

The Serpent's Egg

by Azrael

A Time Turner Story. Finding Horcruxes is dangerous business and the trio are looking forward to a night at the Hogs Head. But then a Time Turner accident changes everything...

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Chapter 1 of 5

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The Hogs Head

'13th January 1998'

The temperature in Hogsmeade had dropped to well below freezing long before three young wizards Apparated to the outskirts of the magical village. The forest offered no shelter from the weather, and after seven months spent in the south, the trio found the bitterness of the highland winter a shock. The whole country had settled into winter, but heavy cloud cover had kept it unusually mild in the south and they had perhaps forgotten just how cold it got here.

Within a few steps Ron Weasley was tapping the toe of his boots hard against each heel in an effort to dislodge the snow and ice from the tread. The boots, like most of Ron's attire, had seen better days, but they were the newest of his possessions and were in better condition than Harry's footwear. He'd noticed this earlier in the week when Harry was taping his shoes up with black insulating tape purchased from a Muggle petrol station. Hermione had offered to try and fix them, but it was one of the very rare moments when her magic had just not been effective enough. Ron had dispatched a letter to his mother requesting new boots for Harry the next time he saw her, and he was secretly hoping that it would be in Hogsmeade.

As he pulled his coat tighter around himself, he thought that it was very possible that they all needed new clothes. They were looking more than a little threadbare.

As they approached the road, Ron instinctively turned back and reached his hand to Hermione who was behind him. She took it with a grateful smile, and she felt a little heavy, as though she were leaning her weight on him. It was a sure sign that she was tired, and he didn't blame her. He was tired himself. It had been a long day, and it was already dark in Hogsmeade. The darkness only added to his mood, and he wished that they could just rest. It was a wish that would be fulfilled imminently. It had been a month since any of them had slept in an actual bed, but tonight they were expected by Aberforth Dumbledore, who had promised to put them up for the night.

"Don't worry," Ron said with unconvincing certainty, "it'll be warm at the Hog's Head."

She seemed to visibly shake before him, and he rubbed his gloved hands over hers in some vain hope of warming her. She looked as though she desperately wanted to believe that he was right and that she shouldn't worry. But worry and fear and stress had become a way of life; it was too late to stop doing it now.

Ahead of them Harry was walking along the stone path to the pub. It amazed Ron that he never fell over. Harry seemed as sure footed as a mountain goat, and he never once looked back to see where they were. His gaze was fixed on the dark shape of the Hog's Head. There was no light to signify that the place was open, but that was not so unusual. Many businesses kept their curtains closed tight and the noise down; there was not much merriment to be had these days.

Looming over the village was the dark and foreboding presence of the school that had dominated not only the township, but the lives of the three who now walked in its shadow but did not draw near. They each missed it for their own reasons, but for the moment they said nothing. Ron knew that Hermione would ask to go there before they left the next day; he also knew that Harry would say no. Harry was avoiding Hogwarts as though his life depended on it, and Ron had put it down to too many bad memories. It wasn't until recently that he'd realised that Ginny was at the school and Harry was convinced that if he went there she would be in danger.

As if on cue Hermione called to Harry, her hand still firmly placed in Ron's.

"Are we going up to the school?"

"No," Harry called back. Distracted by a sound, he squinted in the darkness.

"Why not?" Hermione forced her own legs to move in the cold, and she approached him. "It seems ridiculous to come all this way and stay at the Hog's Head when we'd be safer at Hogwarts!"

Harry, who did not see Hogwarts as even remotely safe, marched towards her, his face a mask of grim determination. "If I go there," he said in a harsh whisper, "he'll think I've gone to see Ginny, and if he thinks I've gone to see Ginny, he'll think that I care about her, and that's the fastest way I know to ensure someone gets killed." He looked around, as though thoroughly expecting a Death Eater to jump out from behind a tree. "I'm not risking her," he hissed. "At the moment there is nothing at Hogwarts to interest him, let's keep it that way shall we?"

'He' was Voldemort, and Harry was right. Hermione closed her mouth and bowed her head, refusing to meet Ron's eye. He squeezed her hand reassuringly, and they silently followed Harry to the pub.

Hermione felt clean for the first time in a month or more. Opportunities to bathe had become horribly restricted to public toilets in Muggle towns. They were quick, perfunctory affairs that offered no pleasure and scarcely did the job. She had been dubious of the bathrooms at the Hog's Head pub, but was relieved when she found the modest little group of rooms, and indeed the bathroom was neat and clean possibly due to the fact that Molly Weasley had gone through and cleaned everything when she had discovered that they would be staying there. The three bedchambers were in a part of the hotel hidden from the public and had housed Professor Dumbledore when he had taken flight from Hogwarts more than two years before. Dumbledore's brother, Aberforth, was skilled in making places unplottable as it turned out, and Hermione found that she was breathing easy and feeling far safer than she had anticipated.

It was Aberforth who had informed them that Molly Weasley had been there. Not only had she cleaned, but she had also left a small pile of fresh clothes on each of their beds. With Ron's clothes she had also left a letter asking them to have lunch with the family the following day. Ron hadn't read the letter aloud. He wanted to keep the contents to himself for a little longer and pretend that Harry might agree to the plan.

Hermione idly looked through the clothes on her bed and smiled when she saw a pair of flannel pyjamas. She glanced longingly at the narrow bed with its multicoloured quilts and wondered how long it had been since she had been able to sleep for more than an hour at a time. It shocked her to realise that once again she was forced to think in terms of months rather than days. The thought that she might well get a full night's sleep that night filled her with a warm pleasure she could never remember experiencing, and her body seemed to instantly lag with fatigue at the anticipation.

A quiet knock at the door caused her to jump and brought back to her just how on edge she really was. When the door opened instantly, without waiting for her to call 'enter', the shock was replaced with a mild irritation at the loss of boundaries they had with each other. She was thankful that she hadn't removed the threadbare dressing gown that she had dragged all over Britain. But it was Harry, not Ron, who slipped into the room; she asked where Ron was.

"He's having a bath," Harry said. He needed one himself, and Hermione felt a pang of guilt at having taken so long in there. Harry idly lifted the corner of a set of green velvet robes folded beneath the flannel pyjamas and chuckled softly. "Mrs Weasley should be given sainthood," he said.

"I know," Hermione agreed readily. "If she were here, I'd kiss her."

"I'm thinking I'll keep watch tonight," Harry said, still looking at the clothes. "You guys need some sleep."

"Harry..." She looked at him and felt an intense sadness. He had decided long ago that it was his job to protect them, and he always kept watch, even when it was someone else's turn. How long had it been since Harry had shut his eyes? They were safe in these rooms; it was one of the few things of which she was certain. "No one knows we're here, no one can get to us. Just sleep, Harry. You need to get some sleep."

And the truth was that they all did.

"Aberforth is bringing some food up," he said as though he hadn't heard her at all. "I said we'd eat in my room."

He got up and left then, and she was sure he was going to needlessly check the wards on the rooms. She wanted to tell him to stop. She wanted to tell him not to worry because these rooms were unplottable and no one was going to hurt them.

She wanted to tell him, but she didn't because deep inside she knew that his vigilance made her feel safe.

Dinner was a quiet and tense affair. Hermione and Ron all but forced Harry to have a bath and had hoped that he would relax enough to enjoy it. He lasted less than ten minutes in the bathroom but returned to them thankfully clean and smelling fresher than he had in months. He'd put on clean clothes with them both sitting in the room, though Hermione had turned her face away to give him the privacy that he seemed not to need. Then they ate the dinner that Aberforth Dumbledore brought to them in silence.

"I got a letter from Mum," Ron said, coughing a little as he said it as though hoping to cough out any fear of a reaction from Harry. "She wants to know if we can go to The Burrow soon. The Order will send an envoy to protect us..."

"She's over the fact that we didn't get to the wedding then?" Hermione asked.

"Probably not," Ron replied reluctantly, "but we did miss Christmas. And I think she understands why we couldn't go to the wedding now."

"We can't go," Harry mumbled through a mouthful of food. "It's too dangerous."

"Hence the envoy to protect us," Hermione said.

"For God's sake, Harry, we'll have the Order crawling all over the place!"

"We had the Order and Aurors all over Hogwarts and they didn't stop Death Eaters getting in, and they didn't stop Dumbledore being killed. The Burrow would be nothing for them."

"What about Grimmauld Place?" Hermione asked, attempting some kind of compromise. "It's still unplottable, and the Secret Keeper is pretty secure..."

"Seeing as he's dead," Harry growled.

Hermione winced but pressed on. "We could all go there. Ron needs to see his family, and I think we need to see them too."

"You go," Harry told her. He prodded at his stew as though it was unpalatable, and perhaps his mood had made it so. "It would be better if you went without me anyway."

A suggestion that Ron and Hermione would simply never accept; they knew Harry too well to expect him to wait for them.

"We could all go," Hermione reasoned, "Grimmauld Place is safe! We have rearranged the wards to keep Snape out. We'd be safe going there."

And as Harry happened to have three pieces of Voldemort's soul rattling around in his backpack, he turned to glare at her. "I'm not safe anywhere," he hissed. "I'm getting these books from Aberforth, and then I'm going back to Derbyshire to work out where the next Horcrux is."

He made it sound so simple, though they all knew that it wasn't. Finding Horcruxes was hard work, and it had been luck that had seen them find and retrieve three. They had put themselves through ordeals that had caused Harry to realise that it was probable that he wasn't going to survive what was to come, and the darkness of this realisation had threatened to consume him. After a Death Eater attack on a safe house, he had become obsessed with the idea that they were not safe anywhere and that an enemy was lurking around every corner. If he had his wish, Ron and Hermione would not be here with him now. But then, they were his best friends, and if he was concerned for Ginny's safety, he was doubly so for them. At least if they were with him, he could protect them, as well as he could protect anyone.

Then there was the fact that he probably needed Hermione's brain. Finding and collecting the Horcruxes was one thing. As yet they had not managed to actually destroy one. Indeed, the locket they had located at Grimmauld Place had managed to blow three of Ron's fingers off and left him in St Mungo's for a week while they were grown back. It had taught them to be more careful. It had also taught them not to attempt to open one until they'd found out more about them. Harry was hoping that the books left in Aberforth Dumbledore's care would not only give them some clues as to the location of the last Horcruxes, but also some indication on how to break them.

Hermione wanted to tell him to relax. She wanted to tell him that they were safe here, that they could sleep, that they could see friends and family without fear, but she doubted he would listen to her and so she kept the thought to herself. She watched him return to his food, placing forkful after forkful into his mouth so mechanically that she doubted he could even taste it.

"Harry?"

They all jumped. They were there in secret and no one should have access to these rooms. Harry was up and had his wand out so fast that the intruder threw her arms up in an ineffectual attempt to shield herself from whatever he was about to hex her with.

"Harry, wait!" Hermione cried

Harry looked as though he would not stop, but his hand finally stayed itself and the visitor lowered her arms, still shaking from the shock of almost being attacked. Ginny peered out at them from within the hood of her cloak, pale from the fright. "I'm sorry," she breathed, still shaken. "I didn't mean to scare you."

Ron was up. Having not seen any member of his family in months, he was suddenly hugging her as though he would never let her go. Harry, on the other hand, was less pleased. He watched the reunion, the blood gone from his face.

"Mum said you were coming here, and I had to come and see you," she said, still holding onto her brother. "Aberforth has already checked to make sure it's really me."

"How did you get here?" Harry demanded with no joy at all. "What the fuck is McGonagall doing letting you run around the village at night?"

The smile faded from Ginny's lips, and she took a step back, releasing her grip on Ron's arm. It was possible that she hadn't heard Harry really swear before; Ron and Hermione were less fortunate, not that their own language had been any better of late.

Ginny blinked. She had obviously thought that Harry would be more pleased to see her. "I..." she stopped and swallowed and looked uncertainly between the three of them. "Professor McGonagall doesn't know I'm here," she said, "I took the one-eyed witch passage to Honeydukes..."

"Then you're a fucking fool!" Harry cried. "We have been living in ditches! We have been doing everything to avoid coming near you, eating out of fucking Muggle dustbins and holding our fucking clothes together with tape so that no one we knew could be put in any danger, and you risk everything so that you could get some kind of thrill out of sneaking down here? Have you gone fucking insane?"

"Don't yell at her!" Ron said, and he pushed Ginny behind him without really knowing why. Harry would never hurt her, but Ron wanted to shield her, perhaps from the bitter man that Harry was fast becoming. "She wanted to see you," he said hotly. "For some stupid reason she cares about you!"

"If she cared about me, she would have stayed at the school where she belongs!"

"Oh right, like you didn't use your Invisibility Cloak to sneak out of school when they thought Sirius was out to kill you? What makes you so very different?"

"Sirius Black was hardly Voldemort! And she should know better than me at fucking thirteen!" He rounded on her. "What were you thinking? What kind of fucking idiotic thought made you do this?"

"Harry, stop it!" Hermione grabbed his arm, but he jerked it out of her grasp.

"No!" Harry yelled. "Anyone could have followed her! It's not just her own life she's risking!"

Ginny ran. She turned and fled before anyone could think to stop her, and time seemed to stand still as the three of them stared in shock at the space that she had occupied. And then Harry took off after her, leaving Ron and Hermione alone to wonder just what had happened.

Ron swore but did not follow. Harry would find her and say sorry and ensure that she got back to Hogwarts safely. If they didn't meet with Ron's family the following day, he wouldn't see her again for Merlin only knew how long. He sank heavily into a chair. "I hate this," he muttered bitterly.

"I know," Hermione said softly, "I hate it too."

"Sometimes..." He looked at her and his blue eyes seemed glassy. "I'm so bloody weak," he said, sounding defeated for a moment. "Sometimes I want to do what he says. Sometimes I just want to leave him and go back to school and let all this crap happen around me... *and hope that we win*"

"Sometimes standing on the sidelines is harder," Hermione told him. "Waiting for something to happen can make you feel helpless."

"I already feel helpless," Ron replied, and he slowly shook his head in despair.

The pyjamas that Molly Weasley had sent were warm and wonderfully clean, and Hermione relished the feel of them against her skin. It astonished her that something as simple as clean pyjamas would feel like a luxury. Things she had once taken for granted felt so much like monumental acts of kindness that she could have cried. Clean skin, warm pyjamas and fresh sheets on a soft bed.

Ron had gone to his own room, desperate for sleep. They had kissed for a short time as they had taken to doing when they were alone. Then he had left, surprising her by not asking for sex as she had expected. Perhaps he realised that she would not say yes; or perhaps he just needed to be alone. Harry had been right when he'd said that they had been sleeping in ditches. They had huddled together for warmth and the feel of their bodies and limbs around her had become familiar things.

But it was good to be alone now, and she was sure that Ron felt the same way.

She was in the bathroom brushing her teeth when she heard Harry return with Ginny. She hadn't expected that. She, like Ron, had thought he would take Ginny back to the school.

"How long has it been since you slept?" she heard Ginny ask, but Harry's answer became muffled as they went into his room and closed the door.

Hermione returned to her own room and took stock of all the things that she held in high enough regard to carry around with her. A tattered bundle of photographs held together with string, a quick medicinal potions kit. A blanket with more than a few holes and a purse with an all too small amount of Muggle money inside. They had found themselves scavenging food from a skip behind a Muggle restaurant and, repulsed by the situation, they had resorted to stealing a handful of notes from the cash register of a bookshop. They had felt guilty about the theft, but it had kept them in cheap meals from grubby little cafes for a month and had even afforded them a couple of nights in a hostel. The few coins in the purse were all that they had left, and Hermione knew that they would steal more from another Muggle shop rather than risk detection by applying to Gringotts to change Galleons into Muggle money.

They had found safety by hiding in Muggle areas. Death Eaters could not fathom the idea of three powerful wizards willingly living amongst Muggles. That three of the wizard world's golden children would sleep huddled in back alleys amongst the Muggle homeless would never once be considered.

They had purchased a Time-Turner from a stall in the depths of Knockturn Alley just days after Harry had turned seventeen and Death Eaters had stormed their way into Privet Drive to kill him. That the Dursleys were currently living at Grimmauld Place under the protection of the Order of the Phoenix had amused them for weeks after. Hermione still occasionally caught a glimpse of Harry chuckling softly to himself when he remembered that fact. They had bought the Time-Turner on a whim, and it had thus far served them well.

They had discovered that collecting Horcruxes was a difficult business, often requiring more than one attempt, and they had gone back multiple times, breaking all rules of time travel in order to get them. The Turner was old, however, and they had been abusing their use of it. It had seen better days and was now in desperate need of repair. Hermione often wondered just what Professor McGonagall would think of their abuse of the device. She could hear McGonagall's voice in her head every time they pushed the boundaries of time and distance. "Terrible things happen to wizards who meddle with time." She was sure that they did. They had gone back days and weeks in order to correct their mistakes, and their bodies had started to rebel.

Hermione had decided that the human body was not designed to withstand the pressures of time travel. After their last journey, pushed back three weeks, they had found themselves ill from the strain of it. Their bodies felt stretched and thin, their innards strangely liquid. Ron had even coughed up blood, which had sent them all into a panic, but it had righted itself soon enough. Now the Time-Turner was broken. The pin that had held the hourglass in line with the dateline and charm had come loose, and no amount of tightening would keep the thing in place. She had taken to squeezing the whole device together between her thumb and forefinger to hold the tension on the pin. It made the travel awkward and slightly out of alignment, but it still worked.

She hoped to take it to Hogwarts and have someone look at it. It was not something that they could just drop into any shop and have repaired, and if Voldemort discovered what they were doing, he would no doubt use it to his own advantage. She stroked the metal in a loving way. She had become quite attached to it, and somehow the fact that she was the only one who could keep it going made it even more special to her.

She yawned. She needed to sleep, and once again she found herself staring at the inviting bed. She extinguished the light and finally allowed herself to sink into the comfort that she knew awaited her. She could not sleep, however. She found herself lying in the dark, wishing that the mythical sandman would come and throw dust in her eyes. She listened to the sounds of the night. From downstairs came the unmistakable sounds of a busy pub; outside she heard an animal howl from the Forest. In the room next to hers, Harry and Ginny were talking. She could not make out the words, but Harry was at least no longer shouting.

And then Ginny cried out. Loud enough that Hermione sat bolt upright in her bed, ears straining for the sounds of a scuffle. She reached for the wand under her pillow, her mind whirling through the possibility that they may have been found, that they could all be in danger, that Harry and Ginny had been attacked.

And then Ginny cried out again, softer this time, a sound less fearsome and more intimate.

