechless with what he had revealed to her.

"I couldn't kill him," he finished, his voice low. "No more than I could kill you."

A million questions rushed through her mind, swarming in a mass that was nearly painful as she tried to focus. She wanted to ask him about the Mark, about his father,

about what had happened that night Dumbledore had been killed by the professor. She knew now he was on the run, hiding from Voldemort.

But Snape knew where he was. He knew and still Malfoy was alive. He had saved her life, and now she was here, in the "safe house" with Malfoy. From what she had gathered from Malfoy earlier, Snape was with Voldemort *right now*, his knowledge of them sequestered in a place hidden by the skilled Occlumens. It made no sense.

Unless he was still a spy. But that was impossible. Snape had killed Dumbledore.

Her fingertips caressed the white rook before lifting it, her little finger hooking the black knight in question as she moved forward across the board. She set Malfoy's piece on her side of the coffee table next to the others.

"Perhaps you should tell me more," she spoke softly, glancing up at him. He eyed her warily, his face seemingly aged by ten years after their heavy conversation.

"You're safer if I don't. Anyway, Severus wouldn't appreciate it."

"Do you answer to him now?"

"He is my godfather, Granger. Not to mention I owe him my life. He saved me from the monster I could have become and the monster I was so willing to worship." He was looking down at the chessboard, pointedly ignoring her again.

"Speaking of which, where is Professor Snape?" she asked. Malfoy was still focused on the game and started to reach for one of his bishops when her stomach growled.

He looked up, his surprised expression quickly changing to amusement. "Hungry?"

"We've played this game for several hours now, haven't we?"

Malfoy leaned back, digging through the front left pocket of his jeans. Her lips quirked up slightly as he pulled out the pocket watch; the timepiece looked like an antique and was almost comically out of place in his current Muggle mode of dress. "I suppose we missed tea. I thought Severus would be back by now."

Hermione frowned. "Do you think he's all right?"

Malfoy grunted, flipping his watch closed and pocketing it. "He's with the Dark Lord, Granger." He didn't need to add that he thought her question was stupid; his tone was rather direct in its intended interpretation.

She stood, her knees popping with the sudden movement after being bent for hours, her sundress swirling in a wrinkled mass around her. She felt the anger build again, the feeling of being kept in the dark while her world had been so wretchedly fractured causing her emotions to spike.

"We can't just sit here and play chess all day, Malfoy. There is a war going on out there...."

The winded, crackling sound of an Apparition caused the words to die on her lips. Malfoy shot to his feet next to her, his wand out. Wandless, but not without her reputable forethought, Hermione grabbed the rusted, fairly bent fire poker that had been leaning against the weathered mahogany of the fireplace; she had noticed it several hours ago at the beginning of their game and now brandished it as a weapon. Both stood, side by side, staring towards the kitchen, waiting in silence.

The Death Eater stumbled more than walked into the entryway between the kitchen and living room, leaning heavily on the doorframe. Hermione's heart thudded painfully against her ribs, the sweat cold at her brow even as courage swelled through her, causing her to tighten her hold on the fire poker. She heard Malfoy speak, but his words were like an echo, nonsensical as all of her focus burned on the cloaked wizard across the room from them.

A black-gloved hand reached up, darkened in patches by what looked like blood. Instead of slipping into his robes for his wand, he was reaching upwards for his mask, a fine tremor to his hand as he pulled the silvery disguise from his face.

"Severus," the name came out in a relieved rush from Malfoy, the younger wizard pocketing his wand. He started towards the professor, concern on his face. "You've been hurt."

He was relatively unchanged from his days as her professor, Hermione noted absently. His skin was still pallid, his hooked nose casting a shadow over thin lips pulled into what she had wondered sometimes to be a permanent frown. His black eyes were the most striking feature of his pale face; they shone like pure onyx, but were fathomless, engaging their viewer with an unmatched intensity. He could read minds with just a look; his intended target only had to be drawn into the spell of his eyes.

