

# Southern Magic

*by lapita*

Seven years after the death of Dumbledore, Hermione finally returns to Hogwarts.  
What will she find?

## Prologue - Leaving

*Chapter 1 of 22*

Seven years after the death of Dumbledore, Hermione finally returns to Hogwarts. What will she find?

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Many thanks to my beta, Soul Bound.

### **Prologue**

Hermione closed her eyes and felt the small, lithe body clinging to her and wrapped her arms around him, breathing in the hot, sun-warmed hair. 'Ah, my cherished, you take care of my chickens for me, will you?' she lovingly whispered into his ear.

He looked at her with his huge, black eyes and nodded gravely. Hermione knew the naturally solemn boy would be pleased to be given this responsibility and would do it diligently for her. Even though every fiber of her body didn't want her to, she set the boy back down on his feet and breathed in the salt air deeply, hoping to calm her rolling sadness. Hermione squinted into the bright sunlight and took in the warm faces and gentle eyes of the people that surrounded her on the old wharf. Her gaze rested on a plain, older woman in simple, black robes. She took a small step, dropped her eyes and started to lower herself into the formal curtsey, but stopped when she felt the old woman's hands on her shoulders and heard her gravelly voice speak the ancient tongue.

'No, no. No time for such formalities. Your boat awaits, my Learner. Our hearts will yearn for your joyful presence, but we know those who grieve are in need of you. Your strength is important to help them through these troubling times. Farewell, my Learner. I know you will return to us.'

Hermione felt her teacher's finger place ash on her hairline and smelt the powder's earthy tone. She glanced into the old woman's lined face and was greeted by such understanding and power that a tingling of recognition traveled up and down her spine. Hermione also felt gratitude that her teacher understood the turmoil of emotions held tightly in check within her and didn't expect her to recite the long lines of verse that made up the traditional farewell.

The old woman smiled lovingly at the small boy at her side, and he went naturally to her as she bent and lifted him with a small grunt. 'Goodness, young one, you're almost too big to be lifted now,' she said while brushing his hair away from his eyes with a work worn hand.

Hermione felt a degree of solace and smiled.

The old woman turned to her. 'He is loved in our care and is where he needs to be, my Learner. Set your heart at ease, and do what you need to do with a steady mind and heart.'

Hermione gave a sad smile and nodded.

The old woman placed her rough palm on Hermione's cheek. 'Go now, my Learner. It is best not to prolong farewells. It makes the good-byes all the harder for everyone.'

Hermione nodded and quickly ruffled the boy's hair, feeling tears prickling her eyes, and looked away. She straightened her shoulders, adjusted her satchel and walked carefully along the wobbly gangplank. A pair of strong hands took hers, guiding her onto the small boat that was rocking up against the wooden pier.

Hermione's eyes slid like a caress over the coastline, seeking comfort in the familiar -- every little cove and rugged inlet she knew like the back of her hand. The many hot watered streams pouring into the sea had created a mist that hung like an ethereal muslin cloth. A gentle sea breeze swirled the mist, lifting it in places and allowing Hermione to catch glances of thickly treed gullies, small black sanded coves and steep cliff faces. Occasionally, she caught a whiff of sulphur above the smell of the sea and breathed it in hungrily, relishing the pungent, primordial odour.

'Ah, my Lady, we will make good time today. The wind and tide are working in harmony to help us.'

'That is good, Apopo. I have much need of haste today.' Hermione smiled warmly at the man working the small boat and his clever incorporation of the scriptures in his utterance.

Satisfied with the movements of the boat, the sailor paused in his work and squatted down beside her. He pulled from his battered bag a stick of sugar cane, and he quietly started peeling the hard bark with his skinning knife.

'How is your wife?' asked Hermione, switching to the man's fishing village dialect.

'She's well, thank you. She's busy with the little one,' he answered cheerfully, his eyes down and his knife glinting in the sunlight.

'How old is she now?'

'One year this March, my Lady. She's a healthy little thing and her brothers adore her.' Apopo sliced the dripping cane in half and held out a piece, which Hermione accepted with an appreciative smile. They both chewed in comfortable silence for a while, the boat rocking in a gentle rhythm.

'And you, my Lady, are you travelling far this time?'

'Oh, yes, very far. To the land of my birth. It's for a funeral of a friend.' Hermione dropped her eyes and adjusted the folds of her robes.

'My sympathies, my Lady. My heart is with you in this sad time. May you draw in the light that surrounds you to bolster you from the cold, and may your friend enter the next realm easily and with courage,' said Apopo, switching back to the ancient tongue and sadly shaking his head.

Hermione lowered her head in acknowledgement, thankful with that movement she didn't have to speak. Out of respect for her sorrow, Apopo drew himself away to working the boat. Hermione chewed on the pith of the cane, her eyes taking in the vibrantly blue sea, but soon was drawn back to the events of yesterday morning and the feeling of foreboding when a white owl winged its way down. Hermione had known change was due, of course; it was why her teacher demanded so much more from her this last year than ever before. But it didn't prepare her for unfolding the parchment, reading Professor McGonagall's firm, efficient handwriting and feeling the familiar plunging of her stomach. Ron's dead. Ron's dead. Her eyes read. And read again. And read again. Yet her normally efficient mind refused to understand. Or didn't want to.

Hermione snapped back to watching Apopo working every gust of wind so the small boat sliced through the water swiftly. She glanced over and saw the small fishing village coming slowly towards them.

Apopo's firm hand guided her ashore, and Hermione went to press coin to palm, but he moved his hands away in refusal.

'I cannot accept, my Lady of the circle. It's my honour to ferry you here,' he declared firmly with a resolute look in his eye.

'Then let me look at your hand,' Hermione countered with equal firmness.

The man wiped his hands on his ragged pants and stood towering over her, allowing her a better view of his dirty, work callused palms. 'You do me a great honour, my Lady.'

Hermione looked down at the huge upturned palms and ran her fingers gently over them for a moment. 'Every day run your hands through the earth, be that through working your vegetable plot, tending your trees or caring for your flowers, and your acidic stomach will be no more.'

Apopo glanced down at her with a disconcerted look on his face. 'You know about my stomach from my hands?' he asked with surprise.

Hermione simply shrugged her shoulders and smiled. Apopo offered a customary white fragrant flower with the accompanying ritualistic movements. Hermione graciously accepted the flower and tucked it behind her ear.

Hermione walked briskly up the bustling main road to the only Apparation point for miles. She always liked this town it had a vitality about it much larger cities would envy. At first, Hermione was surprised it was so busy; the shops were doing a fair trade for a Friday morning with many shoppers in town, but she remembered the Nine Nights were to be celebrated with the next full moon, and many families were busy preparing for it. As Hermione passed groups of people chatting under the shade of the great trees that lined the street, she bowed her head in acknowledgment of their respectful nods directed at her.