The realisation that Harry and Ginny were making love struck her hard, and she sat painfully still in the bed. She didn't know why, but a sudden wave of nausea rushed through her and her stomach began to churn painfully. She was not in love with Harry. She was not jealous of them. But it was as though this final loss of innocence signified that the last shreds of his childhood were being thrown off and left behind. And as the childhood passed away, the man emerged, and as a man he was one step closer to his death.

Hermione buried her face in her hands and cried.

Hermione woke later than she meant to. After struggling to get to sleep, she found that once there her body demanded that she stay there. When she finally emerged from her room, freshly dressed in the robes Molly Weasley left for her and hoping that Harry didn't demand she change back into her old jeans and jumper, she found Harry and Ron at breakfast in the little sitting room. The fire burning in the grate had made the room comfortably warm, so much so that Hermione instantly felt relaxed and could easily be lulled back to the sleep she had so enjoyed.

The warmth of the fire bore no resemblance to the atmosphere in the room however, and she soon found herself seated between two silent men more intent on pushing food around their plates than conversing with each other. Ginny was gone, escorted back to Hogwarts by a furious McGonagall and two Aurors. Harry and Ron were sitting across from each other, refusing to meet each other's eye.

Harry did, in fact, look troubled. Not exactly the expression Hermione had expected given that he had apparently lost his virginity the previous night. He jabbed at his eggs, lost in his own thoughts and looking very much as though he had done the unforgivable. A feeling no doubt encouraged by the fact that Ron was glaring at him as though he had indeed done the unforgivable. Hermione had to wonder if Ron was angry because Harry had had sex with his sister, or because Harry had lost his virginity first.

Ron gave her a resentful look that swung her opinion to the latter and she sat down at the table, determined to have some breakfast herself.

"Did you sleep well?" she asked, thinking to perhaps start the fight for them and thus get it out of the way.

"Fine," Ron muttered.

Harry said nothing, although Hermione thought she could distinguish a pink blush bloom on his pale cheek.

"Ginny got back to Hogwarts then?" she pressed on.

"Yes," Harry whispered hoarsely, bowing his face a little closer to his plate, "McGonagall came and got her."

Ron grunted and shuffled around in his chair indignantly.

"Aberforth gave me the books last night," Harry said, steering the conversation away from the previous evening.

"Before or after you fucked my sister?" Ron demanded suddenly.

Harry swallowed; evidently the argument was not going to be avoided. "Before," he said, his voice diminishing a little.

"I see. You shout at her, call her a 'fucking fool', and then you go after her, stopping long enough to get some books from Aberforth Dumbledore, and when you finally manage to catch up with her, you fuck her?"

Harry stared, cleared his throat, and drew a deep breath. "No. I shouted at her, went after her and talked to her, then when we came back I got the books off Aberforth and then I..." He looked uncomfortable. "And then I had sex with her."

"How proud you must be," Ron said bitterly, "belittling her and then taking advantage of her..."

"I did *not* take advantage of her!"

Ron looked away.

"I'm sorry," Harry said with a sigh, "I'm sorry I didn't ask your permission before..." He scowled. "No, actually I'm not. I didn't plan it, it just happened and it was *nice*. It was just nice to be with someone who wasn't trying to kill me or hurt me or even protect me. She just wanted to be with me, and I'm sorry if it pisses you off, but I'm not sorry it happened!"

"You should have said he gave you the books," Ron replied, changing the subject, deciding to let it drop. "We could have been off earlier."

"I thought we could use the rest," Harry said quietly. "I thought you and Hermione could go and see your parents and catch me up later."

"If we separate now, we won't be able to find you again," Ron muttered.

"That probably wouldn't be a bad thing."

They fell silent again, and the tension fast became palpable. Hermione could feel her heart begin to thump painfully behind her breast. He was going to tell them to leave. How could he tell them to leave?

"You'd be safer at Hogwarts," Harry said carefully. "Your families would be happier knowing that you were safe."

"My family would be happier if they knew I was helping to keep you safe," Ron said getting up from the table and his breakfast and walking to the door.

For a moment Harry looked stricken at Ron's anger, but then Ron looked back and glared at him fiercely.

"I'm not leaving you," he said. For a moment he looked as though he might break down entirely, and his voice seemed to crack as he swallowed back a sob. "I'm not going to be someone who picks up the *Daily Prophet* and reads that they found your body in some canal..."

"And what? You'd rather be in the canal with me?"

Ron suddenly flashed a brilliant smile, but his voice was far from happy. "Don't treat us like we're Neville Longbottom and Luna Lovegood, desperate to come along for the ride. We love you. And it's not some fleeting little fancy because you're 'Harry Potter: Hero.' We have stuck with you through everything, so don't belittle us by telling us to leave you. We gave up being safe when we helped you put a three-headed dog to sleep more than six years ago, and we're not leaving you now. So stop telling us that we would be better off without you. You might be the one that they call a hero, but we have been there every step of the way. Don't insult us by telling us we need to stay safe now... and yes, I'd rather be lying in the fucking ditch with you than be alive and trying to mourn you."

"I'm sorry..."

Ron opened the door and turned back before leaving the room. "And stop saying sorry," he said, and then he closed the door.

After breakfast, Harry had relented and agreed to go to the Three Broomsticks and see the Weasleys. His first instinct had been to induce them to go to the Hog's Head, but Arthur sent word back that it would be unusual in the extreme for the entire Weasley clan to tramp into the Hog's Head on a Wednesday afternoon. He seemed to share Harry's concern for their safety and quickly organised a private room at the Three Broomsticks; he instructed the trio to arrive with their hoods up, something that was fortunately not unusual in Hogsmeade these days.

They dressed in the cleanest clothes they owned, which were the robes that Molly Weasley had left for them, and threw their old travel clothes into Ron's bag. None of them wanted Molly to fret that they weren't taking care of themselves, and to arrive smelling like three months of stale sweat would no doubt cause her to faint dead away. They wanted to appear calm and well, as though they were in the middle of some kind of wonderful adventure and not a filthy war that would probably kill them. Their plan was set. After visiting with the Weasleys, they would return to what had become their normality. They would find the last of the Horcruxes, and then they would set about trying to destroy them. After that they would finally face their enemy, and despite their fear, they all agreed that having an enemy that was tangible was preferable to all of the hiding and searching they had been doing.

Their moods had lifted a little since breakfast but both Ron and Harry were still looking angry. Hermione had decided that the best thing she could do would be to attempt to placate them both, but she had never been particularly diplomatic and was more inclined to tell them both to get over it. She doubted such advice would help, however, and so her method of placation was to remain silent.

They left the Hog's Head by the path that skirted the Forest and would take them around to the Three Broomsticks by the back way. Frost had made the path from the pub slippery, and once again Hermione and Ron were clutching at each other's arms to steady themselves while Harry walked on ahead. Harry turned back for the briefest glance, ensuring that they were indeed still safe, and arched an eyebrow at the cautious way they were treading along the icy path. He realised too late that he really should be doing the same thing. He slipped and fell as he turned, surprising his companions almost as much as himself as he fell and landed heavily on his arse. He blinked at the sudden flare of pain and stupidly wanted to cry; instead he struggled to gain his feet, swore violently, and shrugged of their concerned offers of assistance.

He silently wished that one of them would fall too so that he would not feel like such a twit, and it was a bitter wish that was almost instantly rewarded as Ron slipped and fell, pulling Hermione down with him. Harry actually allowed himself a moment of vindictive pleasure before reaching out to help them up. Hermione's bag had spilled open and her meagre possessions were spread around them, some had even rolled down into the little gully that bordered the path. Harry wondered why she was carrying so much junk around with her.

Ron was up easily enough, but Hermione gained her feet with a painful groan and she clutched at her left side. Harry's inner smile faded as he realised that she was really hurt.

"Shit, Hermione," Ron panted as he reached for her. "Harry, she's hurt!"

"I'm alright," Hermione protested, "I just landed the wrong way. I probably just bruised something."

"And what if you've broken something?" Ron asked. He looked around at Harry. "She's in pain!"

"Your mum is good at Healing spells," Harry said a little dubiously. "She'll know what to do."

"We could take her up to Madam Pomfrey."

Harry didn't look convinced. "We'll see what your mother says," he replied.

Ron looked very much torn between his dedication to Harry and his caring for Hermione.

"Your mother will probably make us go to Madam Pomfrey anyway," Harry reasoned.

Ron visibly relaxed and ignored Hermione's protests that she was fine. They began retrieving her possessions from the ground, Harry and Ron throwing whatever they found into her bag. Hermione herself was a little more careful. Her purse and wand she quickly stuffed into the pocket of her robes. She quickly pushed tissues, scraps of parchment and a battered old quill into the same pocket before realising that down the embankment lay a box of tampons, her spare socks and a pair of knickers that were grubbier than she would like to admit to. She slipped down the embankment to collect them and found the abused Time-Turner lying on the frozen ground.

Up on the path Harry and Ron had picked up her journal and her secret supply of chocolate, which they promptly began sharing.

"Are you alright?" Harry called down the embankment. "You shouldn't have gone down there; I would have done it..."

Pushing the dirty knickers into her overstuffed pocket, she was grateful that he hadn't.

"Do you need help getting up?"

She grinned up at them. "No, I'm fine." She reached for the Time-Turner.

"What's that?"

"Time-Turner..." She bent to get the Turner and winced, berating her timing. Why did she have to injure herself just before they went to see Molly Weasley, who would no doubt have her bedridden for a week? She picked up the Turner and groaned.

None of them realised that it was turning until it was too late. Hermione thought she heard Harry call out her name; in fact she was sure of it. But it didn't matter, by the time she realised what was happening, Harry and Ron were gone and the world around her began to spin.

Going Back

Chapter 2 of 5

A Time Turner Story...

Chapter 2

"Poor girl. She looks sick."

Hermione wasn't sure if she had actually heard the voice, but if she looked sick, she certainly felt it.

"She looks more like a bad waste of good robes if you ask me."

Heat raced up her spine so hot, and fast, that she feared her insides would flow from her mouth as molten liquid.

"Oh, Lucius, don't be so cruel! She doesn't look very old. Perhaps she came from the school. Did they have a Hogsmeade weekend, do you know?"

"How do you suppose I would know, Narcissa? I don't keep the bloody Hogwarts timetable posted on my wall like some kind of pervert. I wouldn't be at all surprised if she does come from the school, the place has gone to hell since Albus Dumbledore took over."

Hermione's eyes snapped open, and she drew a sharp, painful breath.

"Are you alright? You must've had a fall."

She rolled her eyes to take in the owner of the voice and took another sharp lungful of air. Her mouth worked wordlessly open and closed until finally, realising she had no words that could help her, she stopped and simply stared. Where was Harry? Had they killed him? Where was Ron?

"Did you come from the school? I can take you up there if you need me to."

Hermione frowned, her eyes narrowing at the woman kneeling beside her. She was not the person Hermione thought her to be. This could not possibly be Narcissa Malfoy. Narcissa Malfoy would curse her with an Unforgivable; Narcissa Malfoy would not be offering to assist her back to school. And now that she looked at her, this woman was far too young. She was not a great deal older than Hermione. The same age as Fleur perhaps, but certainly no older. She was pretty, in a heavy lidded sort of way, and her pale blonde hair had been curled into immaculate ringlets that fell graciously from beneath a pretty velvet hat adorned with jewels and feathers.

Too young to be Narcissa Malfoy. This was just some poor girl who bore a striking resemblance to Narcissa Malfoy.

"Oh for pity's sake, just leave her there, Cissa! She's lying in a ditch behind the Hog's Head. She probably passed out drunk!"

Hermione looked the man up and down and this time could not deny the identity. This was certainly Lucius Malfoy. He was bigger than his son, broader than him, but Lucius Malfoy looked like his offspring. Those same sharp features, the same grey eyes. But this Lucius Malfoy was young; Hermione placed him somewhere in his mid twenties.

Oh, dear God, how far back have I gone?

"You look as though you've seen a ghost," Narcissa said with concern.

Hermione shook her head, and testing herself, she sat up. "Mrs. Malfoy?" she asked, hoping against hope that she was wrong.

The woman laughed in disbelief and looked up at her companion. *Mrs. Malfoy?* She laughed again. "Did you hear, Lucius? She called me Mrs. Malfoy?" She turned back to Hermione. "Do I know you?" she asked.

"Well, if she does," Lucius drawled, "it can't be well. She doesn't know that the wedding isn't for another six months, *and* she looks as though she has dragged herself through the hedgerows."

"I'm sure she hasn't," Narcissa said, shocked at his tone. "You said yourself that the robes are good quality!"

Lucius looked astonished at her interpretation of his earlier insult, and he cast a critical eye over Hermione, who was still terribly lost for words.

"We should take her up to the school," Narcissa said. "I think she has hurt her head ... she isn't saying anything."

"I ..." Hermione closed her eyes. Her throat felt raw, and the strange molten feeling in her stomach seemed to bubble its way up through her chest. "I'm fine," she rasped. "What ... what day is it?"

Lucius raised a sceptical eyebrow and looked at Narcissa as though his assessment of Hermione's drunken state had just been confirmed.

"You must've hit your head very hard," Narcissa told her, refusing to be goaded by her husband to be. She seemed to scan Hermione's head for a bump or bruise. "It's Sunday morning."

Hermione bit down on her lip and knew that she was about to sound insane. "What ... what *fate* is it?"

"Oh for pity's sake, Narcissa! She's drunk! Leave her there before she asks for money."

"It's Sunday, the third of December," Narcissa replied, ignoring him completely.

"*The year*," Hermione said as urgently as her throat would allow. "Please, what is the year?"

Narcissa finally hesitated. She stood uncertainly, and stepped back towards the safety she perceived in Lucius. "Nineteen seventy-eight" she said, sounding more than a little confused.

1978? How was that possible?

Hermione felt the Time-Turner in her hand for the first time since becoming aware of her surroundings. It felt somehow gritty and hot. She looked to her palm, and found that the gold metal of the device had blackened. The hourglass was broken, and the sand had spilled into her hand; it covered her fingers with black grit. So it had only stopped turning because it had broken. Merlin only knew how far she would have gone had it stayed intact.

Her recollection of what had happened was confused. She could remember that it had started turning. She could also remember Harry calling out her name. Her own arrogance and belief in her abilities had convinced her that she could stop the thing. She would go back a matter of hours and would simply wait until the event took place. Then she would approach Ron and Harry, laughing at her idiocy, and that would be that. But she had not been able to stop the hourglass from turning, and as the world around her began to spin, all became a blur. She had passed out under the pressure of the journey, and here she was, twenty years in the past.

Somehow she did not think she could simply wait this out.

She was alone, with no Harry or Ron to help her. They weren't alive. They hadn't even been thought of yet. Just as Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy had not yet conceived of a son, and Hermione herself had not yet been born. She was not alive yet.

This was not possible.

She had no idea of what to do. All she had was a broken Time-Turner that was less than useless in its current condition. She had no money and nowhere to go. Was Aberforth Dumbledore working at the Hog's Head in 1978? And if he was, could he possibly help her?

She chewed at her thumbnail. Aberforth was hardly reliable, even Dumbledore had doubted his ability to read.

But *Albus* Dumbledore could read. *Albus* Dumbledore could do a great many things. And Albus Dumbledore was alive in 1978. Alive and well and Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry!

"I fell," Hermione said quickly, ignoring the pain in her body and pushing herself upright. "I was going to the Shrieking Shack it was a dare and I fell. I must've hit my head."

"Are you from the school then?" Narcissa asked, still looking at Hermione with some concern.

"Yes ... yes." Hermione gave them what she hoped was a disarmingly helpless smile. "I'm not supposed to be down here. Professor Dumbledore is going to kill me if he finds out."

Lucius snorted in a derogatory way, leaving Hermione in no doubt as to his opinion of the Headmaster. At Narcissa's urging he stepped forward and offered his hand to help Hermione to her feet. Hermione had to fight the urge to shrink away from the hand. She closed her eyes, and placed her hand in his, and was surprised at how cool it was. He steadied her as she stood, and once he was sure she was stable, he retracted his arm and pushed his hand into his pocket.

Narcissa began to make sounds as though she would insist on accompanying Hermione back to the school, and Lucius began to fidget impatiently.

"You are capable of getting yourself back to school, aren't you?" he asked with barely disguised hostility.

"Lucius!" Narcissa cried.

"We have Christmas shopping to do, *and lunch* ... and she is perfectly well!"

"She's hurt!"

"Merlin's balls, Narcissa! You have to learn that not everyone needs to be saved! She's hardly one of those stray Kneazles that you seem to collect!"

Hermione sucked air in with such shock that she began to cough. "I'm fine, really I am," she said in the face of Narcissa's renewed concern. "I'll just go back to the castle ... I really don't need any help."

"You see, she is perfectly capable of getting herself back to the school."

"Yes. Absolutely. Thank you for your *kindness*." She looked pointedly at Lucius, who sneered back at her. "Please, have a very merry Christmas."

But Narcissa was not to be dissuaded. She glared at Lucius, and indicated Hermione's hand burnt by the Time-Turner and looking a little raw. "You're hurt," she reasoned, "and we will take you up to the school."

Lucius seemed to realise that he wasn't going to change her mind, and Hermione quickly decided that if Lucius wasn't going to stop Narcissa, then she stood less chance still. She smiled politely and resigned herself to the fact that Narcissa Black was going to help Hermione Granger back to Hogwarts.

The Hogwarts of 1978 appeared very much the same as the Hogwarts of 1998, which Hermione supposed should not surprise her considering it had stood there for over one thousand years. Twenty years was nothing to this place. She could only wish that it was nothing to her. With every step closer she could feel her body rebelling against her. Her heart seemed to race erratically, and she was slowly becoming convinced that her gut had indeed liquefied during the journey back. She found herself sweating uncomfortably, and she almost wished that it was someone other than Lucius Malfoy walking lazily behind her, because she honestly felt she could faint.

She was not going to allow any of this to show, however. She was going to continue to the castle and assure the couple with every step that she was perfectly well.

She found herself grateful that she had dressed herself in the robes that Molly Weasley had left at the pub for her. Had this happened the day before, she would have been dressed in her dirty jeans and jumper, not to mention that filthy jacket with the holes. She was fortunate that the robes covered her scuffed and ruined boots. She doubted that the future Mrs Malfoy would have come anywhere near her in such attire, and Hermione had no doubt that Lucius Malfoy would have cast a hex rather than help her up.

Narcissa had helped her, however, and she was now conscientiously escorting her to Hogwarts. Lucius was trailing along behind them, and Hermione had to resist the urge to turn and look at him. He was better looking than Draco, she decided, not that she had ever really looked at Draco with anything but contempt, and it was hard to think of Lucius Malfoy in terms of handsome or attractive. She could only attribute her thoughts to the fact that the woman walking along beside her was so ridiculously chatty and friendly. Narcissa prattled on, needing little encouragement to conversation. She asked several questions that Hermione answered as best as she could given the circumstances. Narcissa also laughed quite freely at herself when she thought she'd said something foolish. It was a trait that surprised Hermione immensely.

