

Deception of the Night

by Clara Minutes

Unexpected circumstances during the summer lead Hermione to a situation she never imagined.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 13

Unexpected circumstances during the summer lead Hermione to a situation she never imagined.

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Hermione made her way off the train with Harry and Ron. She held back a sense of sadness, for she knew her parents wouldn't be waiting for her this year. She and Ron had decided to stay with Harry for the few days he was required to visit the Dursleys.

Looking around, she noticed that Arthur Weasley, Nymphadora Tonks and Remus Lupin were all waiting to escort them to number four, Privet Drive.

"Wotcher," said Tonks when they all got closer.

"Hi, Tonks!" Hermione said, happy to see the other witch.

"Let's just get this over with," Harry pleaded with conviction.

The drive to the Dursleys' residence was blessedly uneventful. Arthur, the one who was driving, let them out at the end of number four's drive. Remus quickly got out and helped unload their trunks.

"Thanks, Professor," Hermione said once he'd handed over her things.

"You're welcome, Hermione. Though I am not your professor any more." There was a note of regret in his voice.

She gave him an encouraging smile and waited for the others to gather their trunks.

Harry led her and Ron up to the front door. After a swift knock, Vernon Dursley appeared. Petunia and Dudley followed close behind. Mr. Dursley surveyed the scene in front of him and made to slam the door. Before he could begin to close it, Hermione walked right up to the Dursleys and introduced herself.

"I'm Hermione Granger. Ron Weasley and I will be staying with Harry while he is here." She indicated herself and Ron, who was standing behind her.

"You will not!" Vernon Dursley bellowed, splotches of color starting to appear on his face.

"I'm sorry, sir, but you can't exactly stop us. We're of legal age in the wizarding world, which means we no longer have limitations on our magic. We are also considered adults and able to make our own decisions," Hermione explained as politely as she could.

Dudley, who had been cowering behind Petunia, hastily moved away from the rest of them at the mention of magic. Petunia looked as if she might faint, but managed to follow Dudley back into the house. By now, Vernon had turned a nice shade of maroon. He inhaled and seemed about to argue with the lot of them, but wisely chose to stomp off after his wife and son instead.

"Hermione, thanks. That was bloody amazing," Harry said and led them into the house.

On the way up the stairs, Harry mumbled, "We can all take turns as to who sleeps in the bed."

"Oh, no. Harry, this is your room and your house, so you should sleep in the bed," Hermione said, shooting a look at Ron, who had opened his mouth to protest.

Ron huffed but didn't say anything.

They reached the bedroom and dumped their trunks in a pile just inside the door. Hermione let Crookshanks out of his carrier as Harry opened Hedwig's cage.

"We should go say goodbye to the others," Hermione said.

Harry and Ron looked as if they had forgotten the others were still outside. Rushing back down the stairs, they were glad to see everyone still out by the car.

"Sorry about that." Harry looked sheepish.

"No worries, Harry. We'll be back in a few days to take you to Headquarters," Remus explained, placing a hand on Harry's shoulder.

"We will have everything ready by the time you guys get there." Arthur looked at all of them. "Please stay close to the house; we don't want anything to happen."

"Behave," Tonks said with a wink.

The younger trio smiled and promised to behave. Arthur gave everyone a quick hug then went to wait in the car. Tonks gave a quick wave and followed Arthur. Remus nodded and departed, looking over his shoulder to make sure they got back into the house.

Author's Notes: *I want to thank my wonderful betas, GinnyW and snarkyroxy, for all of their hard work. If you've read my other work, be content in the knowledge that this ends well.*

Reviews and comments are always welcomed and appreciated. Thanks for reading.

Chapter 1

Chapter 2 of 13

A trip to the Dursleys's and Number 12 Grimmauld Place has interesting results.

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter or anything associated with it. This is purely for my own enjoyment.

Hermione and Ron awoke to find Harry already moving about.

"Morning," Hermione said sleepily.

Harry startled at the sound of her voice.

"Sorry, didn't mean to scare you."

"It's alright. I just didn't expect you guys to be up for a while. Morning, Ron."

Ron grunted in return.

Hermione giggled at Ron's reply. *He's definitely not a morning person*, she thought.

"So what are your plans for today, Harry?" she asked as she stood to gather clothes to wear.

"Well, I don't know how much we can do. I'm not exactly allowed to leave the house, and we don't have any reference books here." Harry shrugged and moved to sit on his bed.

Instead of sitting in silence, Hermione made her way to the bathroom to change. She came back a few minutes later to find the boys in the same positions she'd left them.

"We could always search our history texts for important artifacts. *Hogwarts: A History* has sections on each of the founders. It could be helpful."

"What, you don't have it memorized completely? You only quote it all the time."

Hermione rolled her eyes at Ron's comment and went to retrieve the book from her trunk.

"Well, c'mon. Get your own copies and start reading." Hermione flopped down on her makeshift bed and began to read.

The next few days passed in a very similar fashion. Hermione bossed the boys into helping her research historical artifacts that had belonged to the founders. She had taken charge of creating a list of possible objects that Voldemort could have used to make Horcruxes.

The locket was on the list as another Slytherin remnant. It seemed that when Salazar Slytherin left Hogwarts all those years ago, he had taken nothing with him.

Rowena Ravenclaw was going to be the most difficult to find the correct object. She had been a bit of a packrat. She had numerous trinkets and other bits that were

considered important.

Helga Hufflepuff was easier. They knew for certain to look for the cup. Her wand seemed to be the only other object of worth that had belonged to her.

Godric Gryffindor was another story. The sword was a possibility, but that had been locked in the Headmaster or Headmistress' office for some time. Finding out whether Voldemort had access to it was going to be difficult, but it was their best guess.

Hermione sighed and went back to reading about Rowena's favorite paperweight.

Three days after they arrived, Remus, Mad-Eye Moody, Tonks and Bill Weasley came to escort them to number twelve, Grimmauld Place. They were all going to walk to Mrs. Figg's house then travel by Floo to number twelve.

As they were leaving, Petunia stopped Harry and asked, "Are you going for good?"

"Yes. Dudley can have his second bedroom back."

Petunia sighed. "Take this, it's not much, but it's something." She shoved a small wad of money into Harry's hands.

He looked down at the money and back up at her, but she was already heading toward the other end of the house. Harry glanced around as if he didn't know what to do. Everyone shrugged, so he pocketed the money and turned to leave.

The entourage moved quickly down the street. Hermione was in between Ron and Harry, who were surrounded by the others. Mad-Eye was behind them, Remus and Tonks were on the left and right respectively, and Bill Weasley was leading. Remus had already Apparated their belongings to Grimmauld Place. Everyone was on edge until they reached Mrs. Figg's house on Wisteria Walk. As soon as they stepped onto the grass, Mrs. Figg opened the door and rushed them all inside.

"Good day, Arabella," said Remus with a slight nod.

"Remus, good to see you!"

"The fire is connected, correct?" growled Mad-Eye, never one for pleasantries.

"Yes, yes. But shan't you stay for tea? The house is quite secure."

"Thank you, but we really must get going," Remus replied kindly.

"Oh, very well. Harry, my dear, I do hope things go well for you. I understand you won't be coming back. Good luck then. Mr. Tibbles will miss looking after you," she rambled.

Harry looked distinctly uncomfortable at becoming the center of attention. "Thanks, Mrs. Figg. I mean thanks for everything, not just the use of your Floo."

"Harry, stop chattering," Hermione whispered.

"Heh, guess we'll be going then."

"All right, Potter and me first," Moody said, stomping over to the fireplace while dragging Harry along.

A whoosh of green, and they had disappeared. Hermione found Tonks taking her arm and leading her to the fireplace next. Before she could say anything to Mrs. Figg, she was swirling through the multiple grates between Surrey and London. Ron and Bill came through a few seconds after Hermione had gotten out of the way, followed closely by Remus.

Seeing that everyone was safe, Remus said, "Your stuff is in your rooms. Everyone has the same rooms as before. If there is anything you need, there is always someone in the kitchen." He smiled at them.

"Thanks." Harry looked at Hermione and Ron, nodded to Remus and headed upstairs.

She and Ron waved goodbye to the others and followed Harry upstairs. They caught up with him in the library.

"There are lots of books here that can help us. Though I think we have a pretty good idea what type of objects we're looking for, I don't have any idea as to what to do with them once we have them." He looked at Hermione expectantly.

"Let's get to work then. I don't have any more of an idea than you, Harry." With that, she started pulling any books from the shelves that could be helpful.

"Harry, have you given any more thought to who R.A.B. is?" Hermione asked suddenly, the next afternoon.

Harry's brow furrowed. "Not really. We've been so busy with looking up the objects; I haven't had much time to think about anything else."

"Why, do you have an idea?"

"I just thought that we'd have as good a chance as any finding a reference here for someone with the initials R.A.B."

"Wait a minute..." Harry trailed off.

"What? What is it?"

Harry didn't seem to hear her. She looked at Ron, but he looked just as confused as she felt. Harry was heading toward the door. They got up and followed him out to the drawing room. Opening the door with a little more force than was necessary, Harry rushed through and moved straight to the Black Family Tapestry.

Hermione followed his gaze and landed on the name Regulus. Regulus Black. *Could it really be that easy?* she thought.

"I remember Sirius saying something about his Uncle Alphard. What if Regulus was partially named after him?" Harry asked the room.

"Then the locket may be in this house!" Hermione exclaimed, looking around as if she would be able to find it.

"Didn't we move a locket when we were cleaning the house a few summers ago?" Ron asked.

"Yeah, it was heavy. I wonder what happened to it," Harry replied.

"Let's go look in the cabinet," Hermione said as she crossed the room to look into the glass cabinet that had held all of the miscellaneous items.