The Apparation point was busy when she got there, so while waiting for a brightly dressed North Coast family to organize themselves, she rummaged in her satchel and found her wand at the bottom. Pulling it out, she transfigured her robes into a heavy black cloak and skirt and her light sandals into boots. It was hot and itchy on her skin. However, she didn't want hypothermia induced blue skin to be her look when she arrived in a Scottish autumn evening and met people she hadn't seen in years. Satisfied with her first transfiguration in a long time, Hermione flicked up her hood and Apparated with a crack.

# One

## *Chapter 2 of 22*

Seven years after the death of Dumbledore, Hermione finally returns to Hogwarts. What will she find?

Many thanks to my beta, Soul Bound.

Professor McGonagall lifted her head up with relief at the cracking of an Apparation, relieved that Hermione had actually arrived and relieved that she was finally able to move her cold, stiff body. Sitting and waiting were not her strongest qualities, Professor McGonagall acknowledged candidly. She suppressed an unyouthful groan as she stood and moved towards the dark figure under the shadow of a tree. It was these moments of bodily discomfort that still surprised Professor McGonagall and told her with

complete honesty of her advancing years.

The young hooded woman in front of her turned and smiled openly. 'Professor McGonagall!' she exclaimed in obvious delight.

'Hermione.' Professor McGonagall was struck by how radiant she was.

Hermione stepped closer, as if out of habit, to press foreheads in the traditional Southern greeting of friends and almost tipped Professor McGonagall's pointed black hat to the ground. Professor McGonagall smiled, held her hat with one hand to secure it and leant in to press foreheads with the young woman. She smelt an exotic fragrance about the young witch.

'Well met, My Teacher. I hope I find you well despite these trying times.'

Professor McGonagall noted that Hermione uttered the greeting fluently in the Ancient Tongue, so she breathed in and hesitantly spoke the traditional reply, 'Welcome, My Student, you will find warmth and protection in my home and hearth.'

'I'd forgotten about the hat, sorry.' Hermione spoke slowly at first in English, looking abashed.

Professor McGonagall dismissed it with a wave of her hand, while draping another long, heavy cloak over the young woman's shoulders.

'Thank you, that's thoughtful of you.'

'It is cooler here than where you have come from, I would imagine. You are positively radiant, Hermione. It is so nice to see you again after all these years, despite these sad circumstances. Come, let us get moving and get out of this chill.'

It was true, thought Professor McGonagall as they started walking together up the path; Hermione looked so different from when they last met. Not that she had not been pretty when she was younger, Professor McGonagall hastily thought, but it was not what you noticed about her. It was her sharp intelligence that stood out. She looked at the girl and pondered. No, it was not just the young witch's physical appearance she was sensing. The Professor's normally quick assessment of people was momentarily stumped. Then Professor McGonagall felt it like an elusive scent; it was something strange, something she had not felt in a long time. It was both dark and light, repellant and compelling. What was it? And then her all-powerful memory supplied it for her: Hermione was involved in the enigmatic circle of the south. She had only ever felt it once before but was certain she was right. The Professor also felt an overwhelming sense of relief that she had made the right decision all those years ago to introduce the young girl to her sister. It had been something that nagged her on many a sleepless night, even though the rare bits of news about Hermione that she received over the years were always positive. Now she truly understood how positive. It also explained the sudden circumspection regarding the young witch in her sister's otherwise chatty owls; she felt a flash of annoyance at her sister's lack of faith in her. But this was indeed an unexpected turn of events, and Professor McGonagall knew Hermione would have to proceed carefully.

They turned the corner, and Professor McGonagall slowed as Hermione's step faltered and heard a sharp intake of breath. Hogwarts stood in majestic splendor in front of them, lights glowing warmly from its windows. She saw a play of emotions over Hermione's face and knew these coming days would not be easy on her.

'It is an impressive sight, isn't it? I cannot help but admire it every time I walk this path,' Professor McGonagall said softly.

'I'd forgotten how truly beautiful Hogwarts is,' Hermione stated with awe, tucking a stray, brown lock of hair back under her hood.

As they continued walking up the path, a chill wind picked up, and Professor McGonagall drew her cloak in closer around her.

'I saw your sister last week. She was talking about coming to visit you this summer if she finds an apprenticeship for Triton before then,' Hermione lightly said.

'That would be wonderful. We really have not seen enough of each other. I do miss her.' said Professor McGonagall. 'How is Triton?'

'I thought he seemed a lot better in himself the last time I saw him. He's still quiet but not so sad. Athena said, and I agree, it would be very good for him to get an apprenticeship. There are some available a few miles down the river at the boat builders.'

'Young men's hearts are far more fragile than you think, and of course they do everything in their considerable power to hide that very fact. I have seen it time and time again here at Hogwarts,' Professor McGonagall observed. 'Yes, I could see him do well as a boat builder's apprentice. He was always good with his hands when he was younger.'

'And Ron, tell me what happened,' Hermione inquired carefully, glancing up hesitantly.

The Professor sighed deeply. 'It is still all so uncertain, but it happened when he was going down to London...' Professor McGonagall brought a lacy white handkerchief and quickly dabbed her eyes under her wire-framed glasses. She noticed Hermione rub her face briskly, so she put a comforting arm on her slim shoulder and gave it a quick squeeze. Hermione returned the slightest smile, her brown eyes huge with yet to be shed tears.

'Tell me everything. I need to know what's been going on. I feel I've walked back into a play several acts on and I've forgotten my lines. There is so much I don't know,' the hooded figure said sadly but with firmness in her voice.

There were not many people Professor McGonagall would trust with the undiluted truth of events, but Hermione was certainly amongst those few. Still, out of force of habit, the older woman weighed up what to say before speaking.

'We had known Ron was a target for a long time - as you would have been if you had been here. He was greatly outnumbered, and there was no way he could have survived. The latest report indicates there were at least ten Death Eaters involved in the attack, and it was extremely well planned. They had followed him for a considerable distance and knew precisely when to strike. He was hit with eighteen different types of curses and hexes and was left to die. Luckily he was found not long after.'

'Oh, poor Ron. He would have hated those last moments so much,' sobbed Hermione, her cheeks blotchy with emotion.

'It truly is a tragedy,' said Professor McGonagall, softly stroking Hermione on the arm, trying to give some comfort.

'Why, I mean, how did it happen?' Hermione questioned desperately through sniffs.

'We are not even sure at this point how Voldemort knew where Ron would be. Ron was considered high risk, and we had a small group whose sole job was to protect him. But it was difficult because at the same time we also had to allow him to have as normal life as possible, given the circumstances.'

'It would have been a balancing act,' Hermione agreed gently.

'Yes, but we are now left with uncertainty. Maybe we could have done more? Perhaps we made a crucial mistake somehow, or maybe we did not follow up on the right leads? I do not know the answer at the moment, but I do know that all of these questions will be closely looked at over the next couple of weeks. I need answers.'

'Do you think someone in the Order leaked where Ron would be?' ventured Hermione, her brow furrowed.