The couple had come to Hogsmeade to purchase Christmas gifts. It was the first Christmas that Narcissa had been invited to spend with her fiancée's family, and she was eager to make a good impression. Hermione guessed that she was a few years younger than Lucius, and she certainly thought highly of him. Every second sentence seemed to involve him somehow.

"I loved Hogwarts when I was here," Narcissa said as they rounded the outer wall, and the castle loomed up over them. "I was in Slytherin, so was Lucius he was Head Boy, weren't you, Lucius?"

Hermione thought of Percy Weasley and grinned. Lucius grunted something non committal and continued up the hill behind them.

"What House are you in?" Narcissa asked.

"Gryffindor," Hermione replied without thinking, and then she winced. The pleasantries, she feared, could well be at an end.

But Narcissa nodded and surprised Hermione by telling her that she had a number of friends who had been in Gryffindor and who were now quite high in the Ministry. "My cousin's a Gryffindor too," she continued, "but I haven't really spoken to him for years. He's a bit of a Black sheep ..."

"I'm sure she doesn't need to know about the skeletons in your closet, Cissa."

Both girls looked back at Lucius and Narcissa demurred. Then he astonished Hermione by smiling a brilliant smile at his fiancé, so full of genuine affection that she could suddenly understand why the woman was marrying him.

"All the Black family sheep," he drawled.

"Oh, ha ha, Lucius, such a clever pun on my family name," Narcissa retorted sarcastically.

"But you walked so conveniently into it, my dear," he teased in reply.

Voldemort can't have got to them yet. Well, maybe he's gotten to Lucius, but she is still reasonable. Their minds haven't been poisoned yet.

"I trust you can find your own way to the hospital wing?" he asked Hermione, showing none of the humour he was giving Narcissa.

"Oh good grief, Lucius, you are in a mood today!"

"We have plans for lunch," he reasoned, protesting her criticism. "Both our mothers are going to be there, as well as your shrew of a sister ..."

"Bella isn't a shrew!"

"And at this rate we are going to have to run back to the village, and we will arrive looking as though we were raised by gnomes, and I really don't think I could stomach the carry on that our appearance will spark."

And by applying to her fear of criticism, he finally hit his mark. Narcissa's hands flew to her hair and she looked thoroughly panicked, while Lucius pulled out his pocket watch and made a great show of opening it. Hermione wanted to tell her that she looked perfectly coiffed, but she didn't. The truth was that she didn't want to be escorted to the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey would have no idea who she was, and Hermione's thinking had extended only as far as getting to Dumbledore and then getting back to Ron and Harry.

"Please," Hermione said in what she hoped was an airy fashion, "please go. I feel perfectly well, and I would hate for you to be late for lunch."

Narcissa looked torn, but as Lucius hummed over his watch, she looked back to Hermione and pleaded an apology. Hermione bid her farewell, and almost before she was finished speaking, she found herself watching the couple make their way back down the path towards Hogsmeade. They were holding hands, and they quickly fell in step with each other. She watched as Lucius leaned across and said something to his companion that caused her to laugh, and the sound was strange to Hermione's ears. How long had it been since she'd heard such merry laughter? They were so young, so utterly carefree.

She had to turn away. She couldn't look at them without thinking of what they would become. How could they become so evil? How could they raise a child, who would be instrumental in the death of the greatest wizard of their time?

She forced her legs to move again, and now that she was alone, she allowed herself a moment of weakness and groaned softly. She was no fool. She knew that something was terribly wrong, and that it was more than a cracked or broken rib from her fall. But getting to Dumbledore was far more important than how ill she felt. And if it really was serious, she could always go to St Mungo's once she was back. They had waited while Ron recovered, they would wait while she did.

And she could warn Dumbledore. She could tell him now what would happen in his future. She could tell him not to trust Snape.

She walked the stone avenue to the heavy studded doors that marked the front entrance to the castle. She could not recall ever having used them. Students almost always entered from the back, and she had to wonder at why the Malfoys had brought her to the front of the castle. Possibly it was a courtesy due the school. They were no longer students, and so they used the official entrance at the front. She hesitated before the great doors, taking a moment to lean against the stone wall and allowing her stomach to churn uncomfortably before pushing on.

Before she could recover, however, a book plummeted from a window above and landed at her feet with a dull thud. Her eyes widened. The book was thick, and heavy, bound in hard, cracked leather, and had it hit her in the head, it probably would have killed her. From the window above she heard a cackle of laughter.

"Heads up, Snively! No magic in the halls!"

She looked up at the window as more laughter followed the comment. Then came the unmistakable sounds of students cheering on a fight. She found herself smiling; it had been too long since she'd seen something so innocuous as a schoolyard brawl.

Reaching for the book, she picked it up as though it was a treasured and long lost friend. It was a textbook. An old one. Probably second hand or passed on from a sibling. It looked very much like the books that Ron had always dragged around the school and whose battered old covers he had taken great care to hide.

Upstairs a teacher was breaking up the fight, and without knowing why, Hermione placed the book gently back on the flagstones. She turned back to the door and pushed it open, deciding it was time to go and find Dumbledore.

Once inside the school, she inhaled the smell of stone, wood, and age. She couldn't help but smile. She did love the school, and she missed it terribly. Coming back this way seemed a shame, but she took time to pause and take in the sight of the Entrance Hall she had crossed any number of times and never really appreciated.

But she didn't really have time to stop, and she should have known it. No sooner had she drawn her first sensory breath before the sound of someone running down the stairs disturbed her. They did not panic her, and upon thinking of it later, she could not believe her own stupidity. She turned and actually watched the young man come down the stairs, not seeking to remove herself from his path at all. He was instantly recognisable to her, but instead of being sensible, and running for the Headmaster's office, she stood transfixed, as if by a vision.

He was tall, good looking, and young. The man ravaged by loss, and years in Azkaban and hiding didn't exist in this time. He had a look of open good humour on his face. His hair was quite long, falling to his shoulders in a haphazard way, and he was smiling as though he was enjoying a private joke.

He stopped, looked Hermione up and down, and the smile instantly transformed into something distinctly sleazy.

"*Sirius*," Hermione breathed. She could have wept at the sight of him. She had never seen him looking so well and healthy. She could not recall him seeming so happy.

Sirius arched an eyebrow. "Do I know you?" he asked, sounding a little nervous, and Hermione realised that she had said his name aloud.

"I ..." Hermione felt her face burn hot as his expression became one of someone trying to remember a girl he'd had a quick fling with and then promptly forgot. She had a terrible urge to tell him to get such thoughts out of his head. He was old enough to be her father after all! Except that he wasn't. The Sirius Black standing before her couldn't be any older than she was. He was eighteen at the most.

If Sirius was here, it meant that Harry's parents were here also. James and Lily Potter were somewhere in this school, going about their lives without knowing what would happen to them all too soon. So many lives that could be saved with some quick explanations. She needed to speak to Dumbledore. If she started babbling about being from the future, and that they were all going to die, Sirius might just hex her for her insanity.

"No," she stuttered, "you don't know me. I've seen you in Hogsmeade, that's all."

The grin was instantly back on his face.

"I'm here to see Professor Dumbledore," she continued, forcing her curiosity down and her confidence up.

"Would you like me to show you where his office is?" Sirius offered, and Hermione was horrified to note that he looked as though he would show her a lot more than the location of the Headmasters office.

"Oh, no, it's quite alright. I know where it is."

"Oh ..." He gave her a quizzical look, and she winced inwardly. He had never seen her at the school in his life, and yet she knew exactly where she was going.

"I've visited ... a long time ago."

"Oh." He smiled broadly and rocked on his feet. "So what school do you go to?"

"Beauxbatons," she replied, the lie rolling so easily off her tongue that she almost reeled with shock.

"Really?" Sirius was nodding with enthusiasm. The French school was famed for its beautiful students, and Sirius was evidently interested in their comings and goings. "Do you like it there? I've heard it is really amazing."

Hermione chewed at her lip. Having an accident with a Time-Turner and ending up twenty years in the past was unexpected enough; coming face to face with Sirius Black and discussing her attendance at a school she had never seen was testing her resourcefulness. She began to wish that she had listened to Fleur when she had waxed lyrical about her glorious school days. Hermione unfortunately had a tendency to zone out the minute Fleur began to speak, and any useful information she could have imparted was well and truly lost.

"Don't you have a lesson to get to?" Hermione asked in the same tutting way that she would use with Harry and Ron when they hadn't done their homework. She didn't have time to stand and chat with Sirius Black. The overwhelming nausea, held at bay by the surprise of seeing him, began to reassert itself. And she had to see Dumbledore so that she could get back to Harry and Ron, who were no doubt frantic by now.

Sirius looked more than a little surprised at such a dismissal, but the grin was gone only momentarily. "I've just come down to get Snivelly's Transfiguration textbook. Apparently he needs it to function."

"And you were kind enough to come to get it for ... *Snivelly*?" she asked archly.

"Well," Sirius chuckled, and managed to look deviously charming, "I *did* throw it out the window."

"Ah, yes, the book that almost killed me." Hermione smiled with amusement. "You felt guilty?"

"I wouldn't say *guilty*. Professor Slughorn is violently in love with the greasy git." Sirius rolled his eyes dramatically.

And it suddenly all made sense. Snivelly's identity was revealed in the worst possible way. They were all here, the heroes as well as the villains. Snivelly was *Snape*. She felt herself grow pale and she swayed.

"Are you alright?"

"Yes ... yes, I'm fine." She frowned and bowed her head. "Excuse me. I've got to go and see Dumbledore."

And with that she pushed past him, ignoring the look of confusion on his face as she went to find the Headmaster.

Meeting with Dumbledore

Chapter 3 of 5

A Time Turner Story. Finding Horcruxes is dangerous business and the trio are looking forward to a night at the Hogs Head. But then a Time Turner accident changes everything...

Chapter 3.

Disclaimer: Please see chapter 1

By the time Hermione found the gargoyle that guarded the entrance to Dumbledore's office, she was more confused than she thought possible. With every turn she expected to run into some ghost of a past that wasn't hers, and as she pushed further into the maze of corridors, her body began its desperate protestation. She was not supposed to come this far back, and with every step her body was determined to let her know it. She had managed to forget that she had fallen prior to her journey back through time, but as her insides seemed to bubble and steam, her ribs joined in with a throbbing ache. Her mind seemed suddenly useless, and what had happened made no sense at all.

She had to stop, and she closed her eyes to draw a comforting breath. She knew this place; she had felt safe there once. She had loved Hogwarts. She loved its smell of stone and wood and dust. She could detect the smell of the polishes that they used on the suits of armour and the ancient oils in the paintings on the walls. Beneath it all she could detect the special scent of parchment, ink, and quills. The library was close by; she could smell the books. She opened her eyes and felt more at ease.

Hermione had elected to leave Hogwarts. She had dismissed all arguments to the contrary and followed Harry. She could still hear Molly Weasley appealing to the three of them and Professor McGonagall sitting across from them at the kitchen table at Grimmauld Place, begging them to see reason. But Harry's mind was set. Dumbledore had left him a task, and he meant to see it done. And where Harry went, so too went Ron and Hermione. They would never abandon him, not while they still drew breath. It seemed ironic that she had never considered being left alone herself. Yet here she was, walking the corridors of Hogwarts, and had never felt more terribly alone.

The gargoyle standing as silent sentinel over the doorway was an ugly thing, and yet Hermione found it a welcome sight. Beyond the gargoyle, Dumbledore was still alive. The dead had been resurrected; the dead had never died.

There was a password to get in. A password that she did not know. How in Merlin's name did Harry always get in there? What about the teachers? Did they always know the password? Hermione stood and stared at the gargoyle and scowled. It was some kind of sweet, she knew that much, but what sweets did Dumbledore enjoy in 1978?

Dear God, how did visitors get in?

"Fizzing Wizzbees," she said in a questioning way, and nothing happened. "Sherbet Lemon? Acid Pops? Cockroach Clusters?"

And still nothing.

"Drooble's Best Blowing Gum."

Nothing.

"I need to see Professor Dumbledore!" she cried plaintively.

The gargoyle sprang to life and jumped aside, scaring her so much that she jumped back in alarm as the wall slid open easily.

Well, so much for the password system.

She mounted the stairs which began to move ever upward the moment she set foot on them. Her first impulse was to charge ahead: she wanted to see Dumbledore; she wanted to see him alive and whole. Yet something held her back. For as much as she wanted to see his face, the circumstances of his death were still a harsh reality for her.

And her body felt weak. She doubted that charging up the stairs was something that she was entirely capable of.

The pain was nothing, however. She could change the future, and Dumbledore would not die. If she imparted what she knew, all would be well.

She was still thinking such thoughts when the stairs stopped moving and she stumbled forward, almost colliding with the highly polished oak door at the top. She drew a breath and knocked, and the door swung open on silent hinges, revealing Dumbledore's office to her. Hesitating only for a moment, she stepped inside.

Hermione immediately found herself paralyzed in wonder. It was as though she were seeing him for the first time, and yet he was so familiar to her that she had to choke back a sob. Dumbledore was sitting behind his heavy, claw-footed desk, surrounded by his noisy little gadgets that whirred and puffed smoke, possibly serving no other purpose than to satisfy his sense of whimsy. The gentle snores of long slumbering headmasters and headmistresses from their portraits on the walls lulled her slightly and added to the sense of sleepy calm that pervaded the room. Even Fawkes, resplendent in his red and orange plumage, was asleep on his perch.

Dumbledore looked up from the pile of parchment on his desk and did not look at all surprised to see her. He sat back in his chair and seemingly took measure of her with his cornflower blue eyes, whilst waiting for her to speak.

It took several moments before she could verbalise anything at all.

"Professor Dumbledore," she began, but faltered as she felt the overwhelming urge to fling herself around his neck and cry.

Perhaps realising her difficulty, Dumbledore smiled and relented in his silence. "Young lady," he said kindly, "you look as though you have come a long way. Perhaps you should sit down."

Hermione had to feel her way to the chair; she couldn't bring herself to look away from Dumbledore's face lest he disappear from the office entirely. As she sank into the welcoming seat, she could only think that she had to somehow stop her racing heart and actually speak coherently enough for him to understand what she was saying.

"Professor Dumbledore..." she began again, and once again she faltered. How did she explain this? How did she tell him everything without sounding like a loon?

"Professor, I am going to sound ridiculous..."

"I am sure you won't, my dear, but perhaps you should start at the beginning. Your name, for example, would be an excellent starting point."

Of course it would, she thought miserably, you bloody twit.

Hermione forced a smile and did as he'd suggested. "Professor, my name is Hermione Granger..." She hesitated and watched his expression before pushing on. "I'm here because I've had a bit of an accident."

Bit of an accident? More like a bloody catastrophe!

She quickly fished the broken Time-Turner from her pocket and placed it on the edge of the desk, hoping that the object itself might give him some kind of forewarning of her predicament.

When Dumbledore reached for the Turner, it broke still further in his hand, finally falling apart entirely.

"We didn't mean for it to break," she said. "I know we should have taken better care of it, but with the war and everything else ..." she trailed off. Dumbledore knew nothing of the war, she needed to remember that.

Dumbledore managed a gentle smile. "I'm afraid we've skipped the beginning, Miss Granger," he said, and Hermione fancied that she heard the faintest hint of amusement in his voice. "Now, I take it that you have used your Time-Turner, and you have gone back a little too far?"

"Well, not quite..." She stopped when she realized that she was stuttering, and she composed herself as best she could. "It's broken, as you can see, and it has been broken for a while now. I tripped and fell in Hogsmeade, and when I picked it up it had already begun spinning." She felt like a fool, and she had no doubt that he would think her one too. "I should have dropped it, but I was sure that I could stop it, and then it was just going so fast ... and, *and I fainted.*"

"And when you woke up you came here?"

"I thought you could help me," she murmured.

"How far back have you come?" Dumbledore asked with interest.

"Well ..." She did a quick calculation in her head. "It was January 27th ..."

"And it is December 10 now," Dumbledore concluded pleasantly.

Hermione felt her mouth fall open. For it to have only been a month or so!

"No! No, Professor, you don't understand!" She was shaking her head so violently that it began to ache. "Professor, it was January 27th, 1999 when it happened!"

Dumbledore stood up so quickly that his heavy oak chair crashed to the floor behind him. There was no hint of amusement in his features now. Indeed, his expression was a strange mixture of astonishment and horror.

"Professor?" Hermione swallowed.

"How do you feel, Miss Granger?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"How do you feel? Are you well?" He began to pace. "Do you feel faint at all?"

"Faint? No ... not really. But I don't feel well either. I hurt myself when I fell, but that isn't what is making me feel ill. We used the Time-Turner often. I know it puts a strain on the body. I ..."

"When were you born?" he interrupted, still pacing and looking increasingly worried.

"Born? September 1980. Why?"

"So you are not due to be born for another two years." He stopped pacing and stared at her as though she could blow up in front of him at any moment. "You have managed to do what the human body magical or not is simply not designed to do! You have gone back to time before your own birth!"

Hermione slouched further into the chair. Evidently this was worse than she had thought.

"It is no wonder you feel ill, Miss Granger. Wizards have died abusing the limits of Time-Turners!"

She blinked and thought that she might cry. It wouldn't do to cry. He already thought her a fool; she didn't need to be crying fool on top of it all.

"I need to get back," she said, calming her voice and sounding as direct as she could. "Harry needs me; I can't leave him to do this alone."

Dumbledore would ask who Harry was, and just what she couldn't let him do alone, and she braced herself to give him an answer. He surprised her, however, and went back to something she had said earlier.

"You said that there was a war? We are at war in 1999?"

"We have an enemy," she confirmed. "Lord Voldemort. Once he was resurrected, his powers were stronger than anyone could ever have expected."

"So Tom is powerful then?" Dumbledore retrieved his chair and sank into it with much the same posture as Hermione had adopted. He looked at her and gave her a reassuring smile. "Oh yes, he is strong even now. The Ministry don't consider him much of a threat I'm afraid."

Hermione had never known a time when wizards did not fear to speak Voldemort's name. She had been reluctant to say his name herself, once upon a time. She used it freely enough now. The Dark Lord had been resurrected; calling him "You Know Who" seemed a little foolish.

She met Dumbledore's eye and found her voice again. "Do you consider him a threat?" she asked.

"I believe it best not to underestimate him," Dumbledore replied carefully. "Evidently I have every reason not to." His brow drew itself into a troubled frown and for a moment he didn't look at her, as though he was struggling to grasp just how she had arrived there. "You said he has been resurrected. Had he fallen?"