"Oh no," she said barely above a whisper. "They're empty!"

"Damn! I bet it was in the stuff Mundungus sold." Harry whirled around and started pacing.

"Where's Dung now?" asked Ron.

"Azkaban. He was sent there for doing something stupid a few months ago," Hermione spoke cautiously.

"We need to talk to him. I have to know where that locket went."

"Harry, please be reasonable. We can't go rushing off to Azkaban with all of V-Voldemort's followers in there." Hermione tried to calm him.

Harry let out a growl of frustration. "You're right, Hermione. We were so close to having one more Horcrux out of the way."

"I know. Let's go downstairs and talk to Remus. We'll have to tell the Order about the Horcruxes anyway. Better to let Remus know before we have to tell everyone at once."

Harry nodded and the three of them made their way down to the kitchen. When they entered, they saw that Remus was talking to Tonks in a low voice. The two of them didn't notice the others come in until Harry cleared his throat. Remus' head snapped up and Tonks went reaching for her wand.

"Whoa," Harry said, holding up his hands. "It's just us."

Tonks laughed a little uneasily, but the tension left her body.

"We have some things that the Order needs to know, but we would like to tell you guys first; that way not everyone is shocked at once."

Harry spent the next hour explaining about Voldemort, his Horcruxes and what little information they knew. Finally, Harry got to the part about the locket and R.A.B. Remus was furious with Mundungus after Harry's explanation.

"I'll go to Azkaban first thing tomorrow," Remus stated after Harry finished talking.

"Thanks, Remus. I wanted to go, but Hermione talked some sense into me." Harry at least looked sorry about his earlier suggestion.

Remus smiled at Hermione. "Thanks. We really didn't need to be chasing after you three so early on."

Hermione shook her head and laughed.

Author's Notes: I want to thank both of my wonderful betas GinnyW and snarkyroxy. I can't thank you both enough.

This story is completely written and about halfway done with edits. You can expect a new chapter at the beginning of every week.

Reviews are very welcome and appreciated.

Chapter 2

Chapter 3 of 13

An uneasy situation and a hare-brained scheme make Hermione worry.

Disclaimer: I don't own anything that resembles J.K. Rowling's work. Please don't sue; I have nothing to give you.

Hermione was in the drawing room with Ron and Harry when Remus returned from Azkaban the next day. Harry had been pacing and driving her crazy. She had asked him to sit, but knew it was a futile effort. He stopped moving when Remus entered the room. They all waited expectantly for any news.

"I hate that place. The Dementors are gone, but it still reeks of despair."

"Thank you for going, Prof – er – Remus. We can't thank you enough," Hermione said.

The others mumbled their thanks.

"Dung was only marginally helpful. He sold a bunch of stuff to a man in Hogsmeade. He thinks the locket was part of that particular sale."

"Did he know who the man was?"

"Yes... It was Draco Malfoy."

"That git? Dung should have known better than to sell anything to a Malfoy!" Harry practically roared.

"He claims he was simply giving things back to their rightful owners. Draco is, technically, a relative of the Black family."

"So you're siding with him? Thanks a lot, Remus," Harry spat.

"Harry! He's not agreeing with Dung's actions. Though at least we can track Draco. It shouldn't be too difficult to get the locket back." Hermione looked from Harry to Remus.

"Finding them will be easy. They have a mansion in Wiltshire. The problem will be gaining access. Even with Lucius in prison, their mansion is like a small fortress," Remus explained.

"Can't the Aurors raid the mansion again? They've done that before," said Ron.

"Maybe, but we'll need to be careful. This locket will be dangerous," Remus said, his tone full of warning.

Harry finally sat down with a sigh. "What are we going to do until then? How long will it take to set up a raid on Malfoy Manor?"

"That I don't know. I'll talk to Tonks and Mad-Eye. Maybe we can just stage a raid instead of going through the Ministry." Remus was thinking out loud at this point.

"If we're going to stage a raid, I think the three of us should be there," Harry said while indicating himself, Ron and Hermione.

Remus looked uncertain. "That will be something for the Order to discuss. There will be a meeting tonight to talk about all of this new information."

Hermione noticed that Remus seemed very tired. "Remus, why don't you try and get some sleep? We won't do anything rash."

"Thanks, Hermione. I'll just take a short nap. The meeting will start at five o'clock tonight."

Hermione was sitting to the right of Ron in the kitchen of Grimmauld Place. Harry was on her left, and Fred and George Weasley were directly across from her. The meeting was due to start any minute. Minerva McGonagall had taken over as head of the Order of the Phoenix after Albus Dumbledore's murder.

Hermione shook herself to stop her mind from going down those memories. Just then, Minerva stood, and the room fell silent.

"Thank you for coming on such short notice. There has been a major development. We know for certain there are several steps that need to be taken before Voldemort can be vanquished. Harry, if you will please explain what you've learned?" Minerva asked as she moved to sit back down.

All eyes turned to Harry. Hermione squeezed his hand under the table as a sign of support. He glanced in her direction then stood.

"Well, Voldemort took many steps to make himself immortal..."

Having heard all of this before, Hermione took to watching the people gathered in the room. From what she could remember, there were more people here tonight than had been in the Order two summers ago. All of the Weasleys were present, save for Percy. Mad-Eye Moody was in the back of the room, his magical eye swivelling from person to person. Kingsley Shacklebolt was sitting next to the twins. He was listening intently to what Harry had to say. There were a few people on the twins' other side that Hermione didn't recognize. One boy in particular didn't look much older than herself. He was watching her instead of paying attention to Harry. She caught his gaze, but he wouldn't look away. Hermione felt decidedly uneasy after her staring match with him.

"I can't believe the Ministry won't send any Aurors to Malfoy Manor! Why on earth do they need more evidence?" Ron vented to her.

Harry was still talking to people in the kitchen.

"I don't know, Ron. We'll think of something."

"I'm with Harry on this. I think we should figure out our own way to get to Malfoy."

"We don't even know he's there, remember? He ran away with Snape. They could be anywhere," Hermione said in an exasperated voice.

"Who could be anywhere?" Harry asked as he entered the room.

"The git. Hermione says that Malfoy ran off with Snape, so Merlin knows where they are now."

"Oh, I'm sure Malfoy ran home. He would think he's safe there since his *daddy* was the one to put up the jinxes."

Hermione sighed. "Okay, Harry. We'll come up with something. I have a question though; do you know who the guy was sitting next to the twins? He had pale blond hair and looked to be our age. He was somehow familiar to me."

"I didn't notice him. Why do you ask?"

"I just got a weird feeling from him during the meeting. I can't explain it." Hermione shrugged.

Ron was looking at her oddly.

"What, Ron?"

"I didn't notice the guy either. He would have been sitting across from me, right?"

"Yes..."

"I saw you staring at something, but I couldn't figure out what it was. You looked very uneasy."

"It was probably my imagination. I haven't been sleeping very well," she said by way of an explanation.

"You sure?"

"Yeah, no problem. I think I'm going to turn in for the night." Hermione got up, hugged both of them, and walked to her room.

"Okay, we need to get to Malfoy Manor. We know it's in Wiltshire. Any ideas?" Harry asked them the next morning.

"Well, I think Apparition is out of the question. You aren't of age, and Ron didn't pass his test," Hermione said.

Ron glared at her.

"What about a Portkey? We could set it to take us close to the Manor and walk the rest of the way," Ron said.

"That's not a bad idea. Hermione, can you make a Portkey?" Harry asked.

"I've never tried, but I shouldn't have too much trouble," she said with a shrug.

"Alright, that looks like our plan. Tomorrow morning we'll Portkey to Wiltshire and try to get that locket back."

"Now, wait a minute! We should think about this. The Malfoys are a nasty bunch. What if we get there and the whole place is one huge trap? Or, better yet, if the mansion is under the Fidelius Charm? We could be standing on top of it and never know," Hermione commented before the others lost interest.

"The Malfoys think they are untouchable. They won't have their Manor under the Fidelius Charm. And Ron is a pure-blood," Harry said as if that explained everything.

"Yeah," Ron said, nodding in agreement.

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"The traps will be set for people who aren't pure-blooded. Ron won't set them off because he is a pure-blood."

"Perhaps, but I think we should sleep on it before making any actual decisions."

"Sure thing, Hermione," Ron said, moving out of the room.

"Goodnight!" Harry said, following Ron.

"Boys!" Hermione muttered and left the room.

Author's Notes: Thank you to my wonderful betas, GinnyW and snarkyroxy. Without these ladies, this story wouldn't be half as good.

As normal, reviews and feedback are welcomed and appreciated. Thank you for taking the time to read.

Chapter 3

Chapter 4 of 13

A proposition is made to Hermione.

The next morning, Hermione woke earlier than the boys. As she entered the kitchen, she noticed the same man who had unnerved her at dinner last night. They were the only two people in the room.

"Good morning," she said, making her way to the stove to make toast.

"Hermione Granger, right?" the young man asked from his seat at the table.

"Yes... who are you?"

"Someone in need of assistance," he replied, standing up.

He had a kind of grace that spoke of someone well trained in manners. She noticed that he had left his wand sitting on the table. That was odd behavior; everyone always carried their wand these days.

He had made his way over to her while she was lost in her thoughts.

"Follow me," he whispered as he passed by her.

Looking around, she couldn't see any reason not to trust him. He had left his wand behind, after all. Plus, the feeling from last night was gone, and her curiosity was getting the better of her. They were in Grimmauld Place, so obviously this man had passed the tests to get into the Order.

"Where are we going?"

"Out of sight," he replied over his shoulder.