'I can never be one hundred percent certain. This is one of the many areas we will be looking into carefully. But at the same time, I do not want some hot head starting a revenge-fuelled inquisition either. Right now that would be one of the worst-case scenarios. Target a scapegoat and that is the quickest way to send them over to the other side with all our information. So publicly, at least, we will be playing it down.'

'Do you know why he was going to London?' Hermione probed, her eyes watching the Professor keenly.

'Oh, yes. Ron is I mean was,' she sniffed, 'our main strategist for the Order. Ginny is the other one, and he was going down to London for a meeting.'

'Wow, a strategist,' exclaimed Hermione in surprise. She cocked her head to one side and added, 'That actually makes sense.'

'Yes, he was absolutely brilliant. I would say he single handedly prevented more deaths than anyone else in the Order,' declared the Professor proudly. 'He was able to work out patterns from the scappiest bits of information. It was an honour watching him work and seeing how he could connect the different leads together.'

'Yeah, I remember how he used to be at least five moves ahead of me when we played chess.' Hermione chuckled fondly.

They continued walking up the path; the night was drawing in and the cold becoming more pronounced.

'The years you were away have not been easy, Hermione. I do not think there is a wizarding family that has not been touched by tragedy one way or another in this dreadful war. I went to Diagon Alley last week and saw fear and sadness everywhere on the faces of the people. I always worried Voldemort wanted to weaken us by disrupting the fabric of our society, and when I saw those faces, well, he may be succeeding. It is sometimes so difficult to counter it, but it is important we do. If we do not, then he has essentially won, hasn't he? It is why it is important to keep Hogwarts open.'

'It's like a symbol,' Hermione quickly observed.

'Exactly, like a symbol of continuity,' the Professor confirmed, pleased with Hermione's astuteness.

'Are you having difficulty keeping Hogwarts open?'

'No, we get continual pressure from the Ministry, but that is nothing new. It has been going on for at least four hundred years. I think the vast majority of wizarding families want Hogwarts to stay open - it represents normality to them. And besides which, their children are probably safer here than most other places,' Professor McGonagall concluded with a shrug.

'Besides the South of course,' countered Hermione wryly, eyes twinkling brighter because of the tears.

'You are right there. Old habits die hard I suppose,' the Professor affirmed regrettably.

'And Voldemort?' the young witch asked again with typical directness.

'People can say what they like about him, but over and above everything, he is a clever tactician. He did what we did not expect and drew the battle out, then scattered it amongst us.'

'No single battle between Harry and Voldemort?'

'No. That was why the early years were such a struggle, because all our planning had been focussed on orchestrating one. We could not read what Voldemort was doing correctly. It was Ron, actually, who worked it out before anyone else. Then we had to spend a ridiculous amount of time trying to convince the Order we were right. What a waste of precious time and lives that was. It was so frustrating trying to change a group of people who do not like change of any sort. The single battle is something, I believe, Voldemort does not want. But then you never know. Just when you think you understand or firm up an idea about him, he will switch tactics.'

The Front Entrance loomed above them like a gaping mouth, and Professor McGonagall gave Hermione a friendly pat and withdrew her arm. She slid automatically into her Headmistress persona that she needed to have about her - more for what others expected than for herself, she thought truthfully.

'The students will be in the Great Hall finishing dinner, I would imagine. They usually linger on Fridays, chatting - as you would know,' she said with a small smile. 'I will show you to your rooms, where you can unpack, and then we can meet again later in my rooms for a light supper. 'The Sitting' is at the Burrow tonight, and the service is tomorrow at ten. We can leave together to go to the Burrow if you want after supper.'

'I'd like that very much,' Hermione replied and followed the headmistress up the stairs.

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Professor McGonagall rose from her armchair next to the fire when she heard a knock on the door. She opened it to a pleased but chilled looking Hermione stamping her feet to keep warm.

'This is a surprise. I was just coming to get you.'

'Good Evening, Professor McGonagall, I can't believe I found my way here - I didn't even have to ask a portrait,' the young witch said, her teeth chattering. 'Oh, Merlin, this castle is cold.'

'Come in, come in. I am not really surprised you remembered, with your memory. Would you like something to drink?' The Professor led her towards the pair of plush red armchairs in front of the fireplace.

'Actually, what I'd really like is a cup of tea - I've been up since four this morning. Also, I don't want to start on anything stronger now because I'm sure it will be flowing tonight,' Hermione commented with a grin.

'You read my thoughts exactly.' The Professor nodded at her cup of tea on the coffee table as she lowered herself back into her chair. Hermione sat down gratefully in the opposite chair, holding her hands near the fire, clearly enjoying its warmth. Professor McGonagall clapped her hands, and a matching fine boned cup and saucer materialized. Hermione looked momentarily startled, and Professor McGonagall remembered the southern tradition of not using magic with food or drink. In light of that, she leant down and picked up the teapot being kept warm next to the roaring fire and poured Hermione a cup of hot, strong tea.

'I see you found the extra cloaks I took the liberty of putting in your wardrobe,' Professor McGonagall noted.

'Oh, yes, thank you. They are perfect so warm,' Hermione replied gratefully.

'I have always found layers do the trick in warding off the cold.'

'I had to seriously restrain myself from putting all of them on. I think my blood has thinned considerably. I honestly couldn't feel my toes before, which was disconcerting to say the least.' Hermione took a sip of tea but quickly put it down again to add sugar.

'It will take you a few days to get use to the cold, I would imagine,' she said pragmatically. There was the briefest of pauses when only the crackling fire and the whistling wind on the windows could be heard. The Professor spoke gravely again. 'I need to tell you before we leave that Mr. Weasley and Percy were also killed two years ago during an attack on the Ministry.'

Hermione's face paled, and her brown eyes filled with tears in shock.

'Oh, no! Oh, poor Mrs. Weasley, and now she's lost another son. This is truly terrible,' Hermione cried out, burying her face in her hands. After a short while, she looked up. 'Oh, that poor family, I've been away for too long if I'd known... oh, how I would have been here for them. What will they think of me - will they understand that there was no way for me to know?'

Professor McGonagall leaned across, placing her wrinkled liver spotted hands over Hermione's young tanned ones. 'No, you did what you had to do, though others may not see it like that. It was the right decision you made, and seeing you again, any doubts I had are gone. You have truly blossomed into someone special. For some reason you are meant to be with us now, otherwise the owl would not have got through - you know that. But be wary about disclosing what you've become. Prejudices still run strongly in the Wizarding World.'

Hermione was silent for a bit, her eyes on the crackling fire, her fingers fiddling with the end of her sleeve. Professor McGonagall could almost sense Hermione reaching within herself and drawing on an ancient power that felt tangible despite its peculiarity. She hungrily leaned towards Hermione as if she were the warm fire instead of the crackling one in the fireplace. Professor McGonagall blinked, and the room came back into focus. Hermione reached forward to take another sip, her face clear and her eyes sharp.

'And Harry, tell me about him,' Hermione asked slowly.