The silver mask slipped from fingers, clattering against the weathered, wood-planked floor. Snape leaned heavily against the doorframe, hunching slightly. His black gaze shifted from Malfoy to her, and then back to Malfoy.

"The Dark Lord is... displeased."

She watched as Malfoy hurried next to the older wizard, slipping one arm under his and around his back to support him. She stood still, feeling a mixture of uncertainty and unwanted concern for her former professor as Malfoy led him to the couch facing the large fireplace.

"Merlin, Granger! Don't just stand there. Come here!"

She was so lost in the moment she didn't spare Malfoy the scowl he deserved for barking any sort of order to her. She moved dazedly around the blue couch, walking past the coffee table with their unfinished chess game and stopping behind Malfoy. Malfoy was murmuring something to her old professor, which he in turn answered, the words Dark Lord, battle, and pursuit the only ones she could make out. Malfoy's pale fingers were working the clasps on the heavy Death Eater robes while Snape shakily pulled the ominous hood back from his black, greasy shoulder-length hair.

"Do you plan on actually brandishing that weapon, Miss Granger? Or are you trying to determine its uses in metallurgy?" His silky, low voice, tinged ever so slightly with pain startled her into moving backwards a step. Malfoy whipped around, his innocuous expression shifting to dark annoyance.

"Bloody hell! Drop that fire poker and get your arse over here," he growled. Anger burned through her, simmering slightly when she saw the fear in his cold gray-blue eyes. Malfoy was scared. It suddenly occurred to her that the professor might have actually been hurt quite badly.

She set the fire poker down next to the coffee table, walking over to the couch and kneeling down next to Malfoy. Snape was staring at her, his black eyes so intense she unwittingly looked away, her attention back on Malfoy. The blond wizard's wintry gaze was shifting from the blood splattered across Snape's torn black frock coat to the subtle shudder of his gloved hands. Hermione realized that Malfoy was assessing his injuries. Snape was wounded; she wasn't anywhere near as skilled as a mediwitch, but she recognized the residual symptoms of the Cruciatus curse, not to mention other curses and hexes he may have suffered at the hands of Voldemort and his fellow Death Eaters.

Malfoy jerked to his feet and, without a word, turned and dashed out of the living room into the dark hallway beyond.

"Malfoy!" Her enraged exclamation of his name went unanswered, and she exhaled sharply, turning back to Snape.

He was still staring at her, his expression unreadable, though obviously in the realm of something unpleasant. She opened her mouth to speak and then pursed her lips, the words failing in her throat. He was a traitor. He had killed Dumbledore. But he had saved her life, for whatever reason. And it wasn't within her to just let him suffer from his injuries while she sat and watched.

"Sir, I don't have a wand," she said, her voice soft and hesitant. He scowled.

"I don't remember asking for your assistance, Miss Granger," he snapped, his tone still low and uncompromising. She frowned.

"I don't believe I gave you a choice, Professor," she shot back, moving closer to where he lay, spread out in a half-reclined position on the couch. His expression had shifted again, and if they were back in Potions class, she would have taken it as a warning. Oh, it had been a long time since she had actually feared him; however, she recognized danger when she saw it. But her world had irrevocably shifted in the past forty-eight hours, and they had not been professor and student for quite awhile now. She wouldn't back down.

"Why, you impertinent little witch," he snarled, moving up on his elbows, his black eyes pinning her. Her breath caught, but she ignored the sudden uneasiness, her Gryffindor sensibilities taking over. With the same courage that ran through the heart of her House, she reached forward, the fingertips of her left hand brushing against the buttons at the collar of his frock coat. She needed to see his wounds. Maybe with wandless magic, she could help him.