He led her into the cupboard off of the kitchen that had once contained Kreacher's home. His nest was gone, along with all of the Black family heirlooms he had stashed away.

Before entering the room completely, Hermione pulled out her wand to be safe.

"All right, we're out of sight. What sort of assistance were you talking about?"

"A friend of mine is in a bit of a situation. He's a highly ranked man on You-Know-Who's side. This is all well and good, but he needs a little help. The Dark Lord is growing restless, he wants information on the great Harry Potter. You can help my friend in that regard," the man explained, looking at her intently.

"Who are you? You seem very familiar." She stared at him, trying to place why he was familiar. He had dark blond hair, which framed a square face. His features were subdued. He was not someone that would stand out in a crowd.

"I am an ally in this war. That is all you need to know for now," he replied and moved to stand directly beside her.

Hermione looked at him suspiciously. The only light in the room was coming from her wand, so the shadows made it hard to see his face.

"Will you help me, or us, rather?"

"What does helping you entail?"

"That is partially up to you. The Dark Lord will want you near so he can access your information freely. As to how you get there, that is up to you."

"You've used that phrase twice now. Only people in Voldemort's circle call him 'The Dark Lord'." She trained her wand on him, ready to immobilize him at any moment.

"Old habits, Granger," the blond drawled.

"Malfoy?" she asked.

"Oh, very good. Though, it certainly took you long enough," he replied with sarcasm.

She pressed her wand to his throat. "Give me a reason why I shouldn't Stun you and take you straight to the others?"

"You want to help me. It may just let us win this war. Plus, your sense of morals won't let you Stun an unguarded man."

"Let me guess, your friend is the dear, *former*, Professor Snape?"

Malfoy quirked his lips in response.

"It makes sense. But why should I trust you?"

"Because I wouldn't be here if my motives weren't true. You know what steps are required to be a member of the Order. I happen to be a full member, same as you," he explained, swallowing hard against the wand held to his throat.

Hermione narrowed her eyes and moved her wand away from him. "How will I get out to Snape without just disappearing?"

"You are going to my old home, aren't you? I can 'kidnap' you from there."

"How do you know about that?"

"That's my job, Granger. You would do well not to underestimate me," he said, his posture proving he thought highly of himself.

"You won't harm Harry or Ron?"

"Not unless I have no other choice. I can't promise you anything. If they get in the way, it's their fault."

Hermione thought for a moment. She wanted to help. Malfoy's statements were true about his validity having to be sincere. There was no other way he could get into the Order. Though, this meant that Professor Snape was innocent too. She sighed; everything seemed a bit shocking at the moment.

"Will you help us?"

"I would like to think about it. I need a way to know that you won't really kidnap me, or hurt Harry and Ron. What guarantee do I have that this isn't some elaborate plan to get me killed? Snape did murder Professor Dumbledore; you can't deny that!"

"We don't have time for that. This is a clever ruse to get you to the Dark Lord, but for the Light side's benefit. Take whatever measures you feel you need to in order to convince yourself that you'll be safe. But, I need an answer now. Severus must have something to tell the Dark Lord," Malfoy explained, watching her.

"Oh, I want to help, but I don't trust you, Malfoy. I trust your intentions because I have to, but you as a person, that's a different story."

"You don't have to trust me. Simply believe in my sincerity to see this war end. Severus feels the same."

"If he feels the same, why did he kill the Headmaster?"

"Because he had no choice," he said, turning away from her.

She looked at him for a long moment before softly agreeing.

"Thank you," he breathed, relief evident in his features. "You won't regret this decision."

"I certainly hope not."

Author's Notes: First, I apologize for the delay with this chapter. The holidays and computer troubles made it difficult to update. My wonderful betas, GinnyW and snarkyroxy, have my undying gratitude for their work on this story. Thank you, ladies!

Any and all feedback is welcomed and appreciated.

Chapter 4

Chapter 5 of 13

Hermione is kidnapped.

Hermione was seated in the kitchen when the boys arrived. She had already turned a spoon into a back-up Portkey. This was her safety precaution in case Malfoy and Snape really did mean to harm her.

"Good morning," she said as the boys sat down on either side of her. Their "plan" was to cast Disillusionment Charms on themselves and Portkey to Wiltshire. They had found a map in the attic that showed where Malfoy Manor was located. With that information, she could cast the Portus Charm and get them close to their destination.

In the entrance hall, Hermione felt as if they were being watched. Looking over her shoulder, she thought she saw someone duck behind a doorway. Harry and Ron turned to see what she was looking at.

"I thought I saw something," she whispered to them. She was fairly sure it was Malfoy, but for the boys' sake, she pretended to know nothing.

Harry nodded and tiptoed toward the door. He held up his hand, indicating for the others to stay put. Ron and Hermione moved their wands to a ready position and waited for a signal.

Harry spun toward the door very quickly, wand aimed to cast a spell. Hermione saw him take a step into the room. After a moment, he turned back to them and shrugged.

"There's no one," he said, walking back to where they were.

"Thanks for checking, Harry. It must have been Crookshanks or something."

"Well, let's go before someone finds us."

Hermione pulled out a piece of parchment. She held it out to the others, who each grabbed onto a corner. With a mutter and a tap of her wand, the world dissolved around them.

They landed hard in a copse of trees. Ron stepped back and landed on her foot, causing her to cry out.

"Sorry, Hermione," he mumbled.

Hermione noticed that Harry was the only one who hadn't stumbled.

"How do we know which way to go?" Ron asked once he was steady.

"*Point Me.*" Harry's wand spun until it faced north.

"We go that way," Hermione said, pointing in the same direction.

The trees were incredibly dense. They had to change their course a couple of times due to the thick undergrowth. Hermione kept asking Harry if they were still going in the right direction. Miraculously, every time she asked, they were still headed north.

There was a sense of anxiety that was getting more intense the closer they got to Malfoy Manor. She hoped that she hadn't got in over her head.

Twenty minutes after they started walking, the trio finally emerged into an open field. Off to the left, they could see a large manor.

"We're here," Harry said quietly.

"Let's rest in the trees before we go off to the manor," Hermione suggested, heading back into the trees.

"We don't want to be gone long, Hermione. The others will get suspicious and come after us before too long."

She ignored them and sat on a tree stump. Harry and Ron looked at each other, but thought it better to appease her.

"I just want to take five minutes to regroup. Who knows what will be waiting in and around the manor?" she tried to explain.

"Yeah, I guess it's a good idea."

Harry and Ron sat on a log a few feet behind Hermione. She heard a rustling off to her right. Turning quickly, she saw her "kidnapper" approaching her. Just as she was alerting the others, a spell hit her, and her world went black.

Hermione woke slowly. She could hear voices, but couldn't distinguish what was being said. Trying to sit up, and feeling a soft surface under her, she realized her wrists were bound to the headboard. Panic flooded her mind before she could control it. Her heart was racing and her breathing was shallow. 'Get a grip!' she thought fiercely.

The change in her heart rate must have alerted her captors, for she heard people coming into the room.

"Ah, she's awake," said a voice to her far right.

Turning her head to the side, she was startled to see Malfoy talking to Severus Snape. The professor looked a little worse for wear, but healthy, considering he was on the run.

"Well, hello, Miss Granger," Snape said, advancing slowly.

"Severus, why not call her what she really is? A filthy Mudblood," said the boy.

"Now, Draco, where are your manners?"

"Hmph." Malfoy folded his arms in response.

"You weren't so rude yesterday, Malfoy," Hermione said, glaring in his direction. Although, she was starting to doubt her decision to come here.

"You didn't know it was me, yesterday."

"Please, spare me," Snape said, moving closer to her. "You will learn to like each other, or at least tolerate each other. I will not tolerate constant bickering."

"I don't like anything about him." Hermione turned away and looked at the wall.

"Oh, but you should. We have more stake on your life than even you can fathom, Miss Granger."

"Where am I?" she asked, hoping to change the subject.

"Patience. We are at my residence. You are to be taken to the Dark Lord shortly."

"So soon?" She turned back to face the two men in the room. Her panic was threatening to take over.

"The Dark Lord wants to meet his new pet," Draco sneered, moving closer.

"Draco, be quiet." Snape turned to Hermione and said, "Though he is essentially correct, there is more to it than that. I am going to warn you, Miss Granger. The Dark Lord wants information just as much as he wants a toy for his Death Eaters. You have been placed in my care as a show of faith in me." Hermione noticed that his face clouded over with some unidentifiable emotion.

"Why does he," she glanced at Draco, "look different?" she asked after Snape finished talking. She figured that since he was giving information freely, she would take advantage of it.

"A permanent glamour. Even Mad-Eye Moody can't see through it."

"I thought I had gone mad when I could see you but no one else noticed you."

"Yes, I was afraid you would blow my cover. You certainly did stare last night," drawled Malfoy.

"How come no one else could see you?" Hermione asked, clearly confused.

"It's part of the glamour. I can only be seen by the people I want to see me. I'm wanted by the Dark Lord. I'm not going to be parading around like an idiot."

"Miss Granger, it is time. The Dark Lord wishes to meet his new pet."

"Miss Hermione Granger, a *pleasure* to finally come face to face." Voldemort gave a sarcastic bow as she was led into the room.

She held her head high. She would not give him the satisfaction of knowing how scared she was.

"Tales of your intellect have been reaching my ears for some time. It will do us well to have you on our side."

Hermione scoffed. "I will never be on your side."

Voldemort smiled. The gesture was one of the most terrifying experiences of her life. His smile told of pure malice and horrors to come. Hermione shivered.

Snape, who had been holding her wrists behind her back, squeezed her hand. She didn't know if it was an act of reassurance or a signal for her to control herself. Either way, it didn't work.

She turned her head to look at Snape.