'He is my apprentice, actually,' the Professor answered with pride.

'Really? In Transfiguration? Goodness, I would never have guessed that. How's that working out?'

'In fact he has only got a couple of more months to go and one more dissertation to submit before February, and then he is a Professor. He found it challenging at first, but that is quite common. Being an apprentice is different from being a student, and it always takes adjusting to. I needed to take on an apprentice at the time, and he showed an interest, so it has worked out well for both of us. Harry has taken over all of the teaching now he is quite a natural and very popular with the students. Unfortunately with all my work, I have little time for actual teaching. It is a pity as I quite miss it.'

Professor McGonagall took a sip of tea. Hermione looked nicely warmed by the fire now. She had finally shed the heavy outdoor cloak she had been wearing and was rolling up the sleeves of her tunic.

'You are looking like you have thawed out a bit,' the Professor remarked wryly. 'Though you probably should not be showing that to all and sundry.' She pointedly looked at the small powerful rune tattoo showing on Hermione's lower forearm.

The young woman flushed and quickly rolled down her sleeves so her arms were encased in black again.

'Not that I mind, my dear. In fact I would actually wish the opposite for you, but you do need to tread carefully,' the older woman said softly. 'Now, shall we have a bite to eat? We need to leave shortly.' Professor McGonagall clapped her hands, and a plate of delicious looking savories appeared before them. 'Oh, sorry about that, it is so automatic. Please help yourself.'

'No, really, it's completely fine with me. It doesn't worry me at all, and besides, I am rather looking forward to having some Hogwarts food again,' Hermione said before biting into a savory. She went red and started coughing furiously, her eyes watering. 'Goodness me, I think that went down the wrong way,' she said, spluttering and took a gulp of tea.

Once Hermione was composed again, Professor McGonagall picked up from where she left off. 'Harry is still seeing Ginny, and they live down in Hagrid's Hut. Well, I think officially Ginny is still living at The Burrow, but she certainly spends most nights with Harry. I do not want you saying the wrong thing tonight - not that I mind them being together - but you know how some people think. They seem to be good for each other, and I think it works well for both of them to live there it is somewhere they can retreat to that is still within the wards of Hogwarts yet apart from the bustle of the castle. Also the hut has nice memories for them of Hagrid.'

Professor McGonagall looked over at Hermione and knew she was processing everything. She felt her own mind wanting to swerve away from remembering that dreadful week but resolutely faced it. Hagrid had died one week after Albus's funeral, but she knew Hermione never had a chance to mourn his death as within a day of the giant's death, her parents had also been attacked and killed. It was a shattered girl who had sat in this very armchair all those years ago.

'Goodness me, look at the time. We need to start moving,' Professor McGonagall said with a start. 'Now, have you got everything you need, Hermione?'

'Actually I was going to ask if you have a small black headscarf I could use I didn't pack one.'

'Of course, just a moment, I will get one for you.' She disappeared into her room and returned with one in her hand. 'There is a mirror over there if you need it.'

Hermione walked over to it, unclasped her hair and ran her fingers through it. 'I can't believe the tangles it gets into.'

Professor McGonagall looked bemusedly at the woman standing in front of the mirror, while unconsciously straightening her own headscarf. Hermione deftly plaited her long hair, taming it with firm, impatient tugs, then she folded the headscarf and covered her hair and tied it.

'Does it look okay from the back?'

Professor McGonagall stepped closer and tidied the folds of the scarf at the back for her. 'Now you understand why I like wearing hats when I can get away with wearing them.'

'I suppose I'm ready as I'm going to be oh, do they have any idea that I'm coming?'

'No, I did not want to say anything just in case you did not receive the owl. I am sure they will be surprised.'

Hermione and Professor McGonagall walked back to the fireplace. Professor McGonagall pinched some Floo powder from a pot on the mantelpiece and, throwing it into the fire, said, 'The Burrow,' and disappeared in a whoosh of green flames.

## Two

### *Chapter 3 of 22*

Seven years after the death of Dumbledore, Hermione finally returns to Hogwarts. What will she find?

Many thanks to my beta, Soul Bound.

Hermione exploded spectacularly from the fireplace in a suffocating cloud of ash and bizarrely found herself in a noisy roomful of legs and what a wild array of shapes and sizes they were too.

'Well, that was dignified,' she muttered under her breath as Professor McGonagall helped pick her up. Hermione dusted herself off, hacking like a pack-a-day smoker.

'Never mind, my dear; it is a practice thing. I used to be dreadful at it until Albus taught me the trick of holding on one's nose when one steps into the fire. I never could figure out why it works, but it definitely does. Try it next time. Anyway, nobody is paying any attention, thankfully. I remember falling out of the fireplace and landing on my backside mid-way through a full board meeting. Now that's embarrassing. That is also the reason why I wear ankle-length skirts and full dress robes now,' said the professor. 'Right, let us find Mrs. Weasley and pay our respects.'

Hermione followed as Professor McGonagall nimbly worked her way through the crowds of people who respectfully nodded greetings to the older witch. Professor McGonagall briskly asked a rather portly looking wizard where Mrs. Weasley was, and they were directed to the far corner of the room. Hermione concentrated on breathing calmly in an attempt to quell her rising heart rate and at least appear outwardly calm. A drawn, puffy-eyed Mrs. Weasley was sitting and talking to what looked like a younger version of herself. It was a grown-up Ginny, as petite and stylish as ever. The image of the two fair women dressed in black resonated with something deep within her memory, giving her the strangest sensation of having seen this exact situation before. Then it dawned, in fact she had. It was at Dumbledore's funeral that was where she had seen Mrs. Weasley and Ginny last.

'Ah, Professor McGonagall, I'm so pleased you could make it.' Mrs. Weasley stood up, and the two women kissed each other on the cheek.

'I'm so sorry for your loss, Molly. If there is anything I can do to help, please let me know,' said Professor McGonagall sympathetically, squeezing Mrs. Weasley's hand.

Mrs. Weasley nodded, her eyes filling with tears. Ginny quickly stood, putting a comforting arm around her mother.

'You are already doing so much, Professor.'

'No. I can never do too much. And you, too, Ginny,' Professor McGonagall added gently.

'Thank you,' Ginny replied sadly. 'And thank you for everything.'

Mrs. Weasley noticed Hermione standing next to Professor McGonagall. 'And who is this young lady you've brought with you, Professor? I don't think we've met.'

'Well, Molly, this young lady is Hermione.'

'What? Hermione? Our Hermione? No, it can't be well, by Merlin, so it is you look so different.'

'I'm so sorry to hear about Ron, Mrs. Weasley.' Hermione's eyes welled up.

Hermione was pulled into the shorter woman's embrace and looked up to see Ginny giving her an assessing look, so she smiled and mouthed a friendly 'hi'.