Hermione open and closed her mouth, and she imagined that she must look a little like a fish that had jumped out of its bowl. Then before she could think of subtlety, she told him everything: from what she knew of the first rise of Voldemort, to Harry's birth and the prophecy that led to his parents' death and Voldemort's fall. Then, unable to stop herself once she had started, she went on to Voldemort's resurrection, the Order of the Phoenix, and the Ministry's mishandling of the new threat. Then, finally, came the Horcruxes and Dumbledore's death at the hands of the treacherous Snape.

When she finished, Dumbledore looked as though she had rested the weight of the world firmly on his shoulders. He sat in stony silence, his hands curled into fists on the desk, so tightly that his knuckles had turned white.

"I'm sorry, Professor." Hermione felt drained herself, as though telling him had emptied her of something. "Now that you know ... you can change it. You can make sure it doesn't happen."

Dumbledore stood slowly, tapping the tips of his fingers with a strange deliberateness on the desktop as he did so. "Terrible things happen to wizards who meddle with time," he said quietly, and still he didn't look at her.

"I know. Professor McGonagall told me that when I was in third year."

"So you are experienced with Time-Turners then?"

"Yes, I used one to get to all of my lessons."

"She must have thought you very responsible."

"She did. *She does*..." They both looked at the broken Time-Turner on the desk. "We are at war," she said, "and desperate times call for desperate measures."

"I would not seek to change the future." Dumbledore said suddenly, as though the few words they had spoken about responsibility had been little more than chit chat. "I can't warn these people. I can't do anything to change what is to come."

"*What?* How can you say that?" Hermione looked at him, wild eyed and horrified. "You have the knowledge to save these people! They are good people; they don't deserve to die like that! How can you say that there is nothing you can do?"

"Yes, they are good people, if a little troublesome. James Potter and Sirius Black are popular and well loved by many people, and Lily Evans is possibly one of the brightest and sweetest girls to have walked through these halls, but I would not seek to change their future."

Hermione could think of nothing to say that would not come out as a barrage of abuse. She had once been appalled when Harry had told her that he had shouted at the Headmaster, yet here she was, unable to think of doing anything else.

"You can't do this!" she cried. "You can warn them, you can stop Snape and Pettigrew! My God, you can find all of his Horcruxes and destroy the evil bastard!"

"All very valid points, Miss Granger."

"Then why dismiss them?" She demanded.

"You must consider the consequences of your actions, Miss Granger. When you travel back in time, you take with you the ability to change the future. Normally, one would only go back a matter of hours; you could only change one event. You have travelled back more than two decades. You have the ability to change the entire future your own history of our world."

"And what is so terrible about that? You once sent Harry and I back to save a Hippogriff from the axe and Sirius Black from the Dementors!"

"And I can only hope that I used my judgment and wisdom in such a decision. They were two events, not the entire future."

"How do you know that? How can you tell that you didn't change everything with those two things?"

"I don't," Dumbledore admitted. "It hasn't happened yet, and as I don't know the details, I can't judge the severity of the risk. The situations are very different, Miss Granger. You are looking at a future that is clouded by your emotions. You nobly seek to save young and innocent lives; you want your friend to grow up with a family who loves and values him; you even seek to save me."

"I still don't understand, what is so terrible about that?"

"You must try and think about it, without allowing your emotions to hinder your thoughts. We rush out and inform James Potter and Lily Evans of their impending deaths. We tell them that their friend, Peter Pettigrew will betray them and that Sirius Black will be blamed and will spend most of his adult life locked away in Azkaban at the mercy of Dementors. I take steps to ensure that Severus Snape does not overhear this prophecy told to me by Sybil Trelawney when I interview her for the position of Divination Professor. Each of these things will irrevocably change the future, and then what? What if the news given to James and Lily causes them not to marry and their son is never born? What if they do marry and Tom cannot get to them to mark the boy as his equal? Or worse, Tom goes after the Longbottom boy instead. Can we be sure that Alice Longbottom who I can assure you is a brave woman would sacrifice herself for her son the way that Lily would? And even if she does, would Neville Longbottom be a suitable candidate to assist in the destruction of a terrible villain?" Dumbledore paused, as though the enormity of what could happen would overwhelm him. He drew a heavy breath and pushed on, determined to make her understand.

"If Severus Snape does not hear this prophecy, could it possibly mean that Tom does not mark a child as his equal?" Dumbledore asked her, although she knew he expected no answer. "He may not fall at all. Fate has colluded to produce this boy, Harry Potter, and a set of circumstances that, while dreadful, mean that our world has been armed with an all important weapon; one person whom Tom Riddle fears, who is, by your reckoning, cunning and unafraid to confront him. Each and every tragic event has added to his arsenal and made him stronger. Harry Potter does not simply go and fall apart when something goes wrong, he takes it, and uses it, and it makes him stronger. If you seek to change even one of these events, Miss Granger, that boy will not exist as you know him. At worst it could mean that our world is doomed."

"But Harry's life ..." Hermione bowed her head, the weight of his words causing her to sag. "He is more than a weapon. He doesn't deserve to be strong because of this."

"Just as his parents don't deserve to die, nor anyone else that is harmed or killed in this terrible struggle. But occasionally terrible things happen to good people; that is how legends are born."

"And what about you?" Hermione asked bitterly, "Do you plan on dying?"

"Well," he said with a smile that amazed her, "I think that I will have to assess the events leading up to my demise as they occur, but at this point, no, I do not believe that I would do anything to alter my fate."

At this, Hermione fell silent, unable to comprehend how anyone could possibly resign themselves to death without some kind of fight. She could only think that when faced with his own mortality, the old man would change his mind. She hoped that he didn't change it too late to do anything about it. She felt, rather than heard, herself sigh, and when she looked up he was sitting opposite her again, looking every bit as unhappy about the situation as she did.

"I need to get back to Harry and Ron," she said after a short time. "They need me."

"Ah, well, I was hoping that you were not going to say that."

She looked defiant. If he wasn't going to save himself, then she needed to get back and carry on the fight.

"I am sure you are aware that Time-Turners do not go forward."

She felt her cheeks suddenly blaze with colour. "Well, yes, I knew that ... but I hoped ..." she began to chew on her thumbnail.

"You thought I could help you?"

"Yes, Professor."

"Then I'm afraid that we have a little problem, Miss Granger," Dumbledore admitted. "I have no idea how to get you back to your own time."

Hermione's heart sank.

"But, as you have well proved today, nothing is impossible. I am sure that with the help of some very old friends, we may be able to find some kind of solution. It will take some time, however."

Time. Something she suddenly had plenty of. If she could get back to Harry and Ron only moments after she had left them, then she would have lost no time at all.

"There are no guarantees, Hermione," Dumbledore said, as though he had read her thoughts.

"But you think your friends can help?"

"Possibly."

She nodded, as though confirming to herself that he had made some kind of promise. She did not see the look of concern crease his brow; she did not want to see it. She felt sick and she wanted to get back to her friends.

They sat in silence for a time, and then suddenly he began to smile, and did so for such a time without speaking that she began to shuffle in her chair.

"What?" she asked eventually, "What is so funny?"

"Nothing is funny," Dumbledore replied, still looking amused. "I can assure you that after the news of my own demise, I am not finding anything particularly funny. I do, however, have an idea that may be beneficial to all concerned."

Hermione frowned. What kind of idea could he possibly have? Locking her in a tower until they found a solution? That was a good idea.

But locking her away was not in Dumbledore's plans. Quite the contrary, she was about to question the old man's sanity.

"I think it would be beneficial for you to continue your education whilst you are here."

"Pardon?"

"Oh, don't look so worried, Miss Granger. You could easily join our seventh years, and given your predicament, I am sure you would benefit from learning all you can."

Once again she was rendered speechless. Could her news have caused him to take leave of his senses? Continue her education? Here? With these people?

"Impossible," she breathed.

"I don't see why that should be so."

"I couldn't possibly ... I don't have time."

"I can assure you, Miss Granger, that wanting the solution to come faster won't make it so. I could certainly find you a quiet place to wait, but given that a solution could take a long time, what good would a life of solitude do you? It would be far more productive for you to join the student population and improve upon your studies. And with the benefit of having our library at your disposal, you could assist in your own solution."

The library was certainly enticing. Not only to research Time-Turners, but also the Horcruxes that they had found infuriatingly impossible to break.

"But what about the people that I know? I couldn't see them every day and not tell them what is going to happen."

"I would have to insist on your not telling them, of course, but I don't believe that meeting them, or knowing them, would necessarily be such a terrible thing. It may help you to understand their future choices."

"That doesn't make any sense! They didn't choose to die!" She scowled and folded her arms across her chest, refusing to meet his eye. "I cannot go to school with these people. How can I do that and not tell them?"

"You can avoid them, of course. It is a very large school, and aside from some very rudimentary introductions, there is no reason for you to socialize with them." He sighed himself then, betraying his own emotion over their conversation. "Stay in school, Hermione," he said quietly. "At least I will know you are safe and you can focus on something other than your predicament."

She honestly didn't think that going to school with people she knew would die would take her mind off her predicament, but Dumbledore had a way of speaking, a tone to his voice, that was disturbingly convincing. Before long she found herself agreeing to a plan that she was not convinced was sound.

After Dumbledore sent for Professor McGonagall, they set about concocting a story that made her sudden appearance sound plausible. She sat back and listened to him, distracted by her own concerns. What had she gotten herself into? How could this possibly work? She began to wonder just what he was hoping to gain by sending her into the school. There had to be something, she decided, because Dumbledore was no fool, and he must have wanted something to happen. He wouldn't subject her to this otherwise.

She was to be a transfer from Beauxbatons Academy, and as Dumbledore warmed to his role as storyteller, she would also be his niece. He reasoned that it would add a little weight to her position; Hermione thought the very idea implausible, and judging by the look on Professor McGonagall's face as Hermione was introduced, so did the Transfigurations Mistress. Dumbledore was a consummate performer, however. In fact, he seemed to be enjoying his role of uncle immensely. He chuckled, and twinkled, and was so infuriatingly ... *Dumbledore* ... that any questions were quickly dismissed in the face of his confidence. By the time Hermione found herself following Professor McGonagall to the Gryffindor Tower, she found herself almost willing to believe that the plan could work.

As she walked, she dismissed the nausea welling up inside her and decided that she would not socialize with anyone at all. She could only imagine meeting James and Lily Potter and blurting out, "In three or so years you will be in hiding with your son and you are going to be horribly murdered by Lord Voldemort," or something equally as bad. Or what if she saw Peter Pettigrew and viciously launched herself at him, screaming that he was a traitor who would betray everyone to their deaths? No, it would not do to become friendly with anyone. Isolation would be the key.

To that end, she had convinced Dumbledore to give her a room of her own in the Gryffindor tower. She had reasoned that she could not share a common room with them, or sleep in a room with Lily Evans, so close that she could hear her breathing. Professor McGonagall evidently did not agree with the Headmaster showing his *niece* such favouritism, and aside from rudimentary directions, she said nothing to Hermione on their walk through the castle.

It wasn't until they reached the door to her new room, that McGonagall finally addressed Hermione directly.

"I'm assuming your uncle explained to you about House Points," she said briskly.

"Yes, of course. Achievements earn you points, wrongdoing loses them. At the end of the year the House with the most points is awarded the House Cup."

"Gryffindor has won the House Cup for the last three years, and thus far we have been doing well this year. Professor Dumbledore has assured me that you will have plenty to contribute."

"I hope so, Professor," Hermione said truthfully. She was unused to Professor McGonagall looking at her with such evident disapproval. She could also not recall the Gryffindor Head of House looking so sprightly. The professor Hermione had met at age eleven had been supplanted by the woman who walked with the aid of a cane and whose face was etched with the pain of loss and war.

Hermione tried to smile, but had to turn away briefly to grimace as the pain inside her stomach intensified. She needed to lie down. She decided a sleep might do her the world of good.

"Lunch is at 12:30. Professor Dumbledore will introduce you to your classmates then," Professor McGonagall said in a crisp, disapproving way.

Hermione didn't have a chance to answer because as she opened her mouth to speak the world began to spin, and for the second time that day, Hermione fainted.

First day of school

Chapter 4 of 5

A Time Turner Story. Finding Horcruxes is dangerous business and the trio are looking forward to a night at the Hogs Head. But then a Time Turner accident changes everything...

Chapter 4

Hermione woke in a bed in the hospital wing of Hogwarts and blinked as she heard the sounds of Minerva McGonagall telling Albus Dumbledore exactly what she thought of him and his ridiculous story regarding Hermione's sudden appearance at the school.

"Twenty years, Albus! Twenty years! The poor girl could have died at my feet, and I was talking to her as if she was the spoilt niece of the Headmaster!" McGonagall paused before turning on him again. "I *knew* you didn't have a niece! Whose daughter would she be? *Aberforth's*? It's a dreadful lie, no one will believe it!"

"Minerva, calm yourself. No one has questioned my story of who she is, and they have no reason not to believe me. You must understand the need for deception."

"It was hardly necessary to go that far. You could have just said that she was a transfer student. Why add that she's related to you?"

"To explain the preferential treatment that sees her having her own chambers, of course."

McGonagall seemed to be seeking out something else to say. Even from her position in the bed, Hermione could feel the anger coming off the Transfigurations professor in waves.

"How could you have not sent her to the hospital wing immediately? Merlin only knows what kind of injuries she has suffered!"

"I must confess that I did not think of it," Dumbledore admitted, for the first time sounding a little regretful. "After listening to what she had to say, the possibility of her being ill was the furthest thing from my mind. I thought that she had come a long way and that some rest would do her good."

"Come a long way? Oh, Albus, if ever you have made an understatement!" McGonagall looked to Hermione, who quickly feigned sleep. "What are we going to do with her?"

"I am hoping to send her back, Minerva."

"And how is that possible? Time-Turners don't go forward, Albus! No one has ever ..."

"Yes, yes. But no one has ever come back this far either. I have contacted some people who may be able to help, and they are coming here to try to find a solution."

"And what if they can't? What happens then?"

"To be honest, Minerva, it is not something that I want to contemplate. If she is forced to live her life in this time, she could well run to madness."

"Surely nothing so terrible as that!"

"We don't know what her misuse of the Time-Turner has done to her mind. It has certainly harmed her physically; we don't know whether it has harmed her mentally. She has the burden of our futures preying on her: she knows what is to come and she can't breathe a word of it. Imagine how that will separate her from others. Imagine the solitude in which she will be forced to live her life."

"And has she ..." McGonagall hesitated uncomfortably. "Has she revealed anything to you? Anything that we should know?"

"She has revealed nothing that I would care to repeat."

"Yet enough to earn her a private chamber away from the student populace?"

"Twenty years is a long time."

McGonagall began to pace. "So it's bad then?"

"I didn't say that, Minerva."

"You didn't have to." She fell quiet again and then resumed her pacing. "Do you think it wise to give her her own room? It might look suspicious to the other students, and as you know, we have students here whose suspicions live to be aroused."

"She has reasons not to be included in the dormitory, Minerva, and as I believe Miss Granger to be well and truly awake, we shall leave it at that."

Hermione's eyes snapped open, and she shuffled up the bed, trying to cover the fact that she had been caught eavesdropping.

"I trust you are feeling better, Hermione?" Dumbledore asked, ignoring McGonagall's curious look.

Indeed she was feeling better. In fact, she was feeling better than she had in months, no doubt due to the careful ministrations of Madam Pomfrey. Her arm ached a little, however, and upon looking, she found a nasty looking bruise and a tiny puncture wound in the crook of her arm. She folded her hand carefully over the mark and frowned. It was rare for a magical healer to resort to such things as needles; she must have given them quite a scare if she had driven Madam Pomfrey to inject something into her veins.

"I owe you an apology, Hermione," Dumbledore said as he approached her bed. "I should have brought you straight here, rather than detaining you with conversation. I do hope that you will forgive me, I am an old man, and my memory ..."

McGonagall snorted in disbelief as Dumbledore, sharp as a tack, feigned a faulty memory.

Determined to prove that her own mind was a picture of health, Hermione brightened considerably and smiled. "I'm fine, Professor, honestly. I should have made more of an issue of it."

McGonagall began to make a fuss over Hermione, ensuring she was comfortable. It was evident that she thought Dumbledore the one in the wrong, and she perhaps sought to make amends for some kind of slight she felt she'd done her. It wasn't the case, of course, but at that moment Hermione felt like something of an abnormality, especially since both Dumbledore and McGonagall kept looking at her as though she might explode.

"Do you feel well enough to go to your room, or would you prefer to spend the night here?" McGonagall asked. "Madam Pomfrey would prefer you stay here, but it would be better for you to be comfortable. I've put together some clothes for you. Uniform, nightdress and a few casual things ... they might be a little old fashioned. Albus has ensured that you have text books and supplies for classes."

Hermione felt perfectly well, and acquainting herself with her chambers was tempting. She looked around at the familiar corners of the ward, and she had to wonder how many hours she had spent there. Harry's visits had become so regular that Madam Pomfrey kept the bed by the window reserved for him, and Hermione herself had spent considerable time under the care of the Mediwitch. Looking around now, she couldn't help but notice that it was an unchanging place. Even the curtained screens that Madam Pomfrey was currently pulling around her did not look twenty years fresher.

"Miss Granger will spend the night here," Madam Pomfrey said, ending all speculation on the subject as she pulled the screens into place. "She needs a good night's rest and time to recover! You can't expect her to be gallivanting all over the school after such a... *fall*."

Hermione's eyes widened. They had told Madam Pomfrey that she'd had a fall? Professor McGonagall was glaring at Dumbledore, who smiled serenely. Madam Pomfrey seemed utterly disbelieving, but chose to say nothing of it. Instead she produced a goblet full of a steaming potion and tried to shoo the professors away.

"What is this?" Hermione asked, eyeing the goblet suspiciously.

"It's a mixture of Nephelium and Stag horn root, amongst other things. Your fall has caused some damage to your vital organs, and I am trying to strengthen them."

Hermione wondered just how far Dumbledore had said that she'd fallen.

"You also had two broken ribs."

That had certainly been caused by her fall, but it seemed strange that the events of the day had caused her to forget all about them.

She wondered what Harry and Ron were doing. Were they frantic? Was Harry blaming himself? She sagged against the bed head, fatigue coming more from emotional trauma than any physical malaise.

Madam Pomfrey ejected the concerned professors from the room and began bustling about, demanding Hermione drink her potion and rest.

"It has been a long day," the Mediwitch said. "You need to rest tonight. There's plenty of time tomorrow for meeting people and going to classes." She gave Hermione a quizzical look. "Professor Dumbledore says that you transferred from Beauxbatons, and that you are his niece?"

"Err... yes."