"Look at me, girl! I am the only person on this earth you need to concern yourself with," Voldemort hissed with great arrogance.

Snape gave her a small shove, and she landed sprawled on the floor by Voldemort's feet.

His cruel laugh filled the room. "This is exactly how I want you: crawling at my feet. You are only alive because I want you that way. Your purpose here is two-fold. My Death Eaters are growing restless; you will provide excellent sport for them. I also require information about Harry Potter. My *faithful* have been dismal at bringing me information." He was sneering rather nastily by the end of his little speech.

"I have no information of any value," Hermione said boldly.

"I beg to differ. You are one of the people closest to young Harry. I know what he and Dumbledore were doing last year. I want to know how far they've gotten. You are perfect for that."

Hermione slowly stood up. Since she received no reprimand, she rose to her full height. Lifting her head, she looked directly at Voldemort.

Instantly, he was inside her mind, rifling through her memories and thoughts. The pain was nothing like Hermione had ever felt. She thought she would faint from the sudden onslaught. Just as soon as it started, the pain stopped. Voldemort stood there with a smug expression on his face.

"My Lord, what have you seen?" Snape asked from behind her.

"Nothing of any consequence to you, Snape."

"Yes, my Lord. I beg your forgiveness," he said while dropping to one knee, his head bowed.

"Rise and take this silly girl out of my sight."

Author's Notes: Thanks to GinnyW and Snarkyroxy for their wonderful work as betas.

Reviews and words of wisdom are always welcomed and appreciated. Thanks for reading!

Chapter 5

Chapter 6 of 13

A study in Occlumency.

"Well done, Miss Granger," Snape said once they were back at his residence.

She looked at him uncertainly; doubt was slowly making its way into all of her thoughts. "Why are you being civil to me?"

"Simple, you are my ticket out of this mess."

"How am I, a simple plaything, going to accomplish that?" Hermione asked, still skeptical.

"You will soon see. The Dark Lord is growing arrogant to the point of devastation. He believes himself indestructible. Yes, Miss Granger, I know of the Horcruxes. I also know that the Headmaster destroyed at least two." His gaze held hers. She felt as if he was willing her to believe him.

She looked away, uncomfortable under his gaze.

"What did the Dark Lord see tonight?" he asked, stepping toward her.

"I don't know. The images were going so fast. It hurt..."

"Can you not think of any specific memories?"

She shook her head, looking down at her feet.

"Will he always try to gain information through Legilimency?" she asked, thinking back to the pain she'd felt at Voldemort's intrusion.

"No, but that is one thing I wish to discuss with you. In order to keep what information you do know secret, we will need to work on Occlumency. Occlumency will also help

with some of your other tasks," he said, not quite meeting her gaze.

"Sir, what am I expected to do in these 'other' tasks?" she inquired hesitantly, the panic she'd been feeling suddenly flooding back. She was beginning to believe that she may be in over her head.

"Unspeakable things, Miss Granger. Truly unspeakable things."

"Yes, definitely in over my head," she thought in despair.

"Get up! There is no time for you to have a lie-in."

Snape's voice startled her awake.

"We will start your Occlumency training this morning. You have ten minutes to make yourself presentable." He quickly turned and stormed out of the room.

Hermione resisted the urge to stick her tongue out at the man. He could be so irritating! It didn't help matters that she couldn't figure out whose side he was on. He was certainly helping her against Voldemort, but why did he kill Professor Dumbledore if he was loyal? She sighed and got up.

As she was putting on her robes, she felt something in the pocket. She pulled out the spoon that she had turned into her back-up Portkey. Snape interrupted her thoughts as she was still spinning the spoon in her hands.

"I thought I said to make yourself presentable?" Snape asked. "And what, pray-tell, is that?"

She glared at him and said, "My precaution against you."

He looked at her for a while before turning and leaving the room again.

Hermione sighed, got dressed, and made her way downstairs.

"Sit." He indicated a chair and continued speaking. "Has Potter discussed Occlumency with you at all?"

"Not really. He mentioned that you had to clear your mind to be successful, but nothing else really came up." She shrugged.

"In order to Occlude completely, one must have tremendous concentration. Occlumency is the act of blocking one's mind from Legilimency through absolute control of the mind."

He was circling her chair slowly as he spoke.

"Miss Granger, imagine something that will consume all of your thoughts. Preferably an object or thing."

Hermione shut her eyes and thought of a field of heather. The pink flowers stretched out for as far as she could see. She could see them swaying gently with an imaginary breeze.

"Do you have your image? Can you submerge yourself in that image? Block out everything else. When you're ready, open your eyes."

Hermione took a moment and concentrated on her breathing and the swaying of the flowers in her imaginary field. Once her breathing matched the movement in the field, she opened her eyes to see Snape standing directly in front of her.

"Legilimens."

At first nothing happened, then parts of her field started to falter. Flowers were wilting and emotions emerged. She fought to keep the field, and only that, in her mind. She felt a greater amount of pressure, and the field collapsed. Memories flooded her thoughts. The rush of emotion was almost too much to take.

"Stop!" Hermione cried and tore her gaze from his.

"Miss Granger, you will have to do better than that. One slight shove and I broke through your shield." He shook his head.

"I want to try again."

"Get ready. You have three seconds. Three... Two... One... *Legilimens.*"

She tried to keep the image fixed in her mind. The gently swaying breeze was in time with her breathing. She could feel Snape at the edge of her mind, prying to get at her memories. She fought to push him out while maintaining the image of her field. She felt a sharp pain, and the field of heather vanished, flooding her mind with thoughts and feelings.

"No!" Hermione screamed, turning away from him. An image of her and Ron had been surfacing.

"You aren't trying. What is the matter? Do you want everyone to know all of your thoughts? I can read you without resistance; the Dark Lord will take great pleasure in pillaging your mind," Snape said, snarling at her.

"Legilimens."

Hermione attempted to gather her thoughts as quickly as possible. She just managed to get her field of heather back into her mind when she felt Snape's presence. She decided to try something different this time. She opened her mind, letting the flowers take over every bit of her. Who cared if Snape was poking around if all he could find were flowers? Soon, she felt him leave her mind.

"What did you do, Miss Granger?"

"What do you mean, sir?"

"I found no breaks at all. All I could feel was a sense of calm. And too much bloody heather."

Hermione chuckled. "Instead of concentrating on keeping you out, I decided to invite you in."

He gave her a shocked look.

"I mean, if all I thought of was flowers and nothing else, you could break through it. You proved that. I tried to struggle against you, but that made it easier for you, I think. So this time, I decided to think about nothing and let the flowers take over."

"Impressive. Though, you will have to work harder. Voldemort will know you're up to something if all he sees are fields of pink heather."

"Yes, sir." She was glowing with pride. Maybe this wasn't going to be so bad after all.

Author Notes: *I shall send chocolate covered Snapes to my wonderful betas, GinnyW and snarkyroxy. Thank you ladies for your work making this story better.*

Please leave feedback. Authors live for it.

Chapter 6

Chapter 7 of 13

A little more Occlumency followed by a meeting.

"How's the Mudblood?" The drawling voice of Draco Malfoy floated up the stairs to Hermione's sleep-addled ears.

"Draco, I have asked you not to call her that. You don't have to put on a show for the Dark Lord, and you hardly have to call her that for my benefit," Snape replied in a reproving voice.

"Fine, but you didn't answer my question. How is she? She ready for some fun?"

Hermione had started to make her way out of the room, but stopped dead. She'd completely forgotten about the 'fun and games' aspect of her imprisonment.

"Why does it concern you? She'll survive. Since you need her to survive, you should be happy."

Hermione quickly made her way down the stairs, feigning ignorance to their conversation.

"Miss Granger." Snape nodded in greeting.

"Professor."

Draco simply watched her enter the room.

"Good morning, Malfoy."

"Granger."

"Tea is in the kettle. We have much to discuss this morning," Snape said.

"About what?"

"The rest of your duties."

Hermione felt the blood drain from her face. "What will I have to do?"

"That all depends, Miss Granger. What makes you more uncomfortable torture or rape?"

How he could speak like they were nothing was completely beyond her comprehension. "Er, I don't think I can honestly answer that."

"Well, you'll have to pick one before tonight. Whatever the Dark Lord sees will bring you the most discomfort will be your task."

Quickly she said, "Then I will project torture. I think rape would bother me more... Well, I know it would. But torture I can live with. I can hold myself up pretty well," she rambled.

"That's enough. We will practice projecting when you have finished."

"I think I'm finished. I've lost my appetite...."

He looked at her before replying, "Very well. This will be different than our normal session. I will still be trying to break through your barriers while you project what it is you want me to see, but you will have other distractions." Snape looked over at Malfoy.

Hermione really didn't like the look in the younger Malfoy's eyes.

"It's payback time, Granger."

She looked to Snape for help, but he simply shrugged.

Standing up, she started to walk to her normal chair for her Occlumency training. It was times like these that she started to regret agreeing to this.

"Not today. This will be as real as possible. You will kneel or stand before me because that is how you will be in front of the Dark Lord."

Hermione refused to kneel. Unless she was forced, she would never show deference to that snake!

"Legilimens."

Snape never gave her warning anymore. As soon as she felt his presence, she shoved all thoughts out of her conscious mind. Her field of flowers was second nature to her now. The hard part was allowing only certain memories and feelings to pass through her barrier. If she could just turn her mind into a blank slate, this whole mess would be easier.

"Draco."

At the word from Snape, Hermione felt a sharp pain in her left foot. She felt her field start to falter as pain invaded her calm façade. Trying to ignore her foot, she focused on letting everything go. Another sharp pain struck her right shoulder. She could feel blood starting to run down her arm.

"Hands."