'You've come back to us after all these years; wait 'til Harry hears. Gin, run and tell Harry to come out. Oh, this is a surprise seeing you after all this time. The Professor here kept telling me you were enjoying living down with her sister, but I'm so pleased you are back. We have missed you.' Mrs. Weasley gave Hermione an affectionate press.

'Hermione!' Harry boomed across the room. Conversation stilled at the sudden noise. Hermione saw a grown-up, filled-out looking Harry. He bounded up to the witch and scooped her into his arms, his green eyes sparkling behind his glasses. 'Wow, I can't believe it's you.'

'Oh, Harry, I'm so pleased to see you.' She beamed up at him and noticed his flushed face. 'And look at you -- all grown up... I'd still recognize you anywhere though.'

'Yeah, you and the entire wizarding world,' he said, smiling ruefully, running his hand through his already sticking-up, black hair.

Ginny was beside him, and Hermione embraced her, feeling her stiffen. 'I'm so sorry to hear about Ron.' Ginny looked at her and politely nodded.

'Would you like to come and sit with Ron for a while?' Mrs. Weasley asked.

Hermione glanced about, and seeing Professor McGonagall drawn into conversation with an older witch, Harry and Ginny whispering quietly to each other, she nodded. Mrs. Weasley led her to an adjoining room that was hushed, dimmed and had an underlying smell of camphor and wood. It was empty of all furniture, except for a wooden casket in the middle that was raised slightly off the carpeted floor. Hermione hesitated at the door for a moment, adjusting her headscarf firmly and taking off her shoes.

'Would you like some time alone with him?' the older woman inquired softly.

Hermione nodded, her throat tightening and her mouth becoming dry. At an unspoken signal, the room emptied of people, all quietly filing out and politely averting their eyes. She padded in and saw Bill, who nodded warmly in recognition. He squeezed her shoulder gently as he walked past to sit against the farthest wall, dropping his eyes to give her privacy.

As she knelt down next to the casket, Hermione felt the wrongness of seeing Ron lying there, completely still, as he never was in life, and realized how he'd grown into a handsome man. No, it wasn't how it was meant to be it just wasn't right. She fiercely resisted the finality of it. The young woman thought in desperation, *It's not actually real it's not actually true. He's just going to wake up; it's really one of his pranks, and then everything is going to be all right again.* She numbly stared at his still form for an unknown amount of time. Hermione gave a start. Yes, she thought she saw his little finger move. She was right. It was a trick. But as she sat there for longer, she knew it wasn't so. Sadness rolled up from deep within her and overtook her thoughts. Images started flowing with her tears, and they seemed to take on a life of their own, flowing faster and faster into a spiraling whirl of emotions. The images came at her until she felt consumed by them, engulfed in the meaning of each one:

A scruffy boy with dirt on his face, looking at her and rolling his eyes...

The triumphant look on his face when he, yet again, completely annihilated her in chess...

The wringing of his familiar white, sturdy hands when he was worried...

The warm glow of protective love in his eyes when he looked at her...

The feel of him slinging his arms around Harry and her when he was happy...

The anticipation of their first almost kiss, disrupted by an oblivious Harry...

The knot of grief in her stomach when she was at Dumbledore's funeral...

The look of her Mum at breakfast, whose last words had been an inconsequential, 'Can you go to the corner store for some milk?'...

The smirk of anticipation on her Dad's face when he'd knowingly riled her by reading out the horoscope from the morning paper, waiting for her tirade on the stupidity of fortune telling...

The deep smell of house fire smoke when she turned the corner and saw her home ablaze...

The sounds of terror in their screams...

The feeling of absolute powerlessness to save them.

Eventually her tears lessened, the visions releasing her from their vicious grip. Hermione found herself sitting in the dimmed room again next to a wooden casket with Ron in it completely still.

She looked around as Bill pressed a handkerchief into her hand and sat down next to her he'd hardly changed and was as ruggedly handsome as before. Bill hesitantly put a comforting arm around her.

'It's so hard, isn't it? No matter how many times you lose someone, it never gets any easier,' he said in no more than a whisper. 'Maybe it's because you know it doesn't actually get better. You just learn to live with the loss and the sadness, but you know it never really goes away. You just learn to deal with it better.'

Hermione nodded mutely in agreement, wiping her tears away.

'I was so sorry to hear about your parents, Hermione. I never got a chance to tell you that then it must have been hard for you, not having any other family.'

Hermione felt a lump in her throat. Nobody had talked about her Mum and Dad in such a long time with her she was momentarily at a loss to what to say. 'Thanks, Bill, that means a lot to me. Yeah, it was a really hard time. I'm so sorry to hear about Mr. Weasley and Percy. I only found out when I arrived. I honestly didn't know, or I'd have been here for you all.'

'Yeah, I know you would have been it was a really tough time for everyone. Mum went through a rough patch, so Fleur and I moved back home not long after. It was important for Mum to have more of us around at home, and now with Katie Rose, I don't...'

'Who?'

'Of course you wouldn't know about her. Our daughter Katie Rose she's almost two years old now.'

'Oh, Bill, I'm so happy for you both that's such wonderful news! I can't wait to meet her.' Hermione turned and gave Bill a hug of delight.

Bill grinned and flushed, his eyes filled with pleasure.

'Yeah, she's been a burst of light into our family that's for sure and she walks around thinking it's entirely normal to have a huge fan base before you're two,' Bill said jokingly. His face became serious, and he looked directly at her. 'I'm pleased you're back, Hermione. To be honest, there were some mumblings a while back of you abandoning your friends and the cause and all that sort of rot.'

'Hmmm, I wondered if some would look at it like that like I'd abandoned them or something, but it wasn't like that at all,' Hermione commented sadly, casting her eyes down.

'I think they didn't fully understand what you were going through or realize the dangers you were in. Anyway, I'm certainly pleased you're back, and I know that Ron would have wanted you to be here. You really did have a special place in his heart.'

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The night progressed strangely; it was as if time had entered another dimension, and the hands of the clock were relegated to the sidelines. Hermione was swept along with the emotions of everybody there. Tonight was Ron's last night amongst them, and every person there followed the unconscious ebbing and flowing of sadness. Wizards and witches of all ages and from all walks of life came to pay their respects to the Weasleys and sit with Ron for a final time. There was a constant movement of people between the sitting room, where Ron was, and the adjoining dining room, where people sat around tables, eating and drinking. The firewhisky and wine flowed and were the natural aid in helping people cope with their sadness. It also helped in the telling of many ribald stories about Ron's antics that provided much needed light relief and laughter. Then there were quieter moments of absolute sadness knowing yet another young man in his prime with all his power and potential had been taken from them.

Hermione desperately wanted to spend time with the Weasleys and Harry, but every time she made her way towards them, they were drawn away. However, Hermione did meet a lot of people she knew from school and the Order, and all were delighted at seeing her again. Everyone commented how different she looked, which surprised Hermione to no end. She thought she would have a closer look in the mirror when she got back to her rooms; the young witch couldn't imagine what it was people were noticing it wasn't as if she'd dyed her hair blonde. Hermione was careful talking about her life, as she knew Northern witches and wizards looked down with considerable distaste on people from the South. She certainly was not ashamed at what she was or where she lived, but at the same time, she didn't want to upset already traumatised people. And besides, tonight was Ron's night, so it was natural for conversation to revolve around him and his impact on their lives.