Snape grabbed her wrist with frightening speed, jerking her hand away from his clothing and, in turn, pulling her closer against the edge of the couch, nearer to him. The sudden movement caused her breath to catch. Her eyes went wide and her free hand clenched against the worn fabric of the couch as she stared at him. His gloved fingers tightened a fraction around her wrist, and she couldn't help the small gasp at his action.

Snape's already black eyes seemed to darken. His gaze shifted across her face, moving from her large brown eyes, the flush of her cheeks, drifting past her parted lips to the edge of her sundress, the bodice visible from where she was pressed flush against the couch.

"Pray tell, child, what on earth are you wearing?" he asked in a whisper, his voice barely audible to her. She blinked, thrown off kilter by his 180-degree change in conversation.

"It was... um, the Muggle clothes, sir, are all rather out of date."

"Why did you not let Draco Transfigure this... this *dress* for you?"

Laughter bubbled out of her throat at the idea. "Do you honestly expect me to let Malfoy *voluntarily* point his wand in my direction?"

A shadow of what could be considered amusement flickered across his eyes so fast she was certain she had imagined it. He tugged at her wrist, and she moved in response to his unspoken request, shifting up to her full height on her knees. Snape was staring at her again, and she fought the instinct to stir under his gaze.

His free hand slipped into his parted Death Eater robes, and he pulled out his wand. Before she could protest, or protect herself in any way, he was whispering an incantation, the magic swirling through the air, sliding around her, touching her. She felt the shift of fabric, the sturdy roughness of the sundress replaced with the cool softness of brushed velvet. The feel of it against her exposed flesh was disconcerting; the magic slid like silken hands across her bare thighs, up her belly to cover her breasts.

She was still shaking with reaction when he pulled away. In place of the calf-length patterned sundress, she was covered in violet; the dark velvet dress fit her snug around the torso, numerous buttons forming a line down the front to the hem where it brushed her ankles. From the gathered waist, it flowed around her like an errant cloud, shimmering more like silk than the velvet she felt against her skin. It wasn't sleeveless like the sundress, but the bodice edge dipped below her collarbone, and she itched with the sudden childlike response to cover the pale, freckle-covered flesh never seen before by her professor.

"Sir?" Her voice this time was soft, unsure, and she was suddenly annoyed at her own weakness.

"Your garment, Miss Granger, was painful to me. Even if you chose not to let Mr. Malfoy..*help* you out of your predicament, you cannot expect me to suffer under your visual torment."

She blinked, absorbing his words. If she were back at Hogwarts, if her world hadn't changed so drastically in the last twenty-four hours, she might have given him a sharp-tongued retort. As it was, Hermione Granger was lost. She had known this man in front of her since she was eleven years old, but then in reality, she really didn't know him at all. Her feared but respected professor, a wizard who had been scorned and ridiculed by so many even while working as a spy for the Order. *The one who had killed Dumbledore.*

"Why did Vold-" she paused, moistening her bottom lip, "-the Dark Lord curse you, sir? After all that you have done for him?"

He grunted, turning slightly on the weathered cushions as his long fingers shakily worked on the buttons on his dark frock coat. "I am no different than the others, Miss Granger. Even in my *esteemed* position as of late, I still suffer under the Dark Lord's wrath."

She reached out to help him with the task of undressing, and he smacked her hand. Skin smarting, she jerked back, biting her lower lip. She watched as he pulled himself free from the heavy black frock coat, pushing it back to expose the white shirt underneath. Blood soaked through in odd shapes on the thin fabric, and she was sharply reminded of her own wound, the slicing hex now just a dull ache against her left side.

When he worked free of the last button of the white undershirt, she couldn't help but gasp. On the areas of his lean, pale torso not smeared with blood, she could plainly see the scars of his battled past, encounters she could only imagine with Voldemort, other Death Eaters and those things still unknown and unnamed.

"Professor!"

"Do not call me that, girl! I ended my torture as your professor the day I killed the old man. You'll watch your mouth."