This time there was no pain. Malfoy had walked up behind her and laid his hands on her shoulders. The sudden contact almost shattered her concentration. Getting used to the sensation, the flowers stayed strongly in their place. She was completely unprepared for what he did next. Malfoy started making small circles with his hands, almost like he was going to massage her back. The touches became more fleeting the more time that elapsed. When he reached the nape of her neck, Hermione's concentration finally broke.

Snape pulled away as soon as she faltered.

"Draco, that's enough."

The caresses were gone in an instant. Hermione felt strange at the sudden loss of contact.

"You were doing passably. You need to always show memories through your shield. When you faltered, the memories ceased. That small mistake could cost you your life tonight," Snape warned, toying with the wand in his hand.

"Yes, sir."

"Let's go again. Draco, this time, don't wait."

"My Lord, she and I are here to do your bidding," Snape said while kneeling before Voldemort.

"Very good, Severus."

Snape got up and walked to his spot in the circle that had formed around Hermione. She was kneeling in front of Voldemort with her head held high. Her body hurt, and her mind felt raw from the training earlier, but there was no way she would allow Voldemort to know anything.

"My faithful, you will have a chance to play tonight. But first, my pet," the name sounded like a curse from his mouth, "what information do you have for me?"

"I have no information of worth to you," she spat.

A small and dangerous smile appeared on Voldemort's lips. "We shall see."

That was all the warning Hermione received before Voldemort was tearing into her mind. Severus had been brutal, but nothing compared to this. She fought to keep her memories private. Only revealing what she thought would appease him. The pain tore at her mind. Knowing that she could die was the only thought keeping her from giving in and letting Voldemort have free reign.

She saw a memory of her and Harry in the common room. Next was the first task of the Triwizard Tournament. She let some of her fear for Harry show through. A memory of Snape stalking around his classroom came next. A feeling of hurt pride accompanied the memory. The following thought, a worry about being tortured. She showed Voldemort what she looked like after her training earlier today. There was blood on her clothes and bruises were forming along her face. Pure terror was the only emotion she allowed to show for these memories.

The pain was gone as abruptly as it started. She was left dizzy and swaying in the middle of the field.

"Ah, your Gryffindor courage seems to flounder when faced with suffering." An evil smile was on his face, making him look even uglier than normal.

"My faithful, take pride in torturing this Mudblood. Seek enjoyment, but do not kill her. She will still be useful to our cause." Voldemort stepped back and stood to watch his servants advance on her.

"Always a pleasure, you silly girl," drawled a voice from behind Hermione.

A small sense of panic invaded Hermione's thoughts, and a shudder ran through her body. She hadn't realized Lucius Malfoy was out of Azkaban.

As if sensing her thoughts, he said, "My Lord fetched me just for this."

A spell tore through her left bicep, leaving a gash. She swayed slightly but made no other indication she was affected.

"You'll wish you were dead once I'm done with you," he whispered in her ear as he circled back behind her.

Hermione heard a whip crack just as pain lashed through her back. She fell forward, trying to get away. Her arms collapsed under her weight; the strain of the day too much for them.

"Oh, no, my sweet. You will take this standing up."

Someone had grabbed her arm and yanked her upward. Looking at the person holding her arm, she was shocked to see Snape. His eyes gleamed for a moment, and she felt a welcomed pressure on her mind. A sense of calm filled her, and she snatched her arm away from his grasp to keep up appearances.

The whip slammed into her back again, tearing her robe. Lucius Malfoy chuckled and whispered a spell. Hermione was startled to feel the cool night air all over her body. Malfoy had removed her clothes. She started to cover herself, but Snape placed a hand on her arm and tightened his grip in warning.

"Well, Mudblood, show yourself. We've all been waiting for this." Lucius leered as he circled completely around her.

Hermione saw Malfoy flick his wand and the whip turned into a knife. "Too bad my son is such an utter failure. He would have enjoyed this immensely."

Malfoy threw the knife to a waiting Death Eater. He was tall and broad. 'Not as big as Crabbe and Goyle,' she thought.

"Hello, chit. Are you enjoying being our toy?" the man said, trailing the flat side of the knife along her ribs.

With a sudden movement, the knife cut a straight line across the lower part of her ribcage.

She clenched her teeth in pain but made no sound.

The man simply chuckled and said, "Oh, don't worry, I'll be sure to make you scream before this night is out."

Author's Notes: Thanks to my dearest beta readers, GinnyW and snarkyroxy. Any feedback and thoughts are welcomed.

Chapter 7

Chapter 8 of 13

Hermione's recovery and Voldemort's wishes.

Hermione regained consciousness to find herself in a bed. She had no recollection of getting there, but was almost surprised to find herself alive. The man with the knife was the last thing she remembered well. That, and Voldemort laughing.

"You're awake," Draco said from beside her.

"Yes." When she spoke her voice sounded very rough. "Water?"

He passed a full glass to her.

"I have to go get Severus. Don't get up, Granger," he said as he left the room.

She heard him go down the stairs. The sound of murmuring could be heard wafting back up the stairs. She could distinguish the voices but not the words.

Hermione took a sip of water and tried to put the glass back on the table, but the movement sent waves of pain through her.

"Here," Snape said, striding across the room. He took the glass from her hands and placed it next to the bed.

"I gather there is still pain?"

Hermione nodded cautiously.

"Where? Be as specific as possible."

After a moment's pause, she answered, "Both sides, my left shoulder, my neck, the back of my head, and my right heel."

"Thank you, Miss Granger. Those places were particularly damaged. I will fetch a potion for the pain, then we'll look into why those areas are still bothering you to such a degree."

"Professor, how long have I been asleep?"

"Nine days."

She gasped then cringed.

"Try not to move; I will return."

"Has it really been nine days?" she asked Draco after Snape had left the room.

"Yes. We didn't know if you were going to live through the first three. My father and his 'friends' got overzealous toward the end."

"I'm glad I can't remember it," she stated, shaking her head.

"The Dark Lord wants you back with him in a week."

Hermione looked at him. "Why do you call him that?"

"The Dark Lord? Because I have to."

Hermione's brow furrowed as she tried to figure out his words. She didn't get a chance to comment because Severus came back at that moment.

"Take this. It should dull the pain." He handed a vial of blue potion to her.

"Thank you, sir."

She took the potion and drank it quickly.

"Now, Miss Granger, the Dark Lord wants you healthy in a week for another night of fun. I doubt your body will be able to handle it by then. I'm going to try to tell him that you won't survive another night like that, but that you are willing to give him information in return for his mercy."

"I won't tell him anything to hurt Harry. I couldn't do that."

"I didn't say the information would be truthful. I simply said you would give him information."

Hermione looked up at him. "All right then, what do you suggest I tell him?"

"We will discuss that on another day. Do you agree with this course of action?" he asked, looking at her intently.

"Yes..."

"Good, I have to go inform the Dark Lord of your condition. Draco will stay with you," Severus said as he stood. After a quick look at Draco and a nod to her, he walked out of the room.

Over the next week, Hermione divided her time between rehabilitation and learning to lie convincingly. She was decent at it, but her conscience kept trying to interfere.

She still didn't know what to make of Severus Snape. He seemed sincere enough when he was teaching her or helping her recover, but when he got in front of Voldemort he was a completely different person. The switch in personality was always instantaneous and dramatic.

Hermione couldn't fathom how he could keep his personalities separate to such a degree. He was always sarcastic, and more than not, he was harsh, but he was never cruel unless Voldemort was present. Draco had even stopped calling her Mudblood. In return, she started calling him Draco on occasion outside of her thoughts.

"Well, what do you expect? She's a Gryffindor."

"Draco, you were no better when you first started training," Severus replied, glancing at Draco.

She was waiting patiently for Severus and Draco to stop discussing her. They did this fairly often. Something would trigger a discussion, normally her inability to lie, and they would talk about her without acknowledging her presence in the room.

Hermione sighed. "Will you please stop it? I am sitting right here. You could actually talk to me about *my* problems with lying."

Her words seemed to make them realize she was in the room. Snape raised an eyebrow, and Draco tried to look indifferent.

"Well then, Miss Granger, what do you suggest we do about your inability to keep up a convincing lie?"

"Isn't there a saying that the best lies are based on truth? Instead of having me fabricate something, why don't I make something inconsequential into a big deal?" Hermione asked.

"What do you have in mind?" Severus asked.

"Harry hates his fame. What if I tell Voldemort that Harry's starting to become overconfident? We both know that isn't the case, but if Voldemort thinks he can easily take him...?"

"That is a sound idea. The only problem I see from that is the Dark Lord may choose to strike sooner rather than later. Potter has been training, but all of the Horcruxes have yet to be destroyed. A confrontation now would not be prudent."

"Does Voldemort hold much stock in tradition?"

"That depends."

"What if we play the angle that he's always attacked at the end of the school year. There is no reason to change that now. He's always been marginally successful in his attacks at those times. If we remind him of that bit and try to keep him from attacking too soon, we may be successful," Hermione tried to explain.

"That sounds acceptable," Severus said with a nod.

"Good evening, pet," Voldemort hissed in greeting.

Hermione stood tall, looking at the ground while Severus held her hands behind her back.

"Release her, Severus."

"Yes, my Lord."

Hermione didn't like the look in Severus's eyes, not at all.

His grip tightened on her wrists, and before she knew what was going on, he had thrown her on the ground before Voldemort's feet. She had to fight back the emotions welling in her. The pain was stronger from his action than the actual fall.

"Oh, dear, Severus. My pet seems to have grown attached to you."

'Damn!' she thought, quickly calling the field into her mind.

"My Lord?" Snape inquired.

"She was taken aback by your treatment of her just then. It seems she has *friendly* feelings toward you."