Hermione enjoyed catching up with Luna and loved her uniquely truthful take on people and situations. A few times, Hermione had to disguise her chortles with poorly feigned coughs while Luna solemnly threw some unlikely images at her. She found herself thinking that Fudge could quite possibly have a walrus thing going on. It certainly wasn't a thought pattern she had even thought likely, but that was the joy of being around the serious, large-eyed woman. Luna, amongst other things, told her that Ron and Harry hadn't been getting on well for a while, and it was mostly to do to Harry's unchecked aggression and his dominating behavior. Luna hadn't seemed impressed with Harry.

And according to a very drunk and very slurry Professor Sprout, 'Ron was the best student she'd ever taught.' Though she did look at Hermione blearily, leaned across the table and added in a whoosh of alcoholic fumes, 'You weren't so bad either.'

Professor Flitwick, who was swaying on his stool next to them at the table, took up the conversation and somewhat nostalgically said, 'Oh, I remember when the three of you sat together in my class ... and now ... and now...'

He gave a wet sob and a hiccup.

'...Ron's dead ... You live in some god forsaken country a million miles away... and Harry... Harry...' he said, nodding towards Harry, holding court to a group of people. '... He's in the process of self-combusting at Hogwarts,' he finished somewhat theatrically.

'Now, now, Filius, that's a bit overstated, don't you think?' Professor Sprout asked reasonably.

Professor Flitwick turned towards her, somehow misjudged that simple movement, and almost fell off his stool. Both Hermione and Professor Sprout quickly leant forward to steady him. Professor Flitwick then carried on as if nothing had happened, leaning in close to Professor Sprout with the look of serious gossips everywhere.

'Well, then you obviously haven't heard the latest between Severus and Harry, my dear...'

Hermione felt a jolt of surprise and almost choked on her whisky. That was the last thing she expected to hear. All she knew about Snape was he'd murdered Dumbledore, and then her own life had disintegrated around her ears. Hermione had just assumed either he was living his life as a Death Eater, or he'd been captured and given the Kiss. But in all honesty, she hadn't given him any thought. But ... Snape ... here at Hogwarts? Now that's just bizarre.

The Professors, deeply engrossed in the intrigue, had carried on gossiping: '... Harry then tried to hex him across the staff room, which is not acceptable, and broke the lovely blue and white vase you know the one next to the fireplace...?'

'Oh, no, not that vase what a shame; they never do repair quite the same. Mind you, I have no doubt Severus provoked him. He's a nasty tongue on him...'

'Err ... Snape ... I mean Professor Snape?' Hermione interrupted inarticulately.

'Oh, yes, nothing's changed. Harry still absolutely hates Severus; only now, the battlefield is the staff room, not the classroom. Nobody likes it it's all very predictable but very unpleasant all the same,' said Professor Flitwick, shaking his head.

Professor Spout picked up on Hermione's poorly stated underlying question and leaned over to pat the small man's arm.

'Oh, Filius, she wasn't meaning that,' she said impatiently. 'You won't know ... how long have you been away for? What is it? Seven years?' The disheveled woman looked at her surprisingly sharply.

Hermione nodded, the room swaying more than it should.

'Well, Severus was found and pardoned probably not long after you'd left to live with Minerva's sister,' Professor Sprout continued.

'What? Why? How?' came Hermione's surprised questions at the same time she also thought she'd better slow down her drinking. Her thinking and talking patterns were becoming quite peculiar.

'Albus had left a Pensieve that exonerated Severus of any wrongdoing. The Ministry of Magic took it away, tested it and re tested it again to see if it had been manipulated in any way, which of course it couldn't have been. So the Ministry had to stand by Albus' statements and release Severus. But it was done reluctantly, as his capture had satisfied the public's desire for an arrest.'

Professor Flitwick, who Hermione thought was having a small doze, piped in unexpectedly and said in a stage whisper, 'Of course there is a small conspiracy theory that the Pensieve had been manipulated and the Ministry was in the pay and had covered it up.'

'Come now, Filius, if we are talking candidly, which we are, it's not just a small conspiracy theory, but a large one with a large group of people, led namely by one determined Harry Potter. They still think Severus has got a hand in with You-Know-Who, and now with what happened to poor Ron,' Professor Sprout waved her hand sadly towards the sitting room, 'it is just going to add fuel to the fire in that camp. Harry puts a lot of pressure on Minerva to get rid of Severus, but you know what she's like; nobody's going to push her around. She sees things very clearly, does our Minerva.'

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Shortly before five, Professor McGonagall placed a sleepy arm over Hermione's shoulders.

'Come, we need to get some sleep before the service and let the Weasley's have these final hours alone with him.'

Hermione nodded and got up unsteadily. Professor McGonagall linked arms with her, and they supported each other as they walked slowly to the fireplace. Afterwards, Hermione wasn't even sure how she managed to Floo into Professor McGonagall's rooms, let alone how she got herself to her rooms. All she remembered was that she collapsed onto the bed, her head spinning, took the fragrant white flower from her hair, and breathed in its familiar fragrance before sleep swallowed her.

## Three

### *Chapter 4 of 22*

Seven years after the death of Dumbledore, Hermione finally returns to Hogwarts. What will she find?

Many thanks to my beta, Soul Bound.

Hermione stirred and moved her arm so she could give her little boy an early-morning cuddle, but frowned when she couldn't find him. The quietness was also odd, so the witch opened her eyes and took in the strange, dim surroundings. This wasn't home.

A longing to be with her boy washed over her. The thick blankets were heavy and warm, but the air was cold on her face. She glanced around the dark room to try and find her bearings. Hermione breathed in the cool air and smelt the familiar Gryffindor Tower smell and knew she was at Hogwarts. The memories of yesterday came crashing in and, and, and, oh, poor Ron. Tears welled up and slid down her cheeks as an oppressive heaviness descended upon her. Being here without Ron made it seem worse. Everything about the place evoked memories in her that he was firmly a part of. It seemed she should just get up and meet him down in the Great Hall for breakfast like they used to. But instead, today was his funeral. Hermione had only ever been to one wizarding funeral, and that had been Dumbledore's. Her mind swerved violently away from those dreadful times. She'd known coming back here would trigger all sorts of feelings and memories, but these were thoughts and feelings she would prefer to leave alone.

The witch concentrated on her breathing and was trying to calm her rioting emotions when she felt the stir: he was calling her, needing her, wanting her to be with him.

The sound deep within called again: 'Hurry, come now. I want you. I need you with me now.'

Sitting up, Hermione recalled last night, gingerly shaking her head, and smiled. The room stayed rock-steady and her stomach silent. Hermione sighed in relief.