She stared at him, lips parted in a mixture of shock and anger. It was one thing to listen to Harry painfully describe the death of the Headmaster and the ultimate betrayal of the Order's deepest spy. It was another to actually hear her former professor dismiss the act so flippantly, so callously it was as if he had slapped her across the face.

He had killed Dumbledore. He was a murderer, a traitor. *But he had saved her life.*

Without really giving thought to what she was doing, Hermione reached forward again, her fingertips skimming across his bare, injured chest. When he didn't fight her, she closed her eyes, all of her concentration focused on the battlefield of flesh under her hands.

"I remember last night when you healed me. It was a complicated spell, sir, something I've read about but never seen."

"Hmm," his reply was short, but soft. Her eyes remained shut as she felt the transition of skin made hard by scar tissue, to the stickiness of drying blood.

"Teach me and I'll help you," she whispered. His laughter was dry, lacking any humor, and she opened her eyes, once again confronted with the fathomless midnight of his stare.

"You'll always be the insufferable know-it-all, Miss Granger. Even captured as you are now, staring ultimate death in the face, you still hassle me with questions. You silly little girl...."

"I'm trying to help you!" She wrestled forward to stand, but his gloved left hand shot out, grasping her jaw, stilling her on her knees.

"Do you even realize the seriousness of your situation? Last night you were split open like a pumpkin, left to die like Miss Brown. If my Lord had caught you, your fate would have been much, much worse. You are but a pawn, child, surrounded by the enemy's knights with no king to save you."

Her angry retort was lost as Malfoy appeared in the entrance, his hands filled with vials of different colored potions. He paused for a moment in the doorway, his gaze flitting across Hermione and the violet, velvet gown.

"Felt like dressing up for tea, Granger?"

"Shove it, Malfoy."

He smirked at her briefly before walking into the living room and kneeling down next to her in front of the couch. Malfoy handed one vial filled with a dark red liquid to Snape first, his attention drawn back to the remaining six vials in his hands even as Hermione's gaze shifted between him and her former professor. The older wizard had downed the medicine and she watched, speechless, as Malfoy handed him another vial without looking up.

"Give Miss Granger the pain potion, Draco."

"Severus...."

"Don't argue with me, boy."

Without further discussion, Malfoy turned and shoved the small amber vial to her. She glanced at Snape, but his concentration was on the platinum haired wizard kneeling beside him. She took the tiny bottle, uncorked it, and swallowed the bitter tasting concoction in one gulp.

"That which you know is inside you; nothing has left, nothing has changed. I have taught you well, and you will carry on without trepidation, Draco. The blood is nothing but for the mind. Say it now," Snape whispered, his silky voice so low it was nearly lost in the stillness surrounding the trio. Her glance shifted from Snape back to Draco; the Slytherin appeared hesitant, almost nervous. She watched curiously as he slipped the remaining two vials into the pockets of his dark jeans.

"Severus, I don't know if I can...."

"Silence! The girl next to you would not hesitate, but for the lack of her wand. I saved you for a reason. Faith, boy, I have ~~faith~~ faith in you."

Malfoy's mouth pursed momentarily before his face appeared virtually expressionless. He pulled out his wand, his free hand flexing instinctively over Snape's naked torso as his eyes closed in concentration. Hermione watched, transfixed, as the blue light cascaded from his wand, swelling to encompass her former professor's injured body.

"*Viscus Pariter.*"

The healing spell came out with determination and hesitant strength from Malfoy. She found herself staring at him; it was a blunt reminder, again, that he was no longer just a horrible pure-blood prat and she was no longer just a Muggle-born girl. They had started on opposite sides of a war begun before either of them were born. And the man before them, glowing in the residual burst of magic, was perhaps the most significant piece of it all.

Snape sighed, the sound hushed but thick with resignation. His body seemed to sink further into the worn blue cushions, his hooded black eyes shifting between the two teenagers in front of him.