Severus simply stood there, looking at her with disdain.

"This displeases you, Severus?"

"Yes, my Lord, I wouldn't think to sully myself with a Mudblood," Snape sneered.

Hermione was submerged in her Occlumency shield, so she effectively hid her reaction to his words.

"Even in the name of fun? Well, we shall see." Voldemort turned his attention back to Hermione.

"What information do you have for me, pet?"

Hermione hesitated until she felt someone kick her. "Speak, Mudblood." Snape's cool voice entered her thoughts.

"Harry will be most vulnerable at the end of the school year," she said, sounding reluctant to speak.

"And why is that?"

"He will be unprepared for your attack. He will think he's ready, but his arrogance will get the better of him."

"So the fool thinks he will be ready to defeat me? Perfect." Voldemort turned his attention to Snape. "Come here, Severus. We shall call a full meeting."

"My Lord, I beg your leave after you've called the others. I must get this piece of filth back. She cannot stand any more fun for a while," Snape said with regret.

"You dare to take my pet from me?"

"No, Master. I don't want the others to think they will get to play when that is out of the question."

Voldemort narrowed his eyes at Snape. "Do not speak against me again, Severus."

He grabbed Snape's arm and pulled the sleeve back, revealing the Dark Mark. A touch of his finger, and the Mark flared black. Snape hissed in pain.

"Take the girl and get out of my sight."

Author's Notes: GinnyW and snarkyroxy deserve many thanks for their beta work. Thank you, ladies!

Please leave me a note telling me what you like or what didn't work. Any feedback is appreciated.

Chapter 8

Chapter 9 of 13

Feelings revealed and an unexpected visit.

Severus Apparated both of them back to his house. He dropped his hold of her as soon as she was steady. Gesturing for her to precede him, they made their way into Spinner's End.

"That went well. The Dark Lord believes Harry is growing arrogant."

Hermione didn't say anything, but turned so she wasn't facing him. Her entire posture gave off the air of someone fighting to hold back tears. After a pause, she started to go up to her room, but he wouldn't open the passageway for her.

"Miss Granger, is something wrong?"

"Oh, I'm 'Miss Granger' again? Not 'this filth'?" she shot at him, turning her head so he could see the tears shining in her eyes.

"What? Oh... So the Dark Lord was right," Severus murmured.

"What do you mean he was right?" she asked, glancing his way.

"In regards to your feelings for me," he replied slowly.

Hermione glared at him. "I do not have *feelings* for you. I was merely stunned at the violence of your actions."

"Miss Granger -- Hermione, I have to act like a Death Eater in front of the Dark Lord. If he had any inkling about my true motives, I would be dead. It is rather simple. You must not react to my facade. He will start to think there is reason behind your offense."

"There is reason! You were my professor. Granted you were cruel and snide, but you would never have physically harmed a student. That's a lot to just forget," she explained, wrapping her arms around herself for comfort.

"Typically, yes, but you know what I am capable of. I murdered Albus Dumbledore, or had you forgotten? No matter. You cannot react to my actions."

"Of course I hadn't forgotten! You've just been different here than I've ever seen you before."

"Something I must remedy if it will cause you to slip."

"No, sir. Please don't change. I like you more when you're not trying to intimidate everyone."

He quirked an eyebrow but said nothing.

Hermione turned quickly to hide the blush in her cheeks. She hadn't meant to admit she liked him at all.

The wall opened in front of her, so she made her way up to her room in a hurry.

"Miss Granger, I have something to discuss with you," Snape's voice floated up the stairway.

Hermione grumbled as she headed down the stairs. "And again, I'm back to Miss Granger?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You called me 'Hermione' earlier," she stated, walking into the room but avoiding his gaze.

She thought she saw a look of panic cross his face, but it was gone in an instant (if it had ever been there).

"What other information can you give the Dark Lord?" he asked, seemingly nonplussed.

She was sure he was changing the subject for some reason, but she didn't feel like fighting. Plus, she was confused by her feelings and his actions. Fearing what would be said should she speak more, she kept to answering his questions.

"I don't know. He hasn't asked to see me again, has he?"

"Not yet. He will, though, and we should be prepared."

"When?"

"I do not know. Probably within a couple of weeks, but he will probably force you to 'play' next time."

She swallowed hard, her fear changing her posture. "Will it be torture again?"

"Probably not," he said carefully.

Hermione closed her eyes and concentrated on keeping her breathing even. She didn't want to think about what they would do to her instead. A shudder ran through her body despite her best efforts to stay still.

"What about information, Miss Granger? You need something to be able to tell the Dark Lord."

"What about Peter Pettigrew's life debt? Has anyone mentioned that?"

"Excellent idea. I'm sure Wormtail hasn't mentioned it, and I had forgotten."

"That will have the added benefit of getting Wormtail in trouble," she said, smiling slightly.

"Too true," Snape replied.

"Sir, for my own knowledge, did you really call me Hermione earlier?"

She saw him tense at her question.

"Why does it matter so much to you?"

"I want to know I'm not going crazy."

"Then yes, I called you 'Hermione' earlier. It was an extenuating circumstance; you were distraught. I was trying to calm you," he explained a little too quickly.

She smiled. "Thank you, sir. I think I would like it if you called me that all the time."

He watched her for a minute, before saying, "Not at this time, Miss Granger."

A tapping on her bedroom door woke Hermione in the middle of the night. Curious, she rose to see what was going on. She opened the door a crack and was shoved back into her room.

"Draco! What in the world is wrong?"

"Shut it, Granger," he said in a fierce whisper, moving farther into the room.

He looked very disturbed. His normally perfect hair was in disarray, and his clothes were rumpled.

"What's going on?" Hermione said quietly.

"Lucius has come to call. Get ready to leave quickly."

Her eyes widened in shock, and she rushed around the room gathering clothes to wear.

"Why would he come here?" she asked while moving about.

"To check on you, of course. You're his new obsession. He also wants to see if Severus is treating you 'well'." The last word dripped with sarcasm.

"But, Draco, I can't leave. Your father would kill Severus for setting me free!"

"I have to follow Severus's orders."

"Pet, join us," Hermione heard Severus say a moment later.

Stopping cold, she glanced at Draco then she walked toward the door. She moved down the stairs with as much dignity as she could muster through her slightly shaking limbs.

"She certainly looks healthy." Lucius leered at her as she came into view.

"You called, sir?" she said, trying to sound submissive.

"Lucius wanted to see you with his own eyes. He is doubting my ability to take care of my things."

"Nonsense, my friend," Lucius drawled, watching Hermione intently. "The others are restless. I can now tell them that they will be able to have their fun soon enough."

"Yes, something I will take great pleasure in witnessing," Snape said, smirking.

"I must be on my way. Miss Granger, a delight as always." He gave her a mock bow, turned, and let himself out the front door.

"What was that about?" Hermione asked as soon as the door shut behind Lucius.

"I don't know," Severus said, shaking his head. "But it can't be anything good."

"Did you really order Draco to take me away?"

"Yes. I didn't know what his intentions were. I would rather face the Dark Lord's wrath for 'misplacing' you than for allowing a fellow Death Eater to kill you. Is Draco still upstairs?"

"No, I'm here. What did Lucius want?"

"To check on Miss Granger; I just don't know what his reason could be."

Severus was soon lost in thought. Not wanting to bother him, Hermione turned and headed back upstairs.

Author's Notes: Thank you to GinnyW and snarkyroxy for their wonderful beta work. Both of them are truly great.

Any feedback is welcomed and appreciated!

Chapter 9

Chapter 10 of 13

A few things come to light.

Two nights later, Voldemort demanded Hermione's presence at a meeting. As soon as they arrived, he attacked her mind. She barely had time to register her feet touching the ground before he was shoving his way through her thoughts. Thankfully, Severus had told her to build her shield before they left his home.

The onslaught subsided after a few tense minutes.

"Interesting. Wormtail, join me."

The small, quaking form of Peter Pettigrew made his way up to kneel before Voldemort.

"Yes, m-my Lord?" he stammered, his body visibly shaking.

"My pet has shown me something most intriguing. What do you know of life debts, Wormtail?" Voldemort's voice carried through the crowd.

A few of the surrounding Death Eaters shifted uncomfortably at this question.

"N-nothing of importance, my Lord. I know a wizard must repay a life debt when called to do so. But why ask me?"

A nasty sneer appeared on Voldemort's face. "Well, Wormtail, it seems to me that you are indebted to Harry James Potter."

Comprehension slowly filled Wormtail's features. His small, watery eyes started darting in all directions, trying to find a way out. "My Lord, I would never act upon a life debt to him. Never."

"You would be given no choice. Once Potter calls on that debt, you must repay it however he sees fit."

Wormtail frantically looked openly from left to right, shifting uneasily. Finding no way out, he said, "Master, Master... Please have mercy."

"Wormtail, you are a hindrance to my cause. I shall let your *friends* decide your fate." Voldemort gestured to the Death Eaters that formed a half circle around them.

Hermione could see Severus smirking under his mask. She dared hope that they would take their fun with Wormtail and she would be forgotten.

"A slow, painful death would be appropriate for a cowardly traitor," Voldemort said to the Death Eaters who were moving closer to Wormtail.

Murmurs of agreement passed through the crowd.

"Severus, take your turn first. Then get my pet out of here."

"Yes, my Lord," Severus said with a bow, moving forward.

Hermione let out a long, slow breath of relief.

Voldemort turned his attention to her. "Don't get too comfortable. Your time will come," he hissed as he walked away.

Once they were back at Spinner's End, Severus turned to Hermione. "You shouldn't have watched," he said, looking at her intently.