"He also said that it wasn't necessary to contact your parents."

"No... They're abroad."

"France?"

"No." She had no idea where Dumbledore would have said her parents were. Her own parents were married in 1978. In December they were preparing for their first Christmas together. They went skiing. "Austria," she said quietly, "it's been so long since they had a holiday, I'd hate to worry them."

Madam Pomfrey demurred, not believing her, but deciding not to push the issue. "Drink your potion, dear, and try to get some rest."

Hermione dreamed that she was falling through some endless, swirling vortex from which she could not escape or land. She woke disorientated, convinced that she was in some shabby room at a fifth rate hostel, somewhere in Muggle London, or huddled in a back alley, wrapped in Harry and Ron's limbs, trying to stay warm. Instead she found herself in the hospital wing at Hogwarts, and she was filled with a momentary sense of dread. Her first thoughts were that something had happened. Where were Harry and Ron? Such confusion was fleeting, however, and the reality of her predicament dawned quickly on her. Something had happened, but it was not Harry or Ron who was in trouble. Her dream was real, and it was her who was in trouble.

A neat pile of clothes had been left at the end of the hospital bed, along with some toiletries so that she could wash, tend her hair and brush her teeth. She did these things with unusual slowness, almost hoping that she would faint again. It was not to be. She dressed, feeling in the best of health and wondering how Madam Pomfrey could be so terribly good at what she did. She wished something could be done for her mental state, however: there was no time she could recall when she had felt so nervous about the coming day.

Her journey to the Great Hall was oddly quiet. No one rushed past her in the halls. There were no sounds of chatter or dispute. She realised that she must be very late. Everyone was already in the Great Hall, eating their breakfast and preparing for their day. They were blissfully unaware that a war was coming and that their lives would change forever. Hermione walked the corridor, feeling very much like a portent of doom.

She slipped into the Great Hall and was overwhelmed by the sudden noise that welled up around her. Here were the voices missing from the corridors, and she found herself staring at a familiar backdrop and familiar uniforms, and yet the faces were those of strangers. It was disorientating, and she found herself swaying in her confusion.

Her eyes flitted from table to table, seeking out anything that she could use to ground herself. At the head table, Professors McGonagall and Dumbledore appeared to be looking around the hall in search of her. She saw tiny Professor Flitwick sitting beside Professor Binns, who she noticed was well and truly alive. She smiled at the bulk of Hagrid, who looked very much as he ever did. Beside Hagrid sat a man she did not recognise, but further along the table she saw Professor Slughorn picking delicately at something from a heavily laden tray of food.

The House tables appeared to be in the same places that she remembered them to be. She instinctively sought out Gryffindor, and ran her eye along the unfamiliar

assortment of people until she found her mark. Sirius Black, more handsome in his youth than in later years, was leaning across the table to reach for something that she could not see. He had a smile on his face, and as he reached across, he said something that caused those around him to burst into laughter.

Then he sat down, and Hermione's heart skipped a beat.

It was Harry. It had to be Harry. He had the same lean build, the narrow nose and pronounced cheekbones. The unruly black hair could never be mistaken. Even the way his glasses slid down his nose was the same. But this wasn't Harry, and upon staring at him, she knew he could not possibly be. Aside from the year, this Harry was laughing, and her Harry hadn't laughed in months. Hermione watched him and knew, even without meeting him that this Harry was brimming with a confidence that her Harry would never possess. No, this wasn't Harry. This was Harry's father, James Potter.

Hermione took a step back. If she turned now, she could flee the Great Hall and go to the chambers that Dumbledore had given her. There she could stay until this mess was sorted out. If she turned now she could avoid all of them. How could they all be sitting there, looking so carefree and unaware that they wouldn't see another five years? James would be dead and in his grave, and Sirius would be rotting away in Azkaban. She did turn then, desperate to get away from them, but she didn't get far. Turning brought her eye to the Slytherin table, and the solitary figure sitting at the end of it.

Severus Snape was suitably alone, a book propped up against his jug of pumpkin juice and his breakfast utterly untouched. He was tall already; she could tell that despite him sitting down. His uniform looked too short. She was close enough to him to note that the cuffs and hem had been let down and were still not performing their office. He must have had a recent growth spurt. He was pale already too, as though he rarely stirred out of doors, and although the robes were too short, they still managed to hang off him in such a way as to belie how slender the frame beneath them was.

So there he was, a skinny kid with lank greasy hair and a nose that he hadn't quite grown into yet. And she could kill him. It would be an easy matter of pulling out her wand and doing away with him right then and there. How many lives would be saved? She could remove him from history, and no one would ever speak of him again except to note how he had been killed at breakfast one morning. He could go and join Moaning Myrtle in the bathroom, and she could grow old in Azkaban.

"Miss Granger!"

Hermione jumped and spun on her heel to face Dumbledore, who confronted her with a pleasant, if somewhat warning, smile.

"I am pleased to see you up and about, Hermione," he said, looking at her intently. "I trust you are feeling better."

Hermione fumbled over Dumbledore's name for a good minute before being able to say it, realising that she had been caught thinking some truly terrible thoughts. Dumbledore looked away from her for a moment, and she realised that his gaze had been drawn to the unsuspecting Snape. She couldn't help but wonder what thoughts ran through his head as he looked at his one day murderer. Could it be possible that he would think such thoughts as she?

"I'm sorry, Professor," Hermione rasped harshly. "He just looks so ..."

"Young?" Dumbledore offered, still looking at the lank-haired Snape.

"He is going to do terrible things."

"Yes, well, he hasn't done them yet, Hermione." Dumbledore gathered her to him with an arm around her shoulders and forcibly guided her into the Hall. "If you cannot control yourself, you will have to avoid him," he said lightly. "Professor Slughorn has informed me that he is becoming quite a proficient Legilimens, and we really don't need your thoughts scaring him half to death with thoughts of murder."

"You teach Legilimency here?"

"No," Dumbledore admitted, "but many students enjoy learning as much as they can."

"And what does that mean?"

"It means he taught himself the skill."

Hermione snorted with derision and then coloured instantly. She could hardly look down on someone for learning something in their free time.

Dumbledore pressed on, delivering more bad news when he was sure they were far enough into the Great Hall to render fleeing impossible.

"Now, Hermione, my dear niece, I am going to have to introduce you to Lily Evans."

"What?"

"Miss Evans is Head Girl, and she also in your house, so it would seem very odd if I didn't hand you over to her."

"Hand me over to her?"

"To show you around the school, explain the rules, that sort of thing."

"But I already know my way around the school ... and I know the rules. I don't need Lily Evans showing me around!"

"Yes, I know all that, but no one else knows that. The Head Girl is responsible for showing new female students the school, and I am sure you will think of some way to deter a friendship with her if you feel you must."

"If I feel I must?" Hermione had stopped in her tracks, utterly gobsmacked at his logic. "Professor, this is going to be a disaster! I'd rather go back to my room and forget all about doing this."

The smile finally managed to slip from Dumbledore's face, something she did not expect there in the Great Hall. For some absurd reason she thought his tolerance to be infinite, and it quite obviously was not. Then again, he had probably never been in such a situation before. Hermione had tramped her way into the school and given him the name of his assassin and the date of his death; she supposed that the saintly demeanour should be allowed to slip in front of her.

"I am aware that this is hard for you, Hermione, but do you really think that I am asking you to do this for my own amusement or to torture you in some way?"

"No, Professor, but ..."

"There are no buts about it, Hermione. You do not belong in this time, it is true, but here you are. Your journey here has caused untold damage to you, and whilst you are a student here, I can keep an eye on you. Madam Pomfrey can attend you when necessary, and you can take the opportunity to learn as much as you can before you go back. Now, I must introduce you to Miss Evans, and you are welcome to be as obnoxious to her as you choose, but for the moment please meet her with some kind of grace and no more objections."

"I'm not going to be obnoxious to her!" Hermione protested. "I just keep thinking about Harry."

"You won't do him any favours by changing his future now."

Hermione didn't believe it, but she managed a smile so miserable that it caused Dumbledore to chuckle.

"Come now," he said, smiling again now that he'd said his piece, "we all play a part at some time or other. Let us hope that yours will be of short duration."

Dumbledore walked her the short distance to the Gryffindor table where Hermione observed the back of a young woman with long russet red hair. Once again she felt the desire to flee. Dumbledore's wishes be damned, it just seemed wrong to be meeting Harry's mother when Harry himself hadn't really ever had the privilege.

"Miss Evans," Dumbledore said jovially, and the redhead turned around, causing Hermione to wish herself miles away.

It was true, what everyone said. Harry did look like his father except for his eyes. The eyes came from this woman alone. Brilliantly green and expressive, it seemed strange seeing them devoid of glasses and in someone else's face. Lily Evans looked surprisingly like Ginny Weasley: she had the same delicate complexion and wonderfully luxurious hair, even her nose had a similar narrowness, and there was that open look of curiosity that Ginny possessed. Hermione had to wonder whether Harry realised just how similar his mother was in appearance to the girl he was in love with. Ginny's eyes were brown, however, and as much as Hermione liked Ginny, her eyes were nothing to the girl in front of her. The green eyes seemed to enhance everything, making her skin finer, her hair richer, and her lips pinker. Lily Evans was really quite stunning.

Hermione attempted to smooth her own unruly curls in a self-conscious way.

"This is Hermione Granger, Miss Evans," Dumbledore said, sounding suitably proud considering who she was supposed to be. "Hermione is my niece, and I am pleased to say that she has transferred to Hogwarts from Beauxbatons Academy."

Lily's green eyes lit up at the mention of the French school and her apparent relationship to the Headmaster. When Dumbledore went on to explain that she was also a Gryffindor, Lily appeared quite enraptured.

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Hermione," Lily said, and she offered her hand in welcome. Hermione looked at it and knew that she couldn't take that hand without breaking down. She instinctively shrunk away from it, and Lily's smile faded a little as she withdrew the proffered hand. "It must have been wonderful going to school in France," she said, but the pleasure in her voice had, like her smile, faded a little.

"Yes," Hermione replied stiffly, aware that Dumbledore's hand on her shoulder had tightened significantly. "It was very... nice." She felt her cheeks colour. She had been to France once in her life on holiday, and she had no idea what going to school there would possibly be like. "I'm sure Hogwarts will be just as good," she finished lamely.

"I am sure you will make Hermione feel welcome," Dumbledore said, ignoring the awkwardness between them. To Hermione he then added, "I will leave you in Lily's capable hands now, Hermione. You know where to find me if you need me."

Hermione could have thrown herself around his feet and clung to the hem of his robes as he walked away. She didn't want to be left in the capable hands of the future dead Mrs. Potter. She had no idea what to say. She offered an awkward smile to Lily who in turn began ushering people up the bench to make room for Hermione to sit down.

Hermione took the space nervously, wondering if it would be better if she ended up like the loathsome Snape, sitting at the end of the table alone. Opposite sat two girls who looked her up and down with interest, and after a round of introductions, she learned that their names were Rosa and Florence, and they were Lily's best friends. After some rudimentary questions about Beauxbatons, France and Hermione's famous uncle—all of which she deterred with vague and uncooperative answers—they went back to the conversation they were having before Dumbledore's interruption.

"He's cute," Florence said, reaching for some toast, "and there is nothing wrong with going to Hogsmeade with him."

"It's not as though he wants to go to Hogsmeade for tea and cake, Florence!" Lily replied scornfully. She leaned forward and looked a little desperate. "You know exactly what he wants, a couple of drinks at the Hog's Head, and a quick grope out the back!"

"He's been after you for years," Florence reasoned. "I really don't think he's after a quick grope."

Rosa rolled her eyes. "Good God, Lily, how many times have we had this conversation? Just go to Hogsmeade with him!"

All three turned to stare at James Potter, who took the opportunity to ruffle his hair so that it stood out in all directions and wave at Lily who smiled in spite of herself.

"He's a bloody big-headed git," Lily said with more than a hint of affection.

"Now if it was Sirius..." Rosa said, and she and Florence exchanged knowing looks.

"If it was Sirius, we wouldn't even be discussing it," Lily said crisply. "At least James would only want a grope!"

"Oh good grief, Lily!" Rosa was shaking her head, exasperated by what was obviously an oft-had discussion. "It's not as though he's hideous or anything. He obviously likes you, and, believe it or not, you like him too! Just go to bloody Hogsmeade with him! If he takes you anywhere near the Hog's Head, you can slap him and leave."

Lily rolled her eyes heavenward and gave them the answer that Hermione suspected she'd wanted to give all along, "Alright, I'll go."

And then Florence and Rosa looked so excited at the impending date that it could have been them going instead of Lily. Hermione looked away from the girls and was suddenly glad that her best friends were two boys who were remarkably thick when it came to romance. She seemed to remember Ron bemoaning Lavender's neediness, and Harry once admitting that Ginny made his stomach ache, but such comments were generally followed by some rather pathetic displays of masculinity and much punching of shoulders. Harry and Ron did not squeal with delight or start yabbering about how they should wear their hair in a week's time.

"He is a bit of a pig though," Rosa said with sudden negativity. "I mean, he's always hexing some unsuspecting first year."

"But it's all in fun!" Florence protested.

"And he has improved in the last year or so," Lily added.

"And he wouldn't hurt anyone!"

"And he's mellowed a lot," Lily cried, again coming to her would-be-groper's defence. "He hasn't hexed anyone this year that I know of!"

"Snivellus," Rosa and Florence said in unison.

They all, Hermione included, craned to stare at the end of the Slytherin table.

"Well, yes..." Lily turned back to her plate uncomfortably. "But he... Severus gives as good as he gets."

"And I suppose he doesn't really classify as an innocent first year," Rosa mused. "Actually, he doesn't really classify as anything at all."

At this Florence burst into laughter, and Rosa soon joined in, declaring herself very naughty for saying such a thing. Hermione noticed that Lily, while smiling at her friends, did not join in the laughter. She glanced back at the Slytherin table and shook her head, as though there was nothing that could be done for it.

"Oh, come on, Lily," Rosa said in a robust way. "Don't get all missish and affronted. You know exactly what he thinks of you, so why feel sorry for him?" She nodded in Snape's direction with a sniff. "Gods, look at him. A face only a mother could love and a personality that's worse."

Hermione snorted with laughter, so sharp and sudden that Lily looked suddenly stricken.

"Oh, come on, he's not *that* bad."

"He's not that good either," Rosa retorted.

"Or have we found a possible new match, Miss Evans?" Florence teased. "Do I hear the pitter patter of tiny Snapes in your future?"

Hermione almost choked on her pumpkin juice, and Lily looked mortified at the very idea. Then suddenly the three of them burst into hysterical laughter at their own idiocy, and thankfully they changed the subject.

Florence was failing Divination, and Lily reasoned that with such appalling second sight it was little wonder. Rosa had a crush on Sirius, but his reputation for womanising was well known, and she didn't want to be another notch on what, from all accounts, was a heavily whittled bed post.

Hermione turned her attention back to her breakfast, wishing that she could relate in some way to the girls around her. They were so happy. Their worries were of boys and failing grades. Hermione had been entrenched in a darker world from her first year at the school. In recent months, love had become something more desperate than innocent, something to try and extract some kind of comfort from when the horrors of the war became too great. She remembered the stolen kisses with Ron in the darkness of damp alley ways. They were nothing more than brief moments when their situation could be forgotten and they could pretend that all was well in the world.

These girls would discover that world soon enough. Hermione would never know what happened to Florence and Rosa, but Lily was going to die in a handful of years. She would die knowing that her husband was already dead somewhere in their house and desperately hoping that she had saved her son with her sacrifice.

Hermione looked down the table to where James was trying not to look interested in what the girls were talking about. She wanted to say something. Something like, "No Lily, he's not after a quick grope, he loves you and he's going to give you the most wonderful son. *And then you'll both die.*"

She closed her eyes. She had to put what was going to happen out of her mind.

"Do you have your timetable yet?"

Lily had to repeat the question twice before Hermione realised that she was talking to her.

"What? Oh, sorry!" she blushed in the face of Lily's questioning expression. They no doubt thought her an idiot. "I was miles away..."

"Don't worry," Lily reassured her. "Starting a new school must be hard. Leaving all your friends behind, you must miss them."

"Yes," Hermione said truthfully, "I do."

"Will you see your friends over the Christmas break?"

"No, I'll be staying here for Christmas."

"Oh, of course! Professor Dumbledore is your uncle! It must be amazing having such a powerful wizard in the family... I never knew he had a sister."

"Um, yes, well, she's a lot younger than he is ..."

Lily smiled in a reassuring way. "So, *do* you have your timetable yet?"

"Oh, err, yes." Hermione hoisted her bag up from the floor and pulled out the roll of parchment with her timetable on it. Lily quickly smoothed it out on the table for them all to pore over, and Hermione cringed as they began to dissect her choice of subjects.

"Wow, you really believe in filling up your day, don't you?" Florence said.

"I like to keep myself busy," Hermione replied, but her eyes widened as she looked at just what Dumbledore had crammed into it. She could not recall giving him her class preferences, yet he had everything there. Not enough to warrant a Time-Turner though, she noted with some bleak humour.

"Hmm, well, you have Charms first, I can take you there. Rosa can take you to Arithmancy, and that's just down the hall from Ancient Runes. We have a break then, so I can show you around the grounds, and then you can come to Defence Against the Dark Arts with me, then there's Transfiguration I think you'll like Professor McGonagall, she's pretty amazing. Then there's lunch, and double Potions to finish. I can take you there too."

"It's in the dungeons, right?" Hermione said quickly. The prospect of spending the entire day attached to Lily Evans was not a good one, not if she planned on keeping any information about Lily's future to herself. Although just how she would broach the subject of the girl's death, she had no idea. "I'm sure that I'll be able to find my way around."

Lily gave her an odd look, one that was repeated on the faces of her two friends. After a moment, Lily managed to shrug. "Well then, that's fine. I can still show you around the school at break and ..."

"Oh, no, it's not necessary. I have a map, and I'm sure that will be perfectly adequate." Another lie, but a reasonable one.

Lily looked thoroughly confused, as though the idea that someone might not want to know her was utterly unheard of, and she could only manage a thin "oh" by way of reply.

Hermione stuffed the timetable back into her bag and got up from the table. "If you'll excuse me," she said bluntly, and she walked away from the girls, fully aware of what they must be thinking as she left.

She was not there to make friends, so the fact that she distinctly heard Rosa's voice referring to her as a bitch should not mean anything to her. But of course it did. Hermione had to put it out of her mind and concentrate on getting back to Harry and Ron.

She went from breakfast to Charms, wandering the halls for a while before the class started and enjoying the fact that she was there again. While there was no one about, she could pretend that she had never left. She had missed the school, and while she wandered, it felt good to be there.