"Hogsmeade?" Malfoy's one word question startled Hermione, and her attention shifted back to the white-blond wizard.

Snape answered him with a slight shake of his head. "Burned to the ground. Eleven villagers lost their lives. Three students, including Lavender Brown, were killed."

His black eyes caught hers. "No one of concern to you, Miss Granger. Potter and Weasley escaped."

She swallowed the lump in her throat that she hadn't realized had formed. Harry and Ron were both safe. Involuntarily, tears burned at her eyes, threatening to spill.

"Why? Why did you save me? I don't understand. And Malfoy. Why didn't you bring me to Voldemort?" She ignored the quick look from Malfoy, shaking her head sharply, the thick braid at her back swinging with the movement. "Aren't you supposed to kill me?"

Snape grunted. "Don't make me wish to do so, Miss Granger. I have my reasons, which are of no concern to you. Don't be such an ungrateful little witch." He paused, his gaze shifting across her face. She fought the instinct to squirm, the beating of her heart elevating as his black eyes drifted from her mouth, past the bodice of her velvet gown to her hands which were pulled into fists at her side.

"In the grand scheme of things, you know nothing. And while I know you won't, it would behoove you to listen to me, girl. If the Dark Lord ever acquired you, you would be subject to torture, rape, and other unpleasantness before your death. As much as you doubt it, you are better off hidden under my care."

Hermione was immobile for a moment before the sigh escaped, and she rolled back to rest on her heels. Malfoy was still staring at Snape, and she watched the older wizard as his eyes became more hooded, his face relaxing. She had recognized the spell from last night, and knew his body was healing and recovering, and soon sleep would take over and assist him in returning back to his normal state.

"Though I want to finish our game, chess would be bad right now. Grab a book, Granger. Anything you can't open is something of the Dark Arts, and you shouldn't bloody well be reading it anyway. So Severus says."

Hermione tore her gaze from where Snape had fallen into a potion-induced sleep back over to Malfoy. He was staring at her with an indecipherable look on his face and she frowned.

"Since when do you care what a *Mudblood* does, Malfoy?"

His cold gray-blue eyes narrowed and he rose to his feet in one quick movement. She looked up at him from her kneeling position next to the couch; she could have jumped to her feet, but at that moment, she sensed the dare. If he were to hex her now, wandless and at his feet, it would lower his honor as a powerful wizard in both of their worlds.

"You think you know everything, Granger, and you're wrong. Severus is not what you think he is, and I've changed from what I was. If you want to remain the same mouthy Gryffindor chit you were in school, so be it. But it just makes you as stupid and as *commonplace* as the rest of them."

She watched as he turned and walked over to the far wall, lined as it was with meter high stacks of Snape's books. He was ignoring her, scanning the ancient tomes with undivided interest.

"Why did Professor Snape save me, Malfoy?"

His fingers paused on an ancient, brown leather covered text, and he turned, staring at her from across the dark living room.

"Maybe he needed you alive." Malfoy pulled the book from the top of the pile, his attention back on the tome in front of him. "Did you ever think about that, Granger?"

She watched, silent, as the blond-haired wizard pulled the large book from the stack and pushed past her angrily, heading up the lone staircase.

Hermione looked back at her former professor. He was sleeping soundlessly now in front of her, sprawled out half-naked on the worn blue couch. Her brown eyes shifted from the harsh features of his pale face, moving to his ashen, scar-ridden chest.

Without forethought, her fingertips traced the planes of his torso, mapping out some unbidden spell across his flesh. The feeling caught her again, and the emotion nearly choked her, the tears pooling in her eyes.

"Why?" Her voice came out in the barest of whispers. "Why kill him? Why help me? I don't understand."

I don't understand, I don't understand, I don't understand...

Silently, the tears rolled down her pale, freckled cheeks as she pulled away from the sleeping form of Professor Snape.

For now, she would read. But as always, she would come up with a plan.