"It could have been me, sir. I had to watch," she replied, keeping her face a mask. She was actually disgusted and trying her best not to fall onto the sofa. Her body was shaking horribly.

"Stay here. I will return momentarily." He turned and stalked to his bedroom.

Hermione stumbled to the sofa and sat down heavily.

"Back so soon?" Draco asked, entering the room from the secret doorway.

"Yes. He saw Wormtail's life debt. Wormtail's punishment was more important than using me as a toy," she said with little feeling.

"He'll be dead then?"

"An astute deduction, Draco," Severus said upon reentering the room.

Draco turned and glared at Severus before taking a seat in the armchair across from Hermione. The only space left was on the sofa with her, which Severus moved to occupy.

"Hermione, the next time your presence is requested, things will not go as smoothly as tonight."

"I know. I'm worried he'll be bored with torture by then. I don't know if I can handle anything else," she said, not meeting anyone's eyes.

"We'll have to find something to help."

"I don't understand why people would lower themselves to that," Draco said suddenly.

Snape snorted and replied, "It doesn't matter that she's not pure of blood. It's a matter of power. The act of taking someone against their will fulfills their need for power and control. They have no control over their lives because of the Dark Lord, so anything they do that can regain control for even a moment is worth it to them."

"That's sick."

"Voldemort uses it as a tool. It's a way for him to keep his followers happy without giving them too much freedom," Hermione said.

"Exactly."

Hermione grew anxious as the weeks went by without a summons. She knew that the longer Voldemort left her alone, the worse it would be in the end. Severus even looked worried from time to time. She would catch him watching her with an almost pained look in his eyes.

She asked him once what he thought about when he got like that. He informed her it was none of her business and to leave him be.

He had been summoned twice since the night Wormtail was murdered. Hermione would wait downstairs for him on those nights to make sure he made it back. She felt that her very life rested on Severus's ability to lie to Voldemort. In her mind, waiting up for him was a way to show her support. When he returned, he would acknowledge her presence and go to his room, change, and join her on the couch.

Tonight, they were sitting on the sofa in relative silence. Hermione had a question to ask, but was hesitant to break the quiet of the room.

"Sir?"

Severus slowly turned his head to look at her.

"Truly, what do you think our chances are of winning this war?"

He seemed to contemplate his answer for a long time. "I believe that Potter will be victorious, but I think the price will be too high for him to bear."

"What do you mean, the price will be too high?"

"The death toll, Miss Granger. Potter likes to take responsibility for everything that goes wrong, even if it has nothing to do with him."

Hermione noticed the switch back to her last name. "It's 'Hermione', sir."

His eyes met hers before he nodded. "Pardon the slip, Hermione."

She smiled back at him. "That's okay, sir."

"Perhaps you ought to call me Severus. It may keep me from slipping back into the old habit."

"Are you sure? I'm perfectly happy calling you 'sir'."

He stood before answering, "Call me Severus."

He spun and walked to his room, missing the bright smile on her face.

Author's Notes: *I apologize profusely for my lack of updates!*

Thank you to my lovely betas, GinnyW and snarkyroxy. Please feel free to leave any and all feedback.

Chapter 10

Chapter 11 of 13

An attack and a revelation.

Hermione often wondered where Draco went when he left the house. He would sometimes be gone for days at a time.

She was sitting in her spot on the sofa one night when he came barreling through the door. He looked like he had been in a fight and only just managed to escape serious injury.

"Draco, are you okay?" she asked, getting up to help him.

"Yes, I'll live. There was an attack. The Order fought, but we lost some people." He was looking around wildly, as though expecting someone to jump out and hex him.

"We?"

"Yes, Granger, we," he snapped. "Where do you think I've been disappearing to? Out for walks because I need the fresh air? The Order's spy was gone, so I helped. I've been leaving information for them that Severus gives to me."

A soft 'oh' was her only reply. She should have realized that the Order was without any inside information.

"Where is Severus?" he asked suddenly.

"Oh, no..."

"Damn!" Draco exclaimed, turning to head back out the door.

"Draco, wait! You can't go back out there. You don't know if he's hurt or even there. We just have to wait for him to come back."

He stood still with indecision, looking from the door back to her before throwing himself into the empty armchair.

"Here." She returned from the kitchen and shoved a mug of tea into his hand. "Drink -- it'll make you feel better."

He threw her a glare before taking a tentative sip. "This is passable."

"Thank you, and I'm sorry I doubted your loyalty," she said, sitting down on the sofa again.

He nodded, taking another sip of his tea.

Hermione fidgeted for a moment, contemplating how to ask her question.

“Spit it out, Granger. I won’t break.” He sneered at her.

“Well, er, who -- I mean, you said...” she stammered.

“Kingsley Shacklebolt and Dedalus Diggle.”

“Oh,” she whispered.

She hadn’t known either of them very well, but knew that losing Kingsley would be a blow for the Order.

The silence that had fallen was disturbed by the front door suddenly banging open. Severus stormed in appearing to be in a towering rage. His eyes flashed, and Hermione saw Draco cringe.

“Of all the stupid things to do! Draco, how could you let them get away? Hmm? Answer me!” Snape roared in anger.

“Severus, what are you talking about?” Draco asked in a calm tone.

“The Death Eaters. You have the ability to become invisible. Why on earth did you not employ that and take the Stunned Death Eaters away? Have you no sense?”

“If you hadn’t noticed, I was trying to stay alive! The Death Eaters were not out to take prisoners. Kingsley Shacklebolt is dead, Severus. So is Dedalus Diggle. I didn’t have time to worry about getting the Death Eaters out.” Draco’s voice rose steadily throughout his explanation.

“Damn it, Draco! Lucius was one of the ones I managed to Stun. We could have locked him away, or better yet, seen that he got the Kiss this time.” As Severus finished, his face contorted with pain, and he grabbed his left arm.

“I have to go. Do not leave this house, either of you.” He spun and walked out the door.

Hermione was still sitting on the sofa, reading, when Severus returned. He went straight to his room and slammed the door without acknowledging her. She weighed her options and decided to risk talking to him.

She walked to his door and knocked softly. When there was no response, she knocked a little louder. Hermione was startled when the door flew open on its own accord.

“Don’t stand there like a twit!”

She hurried into the room and moved out of the way. He was pacing back and forth, his robes snapping as he turned.

“Things didn’t go well?”

He glared at her, but didn’t bother to answer.

Hermione huffed in frustration. “Why didn’t things go well?”

“Because we lost five Death Eaters in the attack, and Voldemort thinks there is a spy in his ranks. Naturally, he’ll start with the new recruits and work his way to the older members, but any wrong move at this point and my life is forfeit.”

“Severus, you’ve been a spy for almost twenty years. If he hasn’t suspected you yet, I doubt he will figure it out now,” Hermione said, trying to calm him.

“I want this whole bloody mess done with. I’m sick and tired of playing this role. If Potter doesn’t meet the Dark Lord soon, I’ll kidnap him myself.”

Hermione had to laugh. The situation wasn’t funny at all, but she didn’t think crying would help matters any. “Harry is biding his time. We only have a few more months, and then this will all be over.” She moved forward while speaking and put a hand on his arm.

He stopped and looked at her hand. His eyes slowly traveled up her arm until they reached her face. Hermione stopped breathing at the intense look in his eyes. She dared not move for breaking his gaze.

Hermione didn’t know if she moved first or he did, but they both suddenly jumped back as if burned.

“I--” she swallowed, “I’ll just be going, shall I?” And she hurriedly left his room.

“The Dark Lord wants to see you tonight,” Severus said, out of the blue, three days later.

Panic tried to invade her mind, but she maintained her calm and nodded. “For information or play?” she managed to ask through the tightness in her throat.

“Play. We will have free reign tonight as long as we don’t do anything irreversible.”

Hermione shuddered at the thought.

“Here, take these. One is a contraceptive. I hope we won’t have to worry about it, but I’d rather be safe than sorry. The other is a mild calming draught set to last forty-eight hours.” He handed the vials to her and quickly left the room.

Author’s Notes: Thanks to my lovely betas, GinnyW and snarkyroxy. I owe so much to you girls!

Any and all feedback is appreciated.

Chapter 11

Chapter 12 of 13

Voldemort proves his cruelty.

Chapter 11

That evening, Hermione didn't eat dinner. She knew she would only lose whatever food she ate once the pain set in at the meeting tonight. Draco and Severus sat in silence, trying not to watch her too much.

"Hey, it's not like I'm going to die tonight," she said, trying to lighten the mood.

"No, but you'll wish for it. Everyone held back last time; I know they won't be so lenient tonight."

"I have full trust in your abilities to heal me," she said in a quiet voice.

Draco cleared his throat, seemingly uncomfortable at the turn the conversation was taking.

"I'll be there tonight. I don't want to, but Severus asked me to in case he can't help you return."

Hermione's brow creased in confusion. "Why wouldn't you be able to bring me back?"

"If I have to participate, I'm sure you won't want me touching you. Draco will be there to take you if that should happen."

"I'm going to get ready. Thank you both," she said, trying hard not to think about what Severus was implying.

"Granger, why bother? Anything you could do will get messed up as soon as you get there."

"It helps me relax and focus on what is going to happen," she replied evenly, and walked upstairs.

"Hold on," Severus said to her, offering his arm.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped forward and placed her hand on his arm. A nod from her, and the world dissolved.

She managed to keep her balance only by tightening her grip on Severus's arm. As soon as she was steady, he wrenched his arm from her grasp. Sneer firmly in place, he moved to stand before the Dark Lord.

"My Lord," he said, bowing low.

"Rise, Severus. Is my pet ready for some fun?" Voldemort's gaze shifted from Severus to Hermione.

She held herself with grace. Her posture spoke nothing of the turmoil within.