Charms brought back the feeling of unease, however. Lily, as it turned out, was quite brilliant at Charms. So good that Hermione found herself feeling distinctly threatened. She was used to being the best and the brightest in the class, and the prospect of being outdone by the redhead caused panic to well in her. It was entirely ridiculous of course. She did not need to excel, she didn't really need to do anything at all, but she was used to working hard. She was also used to being the best when it came to magic. She had never realised that she was so competitive. Harry and Ron had told her as much, but she had never really believed them.

The rest of her morning passed with relative ease. She refrained from putting her hand in the air as best she could, desperate as she was to blend into the background. She found Snape in her Arithmancy and Ancient Runes classes, but as with breakfast, he kept to himself. Hermione could not help but watch him, noticing that he often pushed his face so far into his books that she suspected he may need glasses. At recess Lily renewed her offer of a tour around the grounds, and Hermione rounded on her so unkindly that she had cause to doubt her own sanity.

"Look, I am sure you are a lovely person, but I really don't need your help. I am perfectly capable of finding my own way around the school!"

"I didn't mean to suggest that you ..."

"It's fine, really it is. Now why don't you go and find your friends? I'll get myself to classes on my own I assure you."

Lily took a step back, and her features finally hardened. "If that's the way you want it," she said coldly.

"Yes, that's the way I want it," Hermione replied.

"I'll just let you know, not everyone will be impressed by you being Professor Dumbledore's niece ..."

"That's fine. It's not as if he and I are close. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to get something to eat."

Lily turned on her heel and walked away, without bothering to reply.

Hermione watched her go and hated herself. Dear God, she had just been a miserable bitch to her best friend's mother. It made her ache to think that in some strange way, Lily would disapprove of her and Harry being friends. She wanted to run after her and explain, begging for some kind of pardon for her behaviour. But of course, she did nothing of the sort. She let Lily walk away, telling herself that it was for the best.

Defence Against the Dark Arts was immediately after lunch, and Hermione found her nightmare made real inside that classroom. They were all there, all of them. The room had been arranged in a semi-circular fashion that reminded Hermione of pictures she had once seen of the Colosseum in Rome. They all looked down on the professor who stood before them all with great humour. Professor Hinton was the latest in the Defence Against the Dark Arts position. He seemed an excellent teacher upon first impressions. He was in turns serious and witty and was able to keep the class enthralled throughout his lessons.

Towards the end of the class, he disappointed them all, however, but Hermione was astonished at how well he handled them.

"Some of you will be pleased to know that we will no longer be finishing our classes with a duelling lesson," he said, and at the many groans of disappointment, he nodded and grinned. "Yes, well, we don't want a repeat of Friday's misadventure, and I personally don't want to spend my lunch hour scraping Mr. Potter and Mr. Snape off the walls... again."

"It wouldn't be so bad if Snively could block worth a..."

"Thank you, Mr. Black," Hinton said, settling them down. "I am sure we are all aware of your opinion; however, I might remind you of just who ended up in the hospital wing."

Sirius shot Snape a look of pure venom while James Potter looked distinctly uncomfortable at the memory. Across the room, Snape was looking quite self satisfied.

Instead of duelling, they made a start on Patronus Charms which they would be studying for the remainder of the week. Hermione was well aware of how to conjure one, but had never studied the theory behind them.

"So, who can tell me what the Patronus Charm is used for?" the Professor asked, and a number of hands shot into the air. "Yes, Mr. Lupin?"

"They are used to ward off Dementors," Lupin said from his position behind James.

"Excellent, that is exactly right. Dementors seek to live off the happiness and ultimately the souls of other living beings. As wizards, we have the Patronus Charm to aid in our defence against these creatures. The Patronus is a silvery phantom-like shape, usually that of an animal, which is the embodiment of the positive thoughts of the one casting the charm. The incantation itself is Expecto Patronum from the medieval Patronus, meaning a patron saint, a patron or assistant, and Expecto, from the Latin meaning to expel from the chest that is to send forth from oneself." The Professor stopped, and a small frown creased his brow as a pale hand rose into the air from the class before him. "Yes, Mr. Snape?"

"What about using them as messengers?"

It was the first time Hermione had heard him speak since she'd reached that time, but judging from the stifled giggles around the class, and the sudden strained look on the face of their Professor, it wasn't the first time he'd said something in that room.

"Messengers?" Hinton asked dubiously, as though he knew something more was coming.

"They can be used to convey messages across distances, and as each one is unique to the caster, no one can mistake who the message is from."

"No," Hinton said, but it was an uneasy no. "Using a Patronus to send a message would not work. They are attached to their owners and are silent, they couldn't travel distances without their owners being nearby, attempting to use them as messengers would be a useless exercise."

"You're wrong," Snape said bluntly.

Hinton looked incredulous at the statement. "Severus, the Patronus Charm has been conjured for well over a thousand years, and there has never been a shred of document evidence to support your theory."

"Which means that it hasn't been written down, *not* that it can't be done."

"Give it up, Snivellus," someone called from the other side of the room, "it's all bollocks!"

Hinton smiled in spite of his position, and turned to stare at the greasy little odd-ball he had for a student. "I think you'll have to give that theory away, Severus," he said, "It isn't workable."

Snape scowled from behind the greasy curtains of hair. "Dumbledore versus Grindelwald," he said quietly.

"This isn't a history lesson, Severus."

"It doesn't have to be," Snape insisted, determined to make his point. "When Dumbledore was cornered by Grindelwald, a silver Phoenix was seen flying across the highland moors where he was trapped. It disappeared into thin air, and moments later reinforcements arrived and the battle was won. The Phoenix was his Patronus. It alerted Dumbledore's followers to his predicament and they came to his aid."

"That is a stretch, Mr. Snape."

Another ripple of laughter ran through the room, and Hermione sat back with some dismay. The Professor may well have been good, but he had no vision, and the idea he was dismissing was not only plausible, it was accurate. The Order of the Phoenix used the Patronus Charm to communicate with each other on a regular basis. Of course, it was one of Dumbledore's brilliant ideas, and not something that was commonly known by those who were not in the Order. That Snape had been able to work it out was quite astounding.

"Miss Granger," Professor Hinton said, snapping her attention back to the room. "You are Professor Dumbledore's niece. Perhaps you can shed some light on Mr. Snape's theory."

Hermione shifted uncomfortably. She could lie. She didn't want to side with Snape, and yet she knew that to lie would misinform students who would soon need every weapon they could possibly get in the fight against Voldemort. To tell them such blatant untruths would be unforgivable.

"There is no reason why the Patronus Charm couldn't be used to send a message," she said carefully. "Using a Patronus has many advantages. The Patronus is an anti-dark arts device, and as such it is able to resist the work of many dark wizards. Also, it is uninhibited by physical boundaries, and a wizard needs nothing more than a wand to cast it."

Once again Hinton was looking incredulous, and Hermione was well aware that all eyes were suddenly on her.

"And how do you suggest the Patronus is sent?" Hinton asked, sounding a little hostile. "How would one overcome the issue of distance, given that what Mr. Snape is suggesting means that the Patronus would need to be sent instantaneously?"

Hermione stared evenly at the Professor and decided that she really didn't like the man, given that he wasn't open to discussion and was now attempting to ridicule her in front of the class.

"Oh, I don't know," she replied with a hint of sarcasm. "Given that we can Apparate owls and parchment messages all over the Ministry of Magic, perhaps it wouldn't be so difficult to do the same with a Patronus?" She demurred then and raised an eyebrow. "But of course, you're the Professor, and I'm sure you'd know a great deal more about these matters than I would."

Hinton stared at her strangely, and the silence in the classroom became quickly uncomfortable. Hermione didn't shrink from it however; she had something that none of these people didn't; practical experience in a war. She could possibly have led the class with as much success as the Professor at that point.

The bell sounded throughout the school, signalling the end of class and all speculation on the subject for that day at least. They were told to read up on the Patronus Charm and the following day they would learn how to cast them. As Hermione was already able to cast her Patronus, she wondered if she could miss the next day's lesson.

She didn't make it to the door of the classroom before Hinton stopped her, and the look on his face was stern.

"It's an interesting theory," he said.

"It's more than a theory," she replied evenly.

"Don't get the wrong idea, Miss Granger, I welcome an exchange of ideas in my classroom, but I don't want to encourage the likes of Mr. Snape to think that things are possible when they quite plainly aren't. He is very dedicated and very bright, but he has some strange ideas of what constitutes Dark Arts and the defence of them, and he has little belief in the extent of his power. You don't need to encourage him to make a fool out of himself just so that you can become popular with the other students."

"I wasn't doing anything of the sort!" Hermione protested. "He made a valid point and you dismissed it. Perhaps his problem isn't the extent of his power, but your desire to limit it."

Professor Hinton was surprised at being addressed in such a way, and Hermione had to wonder what was happening to the respectful student she had once been. She was, she realised, beginning to sound like Harry when he didn't agree with a teacher. It was hardly conducive to making herself invisible, but this man was the one person who could prepare these people for what was to come and she felt that she had to do something to make him take action.

"Will we be learning cloaking spells?" she asked. "Protection spells? Shields at the very least?"

Hinton actually laughed at her then. "Miss Granger, you sound as though you want us to prepare for war!"

It was exactly what she wanted; she just wished she could tell him that.

"I can't do this," Hermione declared as she paced Dumbledore's office. It was officially her lunch break, and she had already been offered sandwiches and tea, both of which were sitting on the Headmaster's desk uneaten. "They're everywhere! It's like they are trying to ambush me every five minutes, and Lily Evans is some kind of fucking saint!"

Dumbledore's eyes widened at her language, but he said nothing, allowing her rant to continue.

"She's so bloody nice! And she's smart and beautiful..." Hermione turned to the Headmaster, stopping her pacing briefly. "Can't she have some kind of flaw? She has everything going for her, it's just a bloody ... tragedy!"

"You are letting what you know of her to cloud your judgement, Hermione," Dumbledore replied seriously. "You know that Lily Evans will become Lily Potter and that she will not only become the mother of your best friend, but that she will sacrifice herself to save his life. You are looking at Miss Evans with eyes tainted by this knowledge. She seems a saint to you because you already believe that she is."

"Don't try to out logic me!" she snapped and resumed her pacing with vigour. She half expected him to remind her of just who she was talking to, but he did not.

"Hermione," he said gently, "I cannot force you to attend the school. We have already discussed this. In your own time you chose not to return to school..."

"I didn't *choose* not to return! My God, you died and left us with some half-arsed clues about Horcruxes! I've spent the last nine months fighting and sleeping wherever could afford enough shelter to keep us dry. You think I chose that?"

"I am sorry, Hermione, that your childhood was cut so terribly short." Dumbledore paused, obviously expecting her to continue, but when she said nothing at all, he sat back in his chair. "Sit down, Hermione," he said, "and drink your tea."

She shook her head vigorously, but sat down and stared at her knees until they became little more than fabric covered blurs. When he placed a steaming cup of tea into her hands, she accepted it without question.

"Crying is not necessarily an evil thing."

"If I start, I might not stop," she whispered.

"I can assure you that you'd stop." He chuckled softly. "I think we all have moments when we believe that we could cry forever, but we stop eventually, and then we do what we must to get by. You are still fighting a war that is yet to happen, and the sad fact is that you have nothing to fight against. You can hate Peter Pettigrew, and you can plot Severus Snape's demise, but at this moment, in this time, they are still boys and are still innocent of any crime. Whatever they may do in the future, they are innocent now."

"I know," she said in a small voice, "but I don't know what to do."

"I can lock you away, if that is what you truly want, but I can only warn you against it. I have some very clever friends who are convinced that they can create a Time-Turner that can take you back to your own time, but clever or not, it will take time. It could be months."

"Months?" Her voice sounded hollow to her own ears, and she felt her stomach drop. "It can't take that long."

"Alas, Hermione, it is more than likely that it *will* take that long. And how would you prefer to spend that time? Locked away from the world, or taking the opportunity to learn everything you can?"

"It isn't the same without Harry and Ron." It sounded foolish and she knew it, but it was the truth. She wanted to be a student, she had certainly missed it, but she wanted Ron and Harry there too. "And what happens next? I stay here and I act like a normal eighteen-year-old for months on end, and then what? I go back to all that darkness and horror. What if I can't stand it?"

And there it was, the thing she feared the most. What if she became comfortable in the safety that Hogwarts provided and didn't want to go back? Could she possibly be so mercenary as to choose safety over her friends and responsibilities?

It was useless to think about it. This place would not stay safe for long; they would soon be at war anyway.

As though reading her thoughts, Dumbledore gave her a sad smile. "Voldemort is gathering strength even now," he said. "The Knights of Walpurgis, who include some of the most influential families in our world, have earned a reputation of late for their views and opinions regarding the Muggle Protection Act, as well as a few other issues that the Ministry are dealing with. From what I have heard, Voldemort has become prolific with the organisation, going so far as to becoming their head. Now the organisation has gone underground, which is odd considering it was respected for more than a century."

"I don't understand, who are the Knights of Walpurgis?"

"I believe that they are to become what you call Death Eaters. The Knights of Walpurgis have existed in our world for a very long time. They have an annual meeting in the Harz mountains on Walpurgis night. Their membership is notoriously strict: only pure-bloods allowed."

"But Voldemort isn't a pure-blood," Hermione said. "He's a half-blood. He's preaching purity of blood to a group of halfwits who think he's right! Maybe if someone takes the time to point out his own bloodline, they might turn away from him."

"Do you really think that will help, Hermione?" Dumbledore asked. "In our world we have a habit of dismissing things that we find unpleasant. Tom Riddle Voldemort is telling these people exactly what they want to hear, he is preaching to the converted if you like. Voldemort panders to the beliefs of those who he wishes to seduce, and it is not only the purebloods who are listening. Our bloodlines are dying out, and whilst there are those who refuse to marry anything other than pure resulting in some admittedly half-witted offspring the majority are not so foolish. They will marry a half-blood if necessary."

"So they'll marry down rather than marry a sister?" Hermione asked sarcastically. "And what about Lucius Malfoy? If pure-bloods are so hard to find, what threw him and Narcissa Black together?"

"As I said, we have a habit of dismissing things that we find unpleasant. The Malfoys and the Blacks are both very proud families, and it is very easy to wipe an undesirable name from the family tree."

"So you're saying they're not pure-bloods?"

"I'm saying that they are as pure as you'll find in this day and age. The Black family less so than the Malfoys."

"And does Lucius Malfoy know that?"

"I dare say he does."

"So why is he marrying her?"

"Is it so far fetched to believe that he might love her?"

Hermione coughed out an incredulous laugh.

"The Malfoys have a bad reputation, and Lucius Malfoy is as proud as any of them, but he is hardly devoid of all human emotion. He is very capable of falling in love."

"And what would his master think of that? Doesn't Voldemort demand total devotion?"

Dumbledore laughed and shook his head. "At the moment he is seducing them. The devotion comes later, Hermione. Most of the old families have fallen into various levels of poverty, only those who are clever in business, or who understand how to earn a living in these modern times, are able to live the life that they believe they deserve."

Hermione glanced around the ancient room. "These modern times?" she asked with a wry smile.

"Well," Dumbledore admitted, "modern for Wizards. Many of these families hadn't worked before this century. They had servants, money, and power, and the ability to obtain more should they need it. Muggle-borns, on the other hand, came from families to whom the concept of working for a living is perfectly common. They are often more logical and industrious than those who have grown up surrounded by magic. Around the turn of the century the half-bloods and Muggle-borns revolutionised the Ministry of Magic. They instigated the Muggle Protection Act, and they made it illegal to use magic to fill one's vaults at Gringotts. The rule of the pure-blood was over, and so too went a way of life that had existed for a millennia. There has been bitterness and resentment ever since, and now along comes a man who says he's the heir of Slytherin and who is promising to return their power and glory. It is rhetoric to be sure, but rhetoric that they like the sound of."

"And the half-bloods? What's their excuse?"

For an ambitious half-blood, Voldemort's ideas are enticing. He is promising them equal footing with pure-bloods, and you must never underestimate some half-bloods' desire to be pure. As frightening as it seems, the half-bloods are often the most racist. They want so much to be pure that they despise half of what they are. Could you imagine a more terrible fate?"

Hermione honestly could, but she doubted that Dumbledore asked the question to receive an answer. "Why would someone hate their family so much?"

"Perhaps their families don't give them much reason to think anything else. Muggles..." Dumbledore paused for a moment, and he looked troubled by his thoughts. "There are a surprising number of Muggles who think that our kind are disgusting creatures, freaks of nature that have no right to exist. And equally unfortunate is the number of our kind who take a Muggle spouse and fail to tell them what they are. Sometimes they wait until after the marriage, and sometimes they wait until after their child is born and starts displaying their powers. The Muggle parent resents their child and their partner, and that resentment mars the child's life forever. They are often neglected or abused, and by the time the child reaches adulthood, their hatred for that parent has grown into a hatred for all Muggles. And Voldemort knows how to take that hatred and use it to his best advantage."

"And is that Snape's story?" Hermione asked bitterly.

"Perhaps, but I admit I know little of his family life."

"His father is a Muggle, his mother's maiden name was Prince, and he called himself 'The Half-Blood Prince.' He wanted to obliterate the part of him that is *Snape*."

"And yet he is still known as Severus Snape in your time. He doesn't seek to make the change permanent."

"Maybe it wouldn't stick; maybe no one believed the Prince bit."

Hermione closed her eyes. Her head had begun to ache, a dull throb at the back that threatened to become a raging pain to plague her every waking moment.

"I think I offended Professor Hinton," she said quietly.

"No doubt he'll be in later to tell me about it."

"And I have Potions after lunch."

"I believe Professor Slughorn's class is very advanced."

"I've had him as a teacher before," she reminded him, and she scowled at the pain in her head.

"You don't sound particularly impressed," Dumbledore said, once again amused.

"I didn't find him very fair. If you weren't one of his favourites, then you didn't exist."

"You will find him much the same now, Hermione. But never fear, with such illustrious connections as myself, you can't fail to make his list."

"I suppose that should make me happy," she said miserably.

"Eat your lunch, Hermione, and enjoy your Potions class as best you can."

note: thanks Ellie for betaing

Chapter 5 - A Bad Day

Chapter 5 of 5

A Time Turner Story. Finding Horcruxes is dangerous business and the trio are looking forward to a night at the Hogs Head. But then a Time Turner accident changes everything...

Chapter 5

By the time the lunchtime break was finished, word had spread that the new girl was some kind of anti-social snob who did not want to mix with anyone. Hermione felt distinctly conspicuous as she walked down to the dungeons for her Potions class. With every step that she took, she was acutely aware of the stares of other students and the whispers of some dreadful wrong that she had done poor Lily Evans who had been nothing but nice to her.