She wondered briefly if he had a hand in her lack of hangover. She didn't know if he usually extended his powers in such a way, but if he did, her eternal gratitude to him had just increased ten-fold. Hermione wrapped a blanket around her as she got out of bed and padded over to the fireplace, yawning. She bent down to light a fire with matches from her satchel. The room was like a fridge. She watched the fire for a bit to make sure it wouldn't go out. Satisfied, she gave it one last prod with another bit of wood and sluggishly moved to the adjoining bathroom. She turned on the shower, relishing the heat warming her very bones up. By the time she exited, she was feeling human again. Hermione threw logs onto the fire, and while the room was heating up to an acceptable level, she tidied the strewn clothes from the night before.

The sound urged her on: 'Come, come, I want you; I need you to be with me.'

Hermione hastily found her satchel again and pulled from it a black piece of rolled-up material, oil, a deep cup, a sharp knife and incense. She carefully laid everything in front of the fireplace.

She felt her own yearning within her; she wanted to be with him with every fibre of her being, but seven intense years of training kicked in, and she resisted. If she didn't want to die a most painful death, she had to precisely follow the ancient rituals to cement her to this reality. Hermione knew the risks in each joining and that she was walking a razor's edge each time. But she also knew she just couldn't resist he was like the taste of wine to an alcoholic, the sting of a needle to a junkie he was everything; her palms were sweaty, and she hadn't even started yet.

Hermione stood close to the roaring blaze and allowed the towel to drop to the floor so she was standing unselfconsciously naked. She systematically rubbed the scented oil over her body until she was glistening. The scent worked on her senses, making her acutely aware of her surroundings. The crackling fire boomed in her ears; the cool air rushed like a torrent over her skin; the cold tiles of the hearth were icy on her feet. The witch swept the cooler ash from the fire towards her and smeared it over her body, marking symbols on her thighs, breasts, chin and forehead. Symbols of tridents, crescent moons, life, death, being and not being.



She wanted to hurry, but pulled back, knowing each step in the ritual ensured she came back whole. But her mind by this time was like a wild bird caged and hammering on the bars to be free. Still, the witch wrapped the long, black material around her waist, making sixteen precise pleats, and pulled the remaining material back over her shoulder so it hung between her breasts. Hermione sat, her hands almost shaking with anticipation as she lit the incense and the oil lamps. She started the incantations, all of which needed to be said word-perfectly nothing like her life at stake to make her accurate. Hermione was consciously aware of the sounds, the rhythm, the meanings, and knew it would carry on while she was gone and draw her back when she was ready.

Her body stilled, and the signal was met with her mind casting itself off from this reality like a bird escaping from a cage, the flurry of upward movement leaving her momentarily dizzy until at last she was picked up and guided, drawn nearer and nearer until she was enveloped in heat and dark and pulsating rhythm.

'I'm here. I'm here. I'm where I long to be,' she cried out to him.

*And she belonged,* came the reply. He was in her and around her. She was in him and around him. He was she, and she was he without him she wasn't, and without her he wasn't.

There was a shift, so she gently opened her eyes and saw from a height a vast, ancient forest undulating away from her; her senses filled with the heady perfume of night-blooming plants. Hermione turned and saw that he was curled around her and that she lay against his white underbelly, his fur tickling her arms; her head was on his huge front paw.

'The moon is beautiful tonight, my love,' came his sound.

She looked at the crescent moon hanging large in the calm night.

'Oh, it's beautiful. I love the new moon the best it has all that potential before it,' Hermione dreamily replied, running a finger down one of his geometric stripes.

There was a deep chuckle. 'Ah, yes, but the full moon carries the passion. I wanted you here sooner with me.'

'And I long to be with you always.'

'I felt your human sadness it touched me so.'

'Yes, sadness hurts my heart, my protector.'

'You know my love goes with you and your love stays with me your eyes are soft with sorrow.'

Hermione's eyes prickled and filled. The moon's shape and color shifted and moved as the tears fell. She felt a roughness on her face, looked up, and saw him gently licking her tears away with his tongue. With his huge teeth inches from her face, it went through her mind briefly that he could tear her limb from limb, disembowel her effortlessly, fling her across the universe, and crush her like an ant. But he wouldn't. Hermione closed her eyes and felt him around her, the noises of the jungle becoming louder. She felt the slow rise and fall of his breath and felt a peace of belonging. She relaxed more than she had in days, drifting towards the netherworld between sleep and awareness....

'Come, I want to show you something,' came his gentle sound regretfully.

Hermione's curiosity was piqued, so she mentally leaned into him and felt him give, drawing her closer and closer within him. He then gave a strong push, and she was sent tumbling over and over away from him at stomach-lurching speed. She panicked, not knowing where she was everything swirled around her; paradoxes made sense; up was down, and down was up; improbabilities were facts. It was as if she'd been caught up in a huge wave and crashed down violently.

'I'm here. I'm here.'

His sound was a rescue rope thrown out to her, and she grasped at it in desperation. The dizzying motion slowed, and she was being gently poured through all possibilities and probabilities until she felt sand beneath her bare feet and a keen wind on her face.

'I'm here,' came his sound.

Hermione looked about and saw she was at the seaside. Many happily dressed holidaymakers were wading in the water and sunning themselves on the beach. She walked down to the water's edge amongst all the families enjoying themselves and found herself luxuriating in the light, joyful atmosphere. Hermione lifted her black robe up as a small, cool wave washed over feet and continued walking long the beach, allowing the water to lap around her ankles.

Hermione heard a child's cry of distress. The witch glanced about and saw a young boy dressed in swimming trunks and a hat, standing stiff with fear as the water lapped about his ankles. The boy was alone, and Hermione couldn't see the boy's family anywhere. Nobody else was paying the boy any attention it was as if he didn't exist to them. She moved beside the boy and crouched down beside him so she was eye level with him.

'Hey, Little One, what's the matter?' She found herself speaking in the ancient tongue.

The boy cried out in panic as another small wave washed harmlessly around his legs, so Hermione scooped him up into her arms and felt him instantly relax against her the moment he was away from the water.

'Let's see if we can find your mother, shall we?' she said softly to him. Hermione looked down into the boy's familiar green eyes and realized with a jolt that this was Harry as a young boy.

'You can't. She is dead. The water took her,' said the little boy in an adult's voice.

Hermione was yanked away as if caught in a rip current and again passed through a myriad of realms. Slowly, she was placed down on the mat in front of the fire, and with a whisper of a caress, he left her mind.

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Professor McGonagall stormed along the corridor, and a first-year boy quickly ducked away when he saw the look on her face. She was most put out. Not only did she have a thumping head and an uneasy tummy, but she was also having to step in and sort out a great mess on less than four hours' sleep. The older woman frowned; she felt as if she did everything for everyone, and it seemed most of the fools could not do even the most simple of tasks. On days like today, she did not know how Albus had played his role so well. Professor McGonagall understood that she saw things too quickly and too clearly to be completely comfortable with the political wrangling that went with both her jobs. She had to be circumspect about what she said, how she said it, and to whom she said it. On top of that, she had to pay close attention to everybody's agenda both hidden and visible. Normally, the Professor did it with great aplomb, and nobody was even aware of her irritation, but on days like today, well....