"Do you have new information for me?" he asked, immediately invading her mind.

Images of Ron avoiding Harry swam through her mind. Her anger at Ron for being a prat followed closely on the heel of the images.

A few more moments passed before Voldemort pulled out of her mind and his gaze scanned the group.

There was a gleam in his eyes when he said, "There seems to be dissention among the ranks of the Order. This is good fortune, indeed."

He turned to address her again, "Now, my pet, you have done well. My faithful shall have fun with you tonight."

"My Lord, if I may have the honor of going first?" Lucius asked as he knelt on the ground, bowing his head.

"No, Lucius. You had her first last time. She needs to have energy left for the others. Severus, why don't you go first tonight?"

Hermione's blood ran cold. He had known this would happen; he had even tried to warn her about it beforehand. Closing her eyes, she tried to keep control of her shaking limbs.

"My Lord, I would be honored," Severus sneered from behind her.

With a hard yank, he spun her around to face him. A brief flash of something in his eyes seemed to beg her forgiveness, and Hermione gave a barely perceptible nod in return. She noticed that his grip had loosened considerably on her arm. She looked up at him, wondering what he thought she would do.

The next moment, he pointed his wand at her throat so that the wood dug into her skin. She tried to move away, but only succeeded in falling over. Snape took this to his advantage and knelt so he could pin her to the ground. He had conjured a hot metal brand. He hadn't touched her yet, but he was holding the brand just barely above her skin. She could feel the intense heat coming from the metal. The difference in the heat of the brand and the cool air made her shiver.

Without warning, he thrust the brand onto the exposed skin of her right hand. She cried out as the pain ran through her whole body. Hermione attempted to move away from him, but didn't get very far. She could wiggle and roll a little, but couldn't succeed in actually escaping. She started thrashing as he moved the brand to her other side. When the metal touched her skin, she let out an even louder howl of pain.

Smack!

Her head snapped to the side as Snape had backhanded her. "Hush, pet. You'll wake the neighbors," he said in a stage whisper.

Hermione vaguely heard the Death Eaters surrounding them laugh. Tears were pricking her eyes from pain and embarrassment. She blinked furiously, trying to stop them from falling.

"The pain too much, my dear?" In conjunction with his words, he was gently, almost tenderly, massaging her face where his hand had struck her.

This time the glowing brand seared through the fabric of her trousers before hitting her skin. Hermione bit down on her lip in an effort not to scream as the smell of burnt cloth and flesh began to make her ill.

"Good girl," he whispered so only she could hear. "I have tired of this game," he continued to the rest of the Death Eaters. "Who would like a turn? Crabbe? Goyle?"

"It is my turn, Severus," a gravelly voice replied.

Severus hesitated for a fraction of a second before replying, "Certainly, Dolohov. She's all yours."

Hermione woke to the sunlight across her face. She tried to roll over, but couldn't manage to find the strength.

"You're awake."

"Very good, Draco. You managed to say the same thing last time," she croaked through her dry throat.

"Here." He handed her a glass of water and a potions vial.

"Sleeping Draught mixed with a pain reliever," he explained at her look.

"Thank you."

She sipped the water to get her throat working again. When the glass was empty, she quickly drank the potion. As her eyes were drifting shut, she felt Draco take the glass and vial from her hands.

The next time she woke, Hermione was glad that the room was totally dark.

"Hermione?" asked a tentative voice from beside her.

She remained quiet for a moment, thinking of what to say. She knew it had been an act, but that didn't mean he hadn't hurt her more than just physically. Surely, he could have found other, less permanent, forms to "teach her a lesson".

Finally, she said, "Yes, *sir*?" She made sure there was stress on the title.

Hermione heard him sigh next to her. "I'm glad you're finally awake. You've been asleep for two weeks."

"Please, get out," she said suddenly, not caring if she was being rude.

"I will send Draco in."

All Hermione saw was a darker shadow moving toward the doorway. She thought she saw him pause, but couldn't be sure.

Once he was gone, Hermione let her defenses down and her tears began to fall.

Author's Notes: Thanks to my marvelous betas, GinnyW and snarkyroxy.

If you're still with me after this chapter, I can tell you this is the hardest one to get through. I thank you for reading and would love to hear what your thoughts are, including, but not limited to how horrible I am.

Chapter 12

Chapter 13 of 13

The aftermath in full.

"How's the pain?" Draco asked from beside her.

"Minimal, thanks to the potion." There was a pause before Hermione asked, "Where is he?"

"He' has a name. And Severus is downstairs. He won't come back up here until you ask for him," Draco explained, shaking his head.

Hermione sighed, looking away from Draco. "Good, I can't see him. He really hurt me."

"Well, you've hurt him too, you know? He's been moping since you sent him out that first night."

"Really? I thought he was impervious to feeling," Hermione said, bitterness infusing her voice.

"How can you say that? He didn't leave your side the entire time you were unconscious! And before you ask, he had left the room for two minutes the one time you woke up. Give him a bloody chance, Granger. I'm tired of having to deal with him on my own!" Draco stood and paced the length of the room, his steps heavy on the floor.

"I'm sorry, Draco. I just can't right now. I want to sort through that night without having to see him standing there. Can't you understand that?" She was fighting back tears as she ended her question.

Draco stopped and sighed. "Fine, just please don't keep him away too long. He's driving me crazy. For that matter, so are you." He flopped down into the chair by the bed, dropping his head into his hands.

"What would you have me do? I can't very well forget what he did to me! My head knows it was an act, but the rest of me is in shock as well as pain. He was so cruel, Draco," she said, staring at a spot on the bed.

"Do you think any of that was real? That he would intentionally harm you to this extent? You knew exactly what to expect before that meeting. We warned you about what you were in for ages ago. Severus said he even tried to let you go!" Draco's chest was heaving as he stared at her.

Hermione sighed, closing her eyes. What little she could remember from that night swam through her head, making her cringe.

"No, I know Snape's part wasn't real, but that doesn't make it hurt less. And really, what was I go going to do? Walk away in front of all the Death Eaters and Voldemort? Snape would have been killed right then, and so would I!" Hermione was wringing the sheet between her hands, just barely holding back her tears.

"So what now? You're both driving me crazy, but I guess I can see where you're coming from." Draco heaved a sigh before continuing. "Will you talk to him? Please?"

Hermione looked at him and sighed. "I can't tonight, Draco. It's still too fresh.... Please understand."

He stood up and walked to the door. "You should sleep. I'll be back after I talk to Severus."

She shook her head as the door closed, leaning further into the pillows. She had no idea how this was going to get any easier. Sighing, Hermione let her eyes fall closed, and soon she was fast asleep.

Hermione woke early the next morning. She looked around briefly and noticed that everything was dark. Not even seeing anyone in the chair beside her worried her a bit. Normally Draco was there for when she woke up. Trying not to panic, she closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths. She heard rustling from the foot of the bed and saw Draco moving to sit in the chair.

"There you are!" she said as he took his seat.

He jumped and turned to look at her. "Why on earth are you awake?"

Hermione shrugged. "I just woke up is all. Where is Snape?"

"Downstairs.... Would you like me to get him?" Draco asked, starting to rise from his seat.

"Oh, no need to do that."

He looked at her for a long moment before relaxing back into his chair. "Go back to sleep, Granger. You need it."

She didn't like being told what to do, but he did have a point. Sighing, she settled back against her pillows.

Hermione felt the sun streaming across her face and figured she had gone back to sleep. Blinking against the light, she noticed Snape standing in the far corner of the room. Draco was seated beside her in the same chair as last night.

She took a deep breath before speaking. "What time is it?"

"Almost eleven," Draco answered from next to her.

Her gaze kept drifting to the man standing in the corner of the room. He was watching her, but keeping perfectly still.

"There is still food downstairs, should you want to eat." Draco's voice barely registered through her thoughts.

She shook herself slightly. "Yes, I am a bit hungry."

She moved to lift herself to a sitting position on the bed, but before she could get very far, pain flared through her arms. She gasped loudly against the pain and let herself fall back against the pillows. In an instant, Snape had strode across the room, pulling a vial from his pocket.

"Drink this, Miss Granger." His voice was low but commanding.

Hermione took the vial from him and tipped it into her mouth. The relief was almost immediate. Sighing, she relaxed into the pillows. She looked up at Snape and simply let her eyes wander over his face. Swallowing hard, she said, "Thank you, sir."

"You should eat," the older man replied, moving away from the bed.

She nodded slowly, still not really trusting her arms after the pain. A moment later, a tray of hot food was being set on her lap. She opened her eyes and looked directly into her ex-professor's face. He stepped back quickly and gave a slight bow before turning and leaving the room.

Hermione sighed again before shifting so she was in a comfortable position to eat. She could feel Draco's gaze on her, but she was ignoring him for the time being. He cleared his throat as if about to speak, but she still wouldn't look at him.

Finally, he reached across her lap and stole a strawberry from her plate. The randomness of the action caused her to turn and look at him. He was grinning.

"Oh, you are tricky.... Now, what have you been dying to say since I woke up?" she said teasingly.

"Will you talk to Severus now? Please... I don't know if I can keep this up between you two. And before you say no because he 'broke his promise,' I'm the reason he was in here this morning. I asked him to please stand in the corner. We fought about it last night. I'm actually amazed we didn't wake you." A slight blush was creeping along his pale cheeks as he spoke.

"Thank you, Draco. I will talk to him because I have to. I need to get all of myself to heal, not just my body. It'll be hard," she said with a sigh, "but it needs to start sooner rather than later."

Author's Notes: Thank you to GinnyW and Soul Bound for beta'ing. I greatly appreciate your work!

Comments are greatly appreciated.