Hermione gave herself some kind of cold comfort by thinking it was all for the best. She humoured herself by thinking that Dumbledore would admire her forbearance in the face of such total disdain.

Professor Slughorn's classroom was lighter than Hermione remembered it being. The answer was really quite simple; Snape had kept the high and narrow windows perpetually covered. Snape had liked it dark and dismal; Slughorn, on the other hand, did not. Professor Slughorn liked High Tea with his favourites. He liked luxuries and comfort. He liked his Potions room light and bright. The windows were bare and spotlessly clean, allowing long beams of light to stream into the room and lull the unsuspecting student into believing that it was warmer outside than it really was. Strangely, she had forgotten most of her year with Slughorn as Potions master, and deep down she feared that it could be because Harry had received so much attention in the class and she so little. It was a fear that she loathed to admit, but it had been a day for realisations, and she decided that she may as well add this to the collection.

Hermione had already decided that Potions was going to be her problem class. Professor Slughorn had known Dumbledore for a good many years, they were almost as old as each other, and Slughorn should know that Dumbledore didn't have a niece. And quite aside from that, Hermione had never particularly liked Professor Slughorn, and if he did believe the story about her being Dumbledore's niece, it could possibly be worse than if he thought the story a load of old bollocks.

When she stepped through the door, it was clear that he did not think it a load of old bollocks. The loathsome professor began to gush the moment she entered the classroom.

"Miss Granger!" Slughorn exclaimed with great joy. "I can't tell you how pleased I was when your uncle told me that you would be joining us! I am sure that you will find our little class most challenging."

Hermione suppressed a groan and wished that she were miles away.

Slughorn positively beamed at her, and then his quick eyes darted about the room. "Now where are we going to put you?"

Hermione cringed at the delight he displayed at the prospect of squeezing her in. She looked around at the surprisingly full class, and the, not so surprisingly, hostile expressions. Students aiming for Advanced Potions had been few and far between under Snape's regime, but this was not the case in Slughorn's classroom. Anyone with a vague inclination to the subject was allowed entry, and the room seemed crammed full of students wanting attention from the Potions master. She wondered if they were all his favourites or if many of them just hoped to have the privilege.

"Ahh, *perfect!*" he exclaimed. "There is a place available beside Severus!"

Hermione started so violently that she thought she might gag. A ripple of laughter ran through the classroom, but it was the look on Snape's face that caused Slughorn to fuss elaborately.

"Now, now, Severus, there is no need to look like that. I am sure that Miss Granger will prove to be a delightful companion."

Delightful companion or hag in a gown, Snape was obviously not going to take the prospect of sharing his desk with any kind of grace. He scowled and looked as though he might spit at her if she took another step closer.

Hermione attempted a smile and knew that it came out of a grimace. She didn't move, and in the end the professor had to physically edge her to the desk and urge her to set her cauldron up beside Snape's. Snape had other ideas however; he had already set his cauldron up in the middle of the desk and was not going to move it without being ordered to.

"Come along now, Severus. How do you expect Miss Granger to get her things set up if you don't make some effort to move your cauldron?"

Snape, who had no plans at all to be civil, flashed a look of pure venom at Hermione and then began moving his equipment with harsh, angry moves. He all but slammed his cauldron onto his side of the desk.

Hermione returned his scowl and didn't bother to thank him.

They were making a seeking potion, a complex mix that could be used to guide its owner to someone or something that they wanted to find. It was one of the few potions that was not imbibed, and when made correctly, it would resemble liquid mercury. It was also one of the most volatile potions in the school curriculum. The brewing process was a dangerous one, but once complete, it was stable and safe, and if made properly, it could last for a century or more, able to be used over and over again.

Slughorn explained that the potion would take at least three days to construct and another month for brewing and decanting. He was giving them a week to assemble the basic potion, apparently he expected mistakes to be made, something that Snape would never have allowed in his own classroom. Once he'd finished giving his instruction, he waddled over to his star pupil and leaned heavily on the work desk so that he could peer at Snape's work.

"I do wish that you wouldn't scribble all over your books, Severus," he said, shaking his head disparagingly. "It is dreadfully untidy, and who is going to hire someone who feels compelled to scrawl meaningless notes all over everything that they own?"

"No one, Professor," Snape muttered, sounding very much as though he was reciting some well read verse.

"No one is right," Slughorn continued, obviously pleased by his response. "You really are very clever, Severus, but you will never go far unless you do something to smooth out those rough edges."

Snape muttered another well practiced reply and bowed his head so that his dark, oily hair fell forward and obscured his face, but not before Hermione saw him roll his eyes.

Slughorn then slithered his way to Hermione's side of the desk and peered at the collection of ingredients that she had selected from the store cupboard. Before he could make comment, however, Hermione excused herself, pleading a need to get something else. The truth was that she didn't want to sit there while the professor waxed lyrical about her famous uncle and about how such an illustrious connection would ensure that she would be powerful as well. Hermione had no desire for invitations to afternoon teas or late suppers. She conveniently forgot that she had enjoyed them when she had first been invited to the few he had given during her sixth year; she could only think back on them with abhorrence. And aside from that abhorrence, it was quite clear who his favourite was in this room rough edges and all.

Once Slughorn had moved on to dote on Lily, Hermione returned to the desk and began laying out her equipment and preparing her ingredients. She hadn't progressed far when she had a quick look around the room: one that gave her pause to think. Students wandered to and from the store cupboard at will while Hermione had retrieved everything at once. Snape had also ensured that he had everything he required before he began. In fact, she was uncomfortably aware that their workspaces looked remarkably similar. In Snape's future classroom, wandering about was not tolerated. Snape had a strict way of working: one that he ensured everyone who passed through his classes adhered to. It struck her suddenly that he had managed to influence more than a generation of potions makers to be highly organised in their work practises simply because he was. She felt the slightest surge of begrudging respect for him and instantly quashed it.

It also struck her that she had never seen Snape make a potion before. He had certainly made them while a professor at the school, but never in front of his students. She watched him now, and she was surprised at how quickly he worked. While others were still reading their instructions, he was already well into creating his potion. She suspected that he was no longer ignoring her, but was now so lost in a world of his own that he'd forgotten that she was there at all. He also did not follow the instructions given in their textbook. If the book said to chop and he didn't agree, he would change it with a swift stroke of his quill and then do as he thought best. He would use his fingers instead of a pestle, the heel of his hand instead of a flat-bladed knife, and at one point he even used his elbow to crush lacewing flies. It was as though he thought the very process a tactile experience, and she had to wonder what he would have thought of someone doing the same thing in his classroom. Slughorn obviously thought the practise was perfectly fine; he stopped by once more, shook his head as though astonished by the brilliance, and left Snape to his own devices.

After a while, Hermione realised that she was woefully behind with her own potion and that Slughorn had left the classroom, causing the level of chatter to rise around the room.

"Hey, it looks like Snivellus has himself a girlfriend!"

Hermione swung around and glared at the culprit sitting smugly at the back of the room. Sirius Black was sitting with a pretty blonde who giggled and stared adoringly at him. Hermione sneered and snorted with derision. She had to wonder why he never married; it certainly wasn't for lack of women falling over themselves to be with him. Then again, with such temptation available, perhaps he saw no need to tie himself to one woman. And as she thought back on it, she remembered that he would have been very young when he was sent to Azkaban, perhaps he hadn't had time to marry. She turned back to her cauldron, deciding that ignoring Sirius and his giggling friend was more constructive than allowing herself to get angry about being their object of ridicule, or to lament his eventual fate.

While the chatter swelled around her, she took the opportunity to hurry along the progress of her potion. She soon had a bubbling concoction that smelled overwhelmingly of sulphur and had turned a murky shade of green which, according to the textbook, meant the potion was entering its most volatile stage. Beside her, Snape added something to his cauldron and absently swirled his wand to stir. He read the book, and she noticed that he frowned and looked into the bubbling pot, and then he scrawled something along the border of the page.

Something flew past Hermione's ear and landed squarely in the centre of the desk. She stared at it, a rock or shell of some sort, wrapped in wet parchment. She resisted the urge to turn back and glare again, deciding that she wasn't going to give them the satisfaction. She wanted desperately to scream at Sirius to not be so childish and ridiculous, but she hardened her jaw and continued with the potion. Snape, it seemed, hadn't even noticed that something had almost hit one of them.

And then another one came flying from the back of the class, hitting her cauldron in the side and causing it to rock dangerously on its stand. The murky green potion sloshed around, splashing over the side of the pot and splattering across the desk. Hermione's eyes widened as a thin stream of liquid trickled from Hermione's cauldron to the burner beneath Snape's, and as it ignited, they both took a step back from the desk.

Hermione turned back to see Sirius bite his lip.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to hit *yours*."

As though hitting Snape's was going to be any better. She pointed her wand at the flames shooting back towards her pot and was horrified when the spell to extinguish the fire didn't work.

Her cauldron ignited, and the panicked thought of 'this is not good' raced through her head. Snape took another step back as Hermione tried again to put the fire out. She realised far too late that the cauldron was going to explode and that she had no real time to run. While she wanted to shriek, 'Dear God, I'm going to die in a Potions accident,' the classroom erupted into cries of panic and the sound of students running for the door. Hermione stood transfixed in horror as the potion began to spark and pop, and she had to wonder just why she wasn't moving. She needed to run. She needed to do something. It was as though time had stood still and she with it.

Then someone grabbed her arm and pulled her down hard to the floor, and she found herself under the desk and face to face with Severus Snape. Above them, something exploded, and they both covered their heads with their hands. Hermione hissed harshly under her breath, and she muttered half a curse on Sirius and his entire family line. She had never had a cauldron explode, she'd never expected to have a cauldron explode, and she'd certainly never expected to be cowering under a table with Severus Snape and hoping that the room wouldn't burn down with her in it.

A sharp cry alerted her to the fact that there was someone else in the room, and one look found Lily crouched beneath her own desk, waving frantically to get their attention.

Snape moved around Hermione and stared back at Lily and then to the door.

"What do we do now?" Lily called.

"Crawl," he called back and gestured to the door.

It seemed logical, but above them, the heat had caused almost every other cauldron in the classroom to burst into flame, and molten hot potion was dripping from the desks and the walls. Lily was not looking entirely thrilled at the prospect of trying to crawl though it all, and she shrank back under the bench.

"If we don't crawl," Snape told her, "there won't be much left of us to find."

"Professor Slughorn will be back soon," Lily cried desperately.

"It's *Double Potions*, Lily."

When she didn't move, Snape swore softly and pulled his hood over his head. Then to Hermione's astonishment, he began to crawl over to Lily. So not only did he not want to sit next to her but he was also quite happy to leave her behind in a burning classroom!

Then he stopped, turned his hooded head back to her and rolled his eyes. "Well?" he hissed. "Are you coming, or are you going to sit there like a gormless twit?"

There he was, eighteen at most and already referring to her as a twit.

"What happened?" Lily demanded when they finally reached her.

"*Her* cauldron exploded," Snape sneered.

"Sirius Black threw something at it!" Hermione protested, her voice rising to shrillness.

Snape looked unimpressed.

"He was aiming at you!"

"Perhaps we should try and get out of here," Lily reasoned, possibly realising that they could start arguing at any moment and that having boiling potion spilling on her was preferable to listening to them.

They began to crawl towards the door, using each workbench along the way as shelter. Hermione gagged as she crawled, the smoke and fumes causing her to feel faint. By the time they reached the door, it was only her bloody mindedness keeping her going.

Once outside the classroom, she seemed to recover, but she lost all sense of decorum as she stood and saw Sirius Black laughing over the carnage he had caused.

"Do you have no idea that you could have killed us?" she screeched as soon as she could stand. "Jesus fucking Christ, what kind of fucking moronic idiot are you?"

Sirius opened and closed his mouth to protest, but evidently the idea that a girl could speak with such a foul mouth had never occurred to him. Under her questioning glare, he stuttered, and finally he managed, "I didn't mean to hit *your* cauldron."

"Well, you did fucking hit it!" she cried. "And it wouldn't have mattered if you had hit your mark. The result would have been the same! Did you listen to Slughorn? Did you bother reading the 'Highly Explosive' warning in your textbook? Are you really the thick-headed prick you currently appear to be?"

Around her, the students had fallen to silence and were gaping at her in shock. She straightened her singed robes and attempted to smooth her hair.

"Has someone gone to get Professor Slughorn?" Lily asked, breaking the silence but sounding a little hollow.

"Huh? Oh, yes. Bertha's gone to get him," a boy replied. He was still looking at Hermione as though she were some kind of harpy.

They fell back to silence again, and they stayed that way until the unmistakable sounds of Slughorn bustling down the hall way drew their attention.

"Oh! Oh dear! What has happened?" He drew a large globe from his pocket and threw it into the classroom. It burst and a shower of white powder settled over the room, dousing the flames and covering everything in sight.

"What has happened?" Slughorn asked again, angrier this time, and he looked around at the crowd of students, determined to find a culprit. When he saw Hermione, Lily and Snape standing there covered in soot and festering potion, he paled and began shaking his head so violently that his chins wobbled with a slapping sound around his face. "No!" he cried. "No, no, no, no, no! Professor Dumbledore assured me that you were an accomplished potions maker! This will not do at all!"

"It's not my fault!" Hermione protested. "Someone knocked my cauldron over!"

Slughorn was not listening; instead he was fawning over his protégé to ensure that he wasn't damaged in any way.

"Black did it," Snape said in the same quiet voice that he reserved for moments when he really wanted people to listen. "He threw something at my cauldron." Snape smirked and his black eyes narrowed. "He missed."

"Is this true, Mr. Black?" Slughorn asked, but his tone had already convicted Sirius of the crime. When Sirius didn't deny it, Slughorn went on, angrier than Hermione had ever seen him. "Very well then, detention, Mr. Black, and one hundred points from Gryffindor!"

"But, Professor, one hundred points!" For the first time, Sirius looked upset by what had happened.

"Yes, Mr. Black, one hundred points! In all my years of teaching, I've never had an entire classroom burn down! Now, all of you, to the library for the rest of the lesson!"

He drew Hermione aside before she could leave, stopping her in her tracks and guiding her to the doorway of the classroom.

"Miss Granger," he said uneasily, "I am wondering if Potions is perhaps not the right subject for you."

"Professor?"

"Exploding cauldrons are not usually part of our advanced classes."

"But it wasn't my fault! Sirius Black threw something at my cauldron and knocked it over. How is that my fault?"

"It isn't, Miss Granger, but these sorts of incidents should not happen."

"What? Sirius Black acts like an arse, and I get thrown out of the class?"

"I am not throwing you out of the class, Miss Granger."

"Oh, of course not, you would just like me to quit."

"I am just questioning how much you can enjoy the class, given the ... disruption ... your presence seems to cause."

"My presence?" Hermione couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. She wanted to slap the professor's jowls. "He was aiming for Snape!"

"Miss Granger ..."

"I'm not leaving the class," she told him harshly. "This is not my fault. Perhaps if you spent more time teaching your students and less time planning intimate suppers for them, *accidents* like this wouldn't happen!"

She didn't give him a chance to reply. She turned on her heel and walked away, wanting only to find her chambers and acquaint herself with her bed.

Sirius was waiting at the top of the stairs when Hermione emerged from the dungeons, and in her soot-covered state, she was in no mood to see him. She set her jaw and kept walking, even as he fell easily in beside her.

"I really didn't mean to hit your cauldron," he said, producing a winning smile that he obviously hoped would soften her. "I was aiming for Snape's head."

"So you've proved yourself a poor shot," Hermione replied, not bothering to break stride.

"Why didn't you tell me that you were Dumbledore's niece?" He looked at her quizzically. "When I met you yesterday, you didn't mention it."

"I didn't see the point."

"Lily says that you have your own room. She thinks Professor Dumbledore is playing favourites."

"Isn't that what Slughorn does every day?"

"He doesn't give his favourites their own room."

"I daresay he would if he could."

Sirius nodded, as though conceding the point. "Rosa says you're a right cow," he continued.

"She's probably right."

"You don't mind?"

Of course she did, but she wasn't going to let him know that. The truth was that being known as a right cow was going to keep people away, and if she kept people away, she stood a better chance of following Dumbledore's orders. "People speak as they find," she said. "I'm sure Rosa has every reason to think me a cow."

"Why don't you come to the common room?" he asked. "A group of us were going to practise our Patronus Charms for tomorrow."

"No thank you."

They began to climb the stairs to the Gryffindor tower, and Hermione wished that her room was further from it.

"If you don't want to study, we can always talk."

"Why?" Hermione demanded, stopping at last. "Why do you want to talk to me? What is there to talk about? You have advised me that someone thinks I resemble a cow, and you caused my cauldron to burn down the Potions room. What makes you think I want to know you at all?"

"I thought you might want to make friends. We're in the same house after all."

"Yes, well, I am sure there are ample girls in your house who are more than happy to 'talk' to you, but I am not interested."

Sirius' face hardened considerably, and Hermione wagered that he was silently agreeing with Rosa's assessment of her. Under any other circumstances, she would have wanted to know him and all his friends, but it was impossible. And given the disaster of her day, she wanted nothing more than for him to leave her alone.

"If that's the way you feel," he said. He had folded his arms across his chest and was looking surly. "I'm sure you'll have no problem not making friends."

As she turned and continued up the stairs, his voice followed her.

"But it can be a pretty lonely place."

The private chamber that Dumbledore had provided for her was far more than she had expected. What she thought would be a tiny space, with room enough for a narrow bed and a trunk, turned out to be a spacious room that had probably once belonged to a teacher. The large wooden bed was heaped with comfortable looking blankets and quilts, and there was a fireplace, two soft looking armchairs and a desk for study. Further inspection revealed a little bathroom with a toilet and bathtub and even a fresh supply of towels. It was probably modest by most standards, but provided more luxury than she'd had in months.

At the end of the bed, a trunk sat opened and was filled with an assortment of clothes and books that Dumbledore had decided should be hers. They were things that should have made her feel at home, but only served to make her feel more alone. A fresh set of school robes, scarf and tie were placed on top, and underneath she found some long, white cotton nightgowns and what had to be Professor McGonagall's idea of casual clothing. The toiletries that she had found for her use in the hospital wing had been placed in the little bathroom, and she thought that perhaps she should have a bath.

The headache that had started in Dumbledore's office, and which had escalated in the potions disaster, now began to pound inside her skull, and she sank onto the bed with a groan. She was also beginning to feel weak again, the same way that she had the day before, but she hoped that this time it would be due to the difficulty of her day. She decided to make herself some tea, hoping that it would make herself feel better. There was a kettle and a few rusting cauldrons near the fireplace, and when she opened the ancient side board, she found a motley assortment of old china cups, but once she had managed to light the fire, she had to sit down without bothering to prepare herself anything. The feeling of wellness that she had experienced that morning was now well and truly gone, and Hermione felt a little panicked as she entertained the idea that she may have done herself permanent damage.