By the time she had reached Hermione's door, however, she had worked most of the ire out of her system. Nothing like stomping and glaring to release a bit of tension. But when Hermione opened her door, fully dressed in the expected black dress robes and pointed black hat, the Professor did a double take, and her bad mood vanished completely. A strange, uneasy magic flowed out the door that almost made her take a step back, but she could not stop herself from curling her lip in abhorrence. There was a putrid flavour to the magic that was overpowering in its strength. Hermione had an unhealthy tinge to her face and black circles around her eyes. The older witch would have blamed her sickly look on the excesses of the night before if it were not for the oddness of the magic swirling around her.

But Professor McGonagall breathed in and plastered a pleasant look on her face. 'Good morning, Hermione. How are you feeling after last night?'

'Surprisingly well, thank you. Please come in and have a seat.' Hermione led them to the standard small table and two chairs that furnished guest lodgings in Gryffindor Tower. The professor glanced around and saw the room was immaculately tidy.

'I must say I am surprised to see you dressed and ready so early.' The eerie magic that rolled around in the room pressed in on Professor McGonagall, so she consciously pulled up her shields, which lessened the intensity. It was very interesting and so different, the older witch mused. It was like a piece of fruit just turning so that it mingled between cloyingly sweet and repellingly rotten.

'And how are you, Professor?' Hermione asked with an impish smile.

'I could be better.' Professor McGonagall smiled but looked at her carefully. 'I have come to ask a favor from you, but please feel free to decline. Harry, who organised the schedule for the service this morning, forgot to arrange a priest to lead the Other Realm Chant'

'Oh, no, how could he have forgotten that?'

'Yes, my thoughts exactly. I am not impressed. And what's more, it is poor Molly who is hurt by his actions, the very person who needs it least,' Professor McGonagall replied tightly, pleased that the younger witch understood the implications.

'Oh, the poor woman,' exclaimed Hermione in dismay. 'Have you found anyone yet oh, you want me to do it?'

Professor McGonagall wearily nodded, pressing her fingers into her temples.

'I do not even know if you know it, but I gathered from my sister that chanting is very popular down South ... ' Her voice trailed off.

'Yes, I do know it, Professor, and I've led it many times, but only in the Ancient Tongue, not in Latin. I'd need to translate it, but I'm not sure if it will end up being the same as the one commonly used here,' Hermione spoke softly, her face unsure.

'I could find a written copy of it if that would help. I am sure there'll be one in the library.'

'Hmmm, I think I'd need to translate it. I need to make sure I work out the correct rhythm. How long have I got?'

'Just under two hours.'

'Yes, that gives me enough time. I'd also need a three string harp.'

'I am sure that will not be a problem. I will find one and get it sent up to you. Thank you so much, Hermione.' Professor McGonagall sighed in relief.

'No, not at all. It's the very least I can do, and I'm pleased to be able to do something to help.'

Hermione was pulling out a quill and parchment as Professor McGonagall left. The professor hoped she had made the right decision but at the same time felt profound irritation at Harry, who was probably only just waking up now, completely oblivious to the chaos and distress his lack of planning had created.

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Professor McGonagall walked slowly down from the podium, wiping her eyes. Looking up and taking in the sea of faces in front of her, she allowed herself to feel a slim slither of satisfaction that she'd managed to convey the right tone in her eulogy. Mrs. Weasley clasped her arm briefly and nodded thanks, her face obscured by the wide-brimmed hat. The poor woman; what she must be going through, thought Professor McGonagall as she nodded in return and slowly made her way back to her seat. She could not even begin to imagine. Losing Albus had been heart-numbingly awful, and it had taken years to truly regain her balance again. But how could Molly even begin?

As she sat down next to a pale Professor Hooch and felt the grim atmosphere, the professor thought that this was exactly what Voldemort wanted. By hurting someone like Mrs. Weasley, he knew there would be a ripple of fear and anger through the wizarding community. It was why she had approached her address carefully. She had to strike a balance between talking of courage and hope, which was desperately needed, but not feeding too much emotion into the many young wizards who were itching to use their rage to seek ill thought out revenge. She felt sure that over the years, Voldemort had deliberately provoked the young wizards. The older witch prayed none of the young men would do anything stupid.

Professor McGonagall watched as Harry made his way to the podium for the final eulogy. He stood completely still for a long moment, his face lowered as if in prayer. The three-hundred-plus mourners stilled until all she could hear was the slightest shuffling of feet and a few coughs, then that too eventually stopped. Silence. All were completely focussed on Harry their symbol of hope. He let the moment stretch to the perfect second before he began. Harry was the best public speaker Professor McGonagall knew. He could convey emotions with the smoothness of a politician and subtly influence the audience, who was utterly unaware of what he was doing. Professor McGonagall had seen it many times, and it was why he was successful in the classroom; he could completely control the students' emotions without them knowing. But it was also what worried her. So she had pulled Harry aside last night and had a firm word with him. He had rolled his eyes and said something to the effect of 'please give me some credit'. But as the witch listened to his pleasant speaking voice, she realized he was right she didn't have anything to worry about. Harry struck the perfect chord with everyone present, cleverly telling several anecdotes about Ron's wonderful joy of life and his incredible bravery, which completely captured the essence of him. At no time did Harry hint of his anger or frustration, which was what she had feared. Instead, he cleverly linked Ron's bravery and joy of life, then expanded them into something that every witch and wizard should try to incorporate into their lives. It was the perfect message. Professor McGonagall watched Harry leave the podium and sit down next to Ginny.

There was a shift in the atmosphere as everybody readied themselves for the final part of the service: the Chant of the Other Realm. A ripple of surprise and whispering went through the mourners, and Professor McGonagall turned and spotted a pale-faced Hermione working her way along her row to the central aisle with her harp in her hand. All Professor McGonagall's goodwill towards Harry vanished in a heartbeat and was replaced with old-fashioned anger. Soon she was twisting and untwisting her handkerchief in her lap, seething. When would the boy learn that bold gestures also need thought and planning? How much longer would she have to step in and sort out his messes? The look of devastation on Molly's face last night had been so awful, she was compelled to try to do something to remedy the situation. It was only after she had sent the tenth owl out this morning that the professor remembered her sister's near obsession with chants, which seemed to be a Southern thing, and had wondered if Hermione knew the Other Realm Chant. She had rather thought the young witch would if her hunch about her being part of the Circle was correct. Professor McGonagall had been relieved when Hermione agreed, but it was only afterwards that she thought the implications through properly. Even the fact that a Muggle-born witch would know the Thirty Minute Chant, let alone lead it, would plant seeds of suspicions in most people's minds. Professor McGonagall felt