The day had not been good by anyone's standards. While she had ultimately succeeded in making sure that she made no friends, she certainly didn't feel any happiness about her success. She had managed to make herself repellent to everyone, including her teachers. She wished that Dumbledore would allow her to take her meals in her room as well. Then she could cut herself as much as possible whilst still being the student he wanted her to be.

A knock at her door drew her from her misery for a moment, and then she remembered her aching head and body. She groaned softly and forced herself out of the comfortable chair, no doubt the person at the door would be Dumbledore or perhaps Professor McGonagall enquiring about her day. She could tell them that she felt ill, and perhaps they would fuss over her and fetch Madam Pomfrey. For some reason the thought of someone taking care of her was wonderfully comforting.

But as she pulled the door open, she did not find either professor on the other side. Instead she found the one person she would never have expected to pay her a visit. Severus Snape was standing nervously in the hall, fully aware that he was in Gryffindor territory.

Hermione's grip on the door tightened, and she felt her knuckles turn white.

"What do you want?" she rasped harshly.

He scowled, perhaps expecting some other reception. He had removed his black school robes and was left in a slightly yellowing shirt and his Slytherin tie. His trousers, like his robes, were slightly too short, despite having the hem let down, and his skinny ankles were covered in crumpled grey socks that disappeared into scuffed black school shoes. He ran his hand through his greasy hair, forcing it back and revealing his pale face in full. Hermione was once again struck by just how young he looked; he also looked remarkably surly given that he had come to her door and was yet to say a word.

"Well," she demanded.

"Potions," he said at last.

"What?"

"Are you going to leave the class?"

Hermione glared at him. Was he so desperate to get his desk back that he'd decided to come and make sure she would go?

"I have no plans to quit," she said with open hostility.

"Professor Slughorn is going to test you to see how advanced your Potions knowledge is. If you fail, he'll tell Professor Dumbledore that you can't stay in the class."

Hermione's eyes widened, and she looked at him in disbelief. "You're joking!"

"He's not happy about what happened today."

"Well, it's hardly my fault. Is he planning to test Sirius as well?"

"No," Snape replied blandly.

"So why are you here? Come to gloat?" She couldn't believe that she was going to have to sit a test. Potions was fast becoming more trouble than it was worth. Given that she was not going to see the year out, dropping the subject was beginning to sound like a good idea.

"I can help you pass it," he said.

She reeled with shock. "And why would you do that?"

The slightest of smiles touched his lips. "Well, you're no friend of Sirius Black, and it can't hurt to have someone else who thinks he's a fucking moronic idiot in the class."

The situation could not get much worse. Somehow she had managed to repel the people she really did care about, and in doing so, she had one of the people to whom she harboured true ill will here at her door offering to help her.

"I don't *need* your help," she said unkindly. "I am a perfectly competent potions maker, and I'm sure I'll be able to pass his test."

"Your potion should not have exploded," he said quietly.

"What?"

"Your potion shouldn't have exploded at the point you were up to. It was only just turning green; it shouldn't have become explosive until it was bright green. You added the lacewing flies too early, and the Giloni berries were pulped, not juiced. Had you taken more care your cauldron would have burned, but it wouldn't have exploded, and the classroom wouldn't have burnt down."

"Impossible! I worked to the letter of the book!"

"Perhaps you did, but the books aren't always right."

Hermione's eyes narrowed. Memories of the Half-Blood Prince's old Potions book were still raw in her mind, and she wasn't convinced that following the instructions in her own textbook wouldn't achieve the same result eventually. After everything that had happened, and if she was honest, her humiliation at having Harry best her at Potions for a year, she was determined not to accept any tips that Snape could offer her. She decided to put her faith in the books she had always trusted. The *official* books. "I see," she said. "The textbooks are wrong? All of these students have been making this potion incorrectly for years then? But you, of course, are right?"

"Yes," he said in the same bland tone he'd used before, as though he wasn't boasting, just stating a fact.

"The potion would have worked," she insisted.

"You would have passed," he admitted. "You did what everyone else did. The difference is that when the potion is made properly, it will last for more than a century. Yours would have diminished within a year."

"As I would have passed, I think I'll take my own counsel on the subject. I don't need your help."

He looked her up and down, clearly reassessing his opinion of her. "As you wish," he said in a snide way, and then he turned on his heel and walked away, leaving her to close the door and shake her head in amazement at his visit.

Severus Snape had wanted to help her pass a Potions test. In a matter of years, he'd be calling her a know-it-all and ignoring her as best he could.

She made her way to her bed and lay down. On the little table beside it, she found a pile of things that had been in her robes from when she'd first arrived. Her dirty underwear had, thankfully, been laundered and folded, as had her socks. Even her tampons and crumpled packet of travel tissues were neatly laid out, but the real treasure lay in two battered photographs that had seen better days: one of her parents and the other of Harry and Ron. She looked at both images with such affection that she could have cried.

She had been gone for more than a day, and as she looked at the picture of Ron and Harry, she began to fret over them. What were they doing? Were they frantic? Had they waited for her, hoping she would reappear? Had they expected her to catch up the time and come running out of the forest, cursing her own stupidity? Then again, was that exactly what had happened? Dumbledore would get her back, of that she was certain, so perhaps she had come running out of the forest with such a tale as this to tell.

Yet there was a nagging doubt in the back of her mind. What if they couldn't send her back? What if the Hermione who went to meet Harry and Ron was a woman in her late thirties who had lived her life sequestered away from the world? Could that possibly be her fate?

No. It would never happen that way. Dumbledore was capable of more things than any other wizard alive; he would get her back to her friends. Harry was a powerful wizard, he had cunning and luck on his side, but she hated to think that he could die from something that her knowledge could have possibly helped to prevent. Added to that fear was the fact that she didn't belong here, and her aching body was now ensuring that she knew it. While she had no fear that Madam Pomfrey could set her to rights, she had to wonder just how long she could last before the aches and pains moved beyond Madam Pomfrey's abilities.

What if she never recovered, regardless of what time she was in?

She pulled herself from such morbid thoughts. She had always been the one who was in control, the smart one whom everyone could turn to for her knowledge and abilities. Now here she was, terribly out of control and lost in a time that was not hers. Under it all, she was afraid; afraid that she would always be sick; afraid that she may go mad; afraid that she would never get back; afraid that she would be alone for the rest of her life. Logic told her that she had every right to be this way. She had endured what no one else had, and she had done herself no end of harm. If these things were not reason enough to be out of control and afraid, what else could be?

Hermione was startled by a knock at the door. Dumbledore called her name through the wood, and she reluctantly got up from the bed and let him in.

"You opened the door," he said, sounding delighted. "After your day today, I thought I should call out so that you knew it was me. That way you could have the choice of pretending that you weren't here."

"And why would I not want to talk to you?"

"I believe you burnt down Professor Slughorn's classroom. I was sure you were cursing me for making you go through it all."

"Oh, I am, I assure you."

He looked a little concerned. "You look pale," he said. "Are you not well?"

"I'm fine," she lied, despite knowing that it was pointless lying to him.

He didn't flinch; instead he gestured to the room and asked if he could come in.

"Oh, yes, of course." She stepped aside and allowed him entry.

"I trust the room is to your liking."

"Yes, it's lovely. I didn't expect something so large. I thought it would be just a little space with a bed in it."

Dumbledore chuckled and shook his head at the very notion. "Miss Granger, it is a very big castle, and I believe that you have gone through quite enough to warrant something above a broom cupboard."

She shuffled uncomfortably, thinking of Harry's early years, and then she went to the chairs in front of the fire. She didn't want to collapse into bed with Dumbledore watching. It would only panic him, so she sank, once again, into one of the squishy armchairs.

Dumbledore watched her and then took the chair beside her. "You would be surprised at how easy it was to find this little room for you. No sooner had I thought of it, than this room appeared. It was most convenient."

"Like the Room of Requirement then?"

"Exactly like the Room of Requirement," Dumbledore laughed. "And if you know about the Room of Requirement, then I can assume that you have very little regards for the rules in your own time."

Far from looking disturbed by the thought of a group of rule-breakers in his future, Dumbledore looked thoroughly delighted.

"Sometimes circumstances make following the rules impossible," Hermione said in her own, and Harry's, defence.

"I have no doubt," he agreed. "Now, what are you going to do about your little problem with Potions?"

"*What? I don't* have a problem with Potions! I was fine until some twit knocked my cauldron over, and then Slughorn carried on as though it was my bloody fault! You should have heard him, ranting as though I was some great clumsy troll, disturbing his little angels ..."

"*Professor Slughorn*," Dumbledore said, reminding her of how to address her teacher. "Yes, he informed me of the ...*accident*. He wants you to sit test, to see how much you know."

"To see how much I know?" Hermione was up and pacing then, her brow furrowed at the implication of stupidity on her part. "He is determined to prove that I am some no talent twit."

"He hardly wants to do such a thing ..."

"Oh, yes, he does!" she cried. "He already thinks it, and he's probably all mortified because he had me in his perfect little classroom *.and he made me sit next to Snape!*" She turned on Dumbledore, her fists clenched by her side. "He put me next to the one person in the room that they wanted to throw things at. If I wasn't beside *him*, whatever they threw would have just bounced off the back of his greasy head, and nothing would have happened!"

"Do try to calm down, Hermione."

"I am a decent potions maker! I was top of my class for Merlin's sake!"

"I'm sure you were ..."

"You don't believe me?" she cried.

"Of course I do, Hermione, but you are upset and you need to calm yourself. You have been through more in the last two days than most people go through in a lifetime, and you have every right to be emotional. I would normally be happy to let you take it all out on me, but at the moment you are not doing yourself any good."

She closed her eyes. He was probably right, she felt sick and faint, and even her mind felt drained. She couldn't help but think that she was going mad. She felt her temperature rise so suddenly that she had no chance to settle herself. Her eyes snapped open in panic, and she stumbled, reaching her hand out for something to steady herself. Dumbledore was with her instantly, catching her before she fell in a heap on the floor.

"You'll do yourself damage," he said gently.

"I've already done it," she murmured.

"To bed, I think," Dumbledore told her, guiding her to her bed and ignoring her protests that she was fine.

"I don't know what's wrong with me," she said quietly.

"Madam Pomfrey was afraid that you may have a relapse. I'll go and get her and you get yourself into bed."

"How often is this going to happen?"

"I don't know," Dumbledore admitted. "I am hoping that this will be the last of it, but of course I am no Healer. Madam Pomfrey needs to see you to determine how well you are recovering."

She laughed bitterly at how un reassuring he was. In truth she wanted to lie down and sleep. She could imagine sleeping for days and days. Dumbledore took his leave, promising to return with Madam Pomfrey as quickly as possible. Once he was gone, she dragged the cotton nightgown from the trunk and changed her clothes before crawling into the comfortable bed.

Sleep was not going to come easily, however. Her head throbbed and her stomach churned, and she rolled onto her side, wanting to vomit.

A knock at the door relieved her momentarily as she cried for Dumbledore to enter with Madam Pomfrey and some relief from her current malady. It was not Dumbledore who peered around the door however; it was Lily Evans, who started with alarm upon seeing Hermione looking so ill.

"You're unwell?" she asked, hurrying over to Hermione in the bed.

Hermione wanted to say that she was fine. She had no idea why Lily would come to her room; she would never have thought that she could have so many visitors, especially given her performance that day. But Lily was there, and Hermione had no way to deter her. She mumbled something that even she could not determine and then gagged, realising that she was going to be sick then and there. She sat up, frantic to find something to vomit into. Lily found an old cauldron near the fire and thrust it into Hermione's lap.

"Do you know what it is?" Lily asked as Hermione wretched uncontrollably. "Something you ate?"

"No ... it's fine ..." Hermione spat into the cauldron and lifted her head. "Dumbledore has gone to get Madam Pomfrey ... She knows how to fix it."

Lily looked helpless for a moment and tried to rub Hermione's back in a soothing way. "God, you are warm! I'll get a damp cloth."

Hermione managed to mumble a 'thank you' while Lily rushed to the little bathroom in search of a towel. She hadn't made it back before Hermione began to vomit unceremoniously into the cauldron.

Lily wrinkled her nose a little in disgust, but she moved forward and gently pulled Hermione's hair back and placed the damp cloth over the back of her neck.

"Oh, God," Hermione moaned, "I haven't felt this bad since Harry, Ron and I got into the Dursleys' sherry."

Lily laughed uncertainly and tried to be friendly. "Are Harry and Ron friends of yours from Beauxbatons?" she asked.

"Lord, no." Hermione coughed and lifted her head again. "I think Ron would like it though ... all those girls ..." She stopped and frowned at herself. She wasn't supposed to be talking about Harry and Ron.

"Do you get into the Dursleys' sherry often then?" Lily continued, still trying to make her feel better.

Oh, God, if she knew who I was talking about, she'd think her son is some kind of drunk, and he's not a drunk, he's lovely.

"I'm so sorry," she spluttered, gripping the cauldron.

"No, I understand," Lily said.

"You really don't understand," Hermione said tearfully. "You really don't"

"I'm sure you'll be fine. Madam Pomfrey is excellent; she will make you feel much better."

Hermione took a deep breath and calmed herself. She pulled the damp towel from around her neck and wiped her face with it before dumping it into the cauldron.

"I'm sorry," she said stiffly, setting the cauldron aside. "I shouldn't have subjected you to that."

"It's hardly your fault," Lily replied. "Everyone gets sick." She frowned a little. "Do you get sick often?"

The answer was more complex than she could ever know. No, Hermione did not get sick often. In fact, she was remarkably healthy, but this was no cold or stomach complaint that could be fixed with a quick brew and a spell in bed. How did she explain that she had all but liquefied her insides with a journey back through time that should have killed her? *Oh, and by the way, Harry is your son, and yes, he got drunk on your sister's cooking sherry and spewed all over her agapanthus.*

"It's a ... condition," she said, deciding that it would be better to be hostile. "It's nothing to worry over."

Lily sat uncertainly on the edge of the bed and looked perturbed by the sudden change in Hermione's tone. "Look, I think we got off on the wrong foot somehow. I know I should have been more attentive at breakfast. I'm Head Girl, and the last thing you need when you start a new school is a Head Girl who is more interested in talking about boys than looking after you.

She thought it was her fault? Did she have no idea that she had no faults?

"I am really sorry," Hermione said, feeling as though she could fall into a stupor. "You didn't offend me. It's just that I'm not going to be here for very long, and Dumbled ... *my uncle* ... wanted me to attend the school while I'm here. I don't want to make friends and then leave again ..."

"I see. Well ..." Lily stared at her. "That makes no sense at all."

Hermione arched an eyebrow. "Then perhaps I don't want to make friends for personal reasons of my own."

"That is all well and good, but life can be very hard if you are determined to go through it alone."

"Ah, yes, well, Sirius Black did tell me that life could be very lonely here. I seem to recall he said it just after he propositioned me."

For the first time Lily's saintly demeanour slipped, and she actually swore under her breath. "I beg you; please don't let Sirius be the one who sets the example for the rest of the school. He can really be very sweet once he knows he doesn't stand an iceberg's chance in hell of getting anywhere with you."

"And there I was thinking he was a bit of a bully."

"You're talking about what happened in Potions? He doesn't get along with Severus ..." Lily looked troubled and she sighed quietly. "It's complex. They don't like each other, they never have, but Severus gives as good as he gets."

"Why do you call him Severus?" Hermione asked impulsively. "I mean, everyone else calls him Snivellus."

"I don't think that ridiculing his name is particularly constructive."

"Is he your friend?"

"No." Lily sighed again. "When we were first years, we were friends of sorts. We have a falling out, but we've learned to respect each other since."

Hermione wanted to tell her that Snape did not respect her in any way. He thought her nothing more than a filthy Mudblood who deserved to die at the hands of his foul master.

"Potions was a disaster," Lily said with a wry smile.

"I know." Hermione threw herself back in the bed. "Professor Slughorn wants me to sit an aptitude test." She laughed at the absurdity of it. "And Snape turned up here, offering to help me pass it."

"Severus offered to help you?" Lily asked, clearly surprised by it. "Severus offered to help you with Potions?"

"Yes, what of it?"

"It's just ... well, he doesn't do that sort of thing. I think the only other person he's ever offered to help with anything was Florence."

"Florence? Your friend Florence?"

Lily nodded. "She ran a mile, silly girl."

"Why would she be silly to say no to him?" Hermione asked. "Maybe she didn't like him."

"Yes, but it wasn't as though he was proposing marriage. He offered to help her with Arithmancy. I'm assuming you said no to his offer then?"

"Yes."

"Then you're an idiot," Lily said bluntly. "He's a genius with Potions. He's better than Professor Slughorn, and Professor Slughorn knows it. If he offered to help you pass it, then perhaps you should accept him."

"And what kind of a teacher do you think he'd make?" Hermione asked sarcastically.

"I have no idea," Lily said, and then she smiled mischievously. "But if you really want to piss Professor Slughorn off, you could pass the test and pass it with the help of his favourite student."

Hermione had to admire the sudden flash of vindictiveness. "Why do you think I'd fail the test?" she asked. "I was top of my class for Potions."

"Does it really matter?" Lily asked. "If the objective is to get under Professor Slughorn's skin, you'd achieve it admirably if you had Severus on your side."

Hermione chuckled. It really was a tempting thought, although it was entirely out of the question. She disliked Slughorn, but her hatred of Snape ran deeper, and she did not need help to pass Slughorn's test.

She didn't hear the door open, but Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey were noisy enough to announce themselves as they entered the room. Madam Pomfrey was berating Dumbledore for sending Hermione to classes before she was well enough to go. She seemed to forget that she had told Hermione that she was well enough to leave the hospital wing.

Dumbledore, upon seeing Lily sitting at Hermione's bedside, looked surprised and, Hermione thought, sought to separate them. "Miss Evans, I see you are helping my niece settle in."

"Hermione wasn't well, Professor," Lily said, getting to her feet respectfully.

"Don't make yourself uneasy, my dear. I am sure that Hermione is very grateful for your attention."

"I am," Hermione said quickly. "Thank you."

"Now," Dumbledore said happily, "I believe that Madam Pomfrey is keen to see her patient, so I must ask you to away."

Lily took her leave, giving Hermione an uncertain smile and bowing her head as she closed the door. When she was gone, Hermione turned her eyes to Dumbledore as Madam Pomfrey began to fuss.

"She is going to be hard to deter," Hermione told him, but from the smile that Dumbledore gave her, she had to wonder if that was exactly what he'd hoped for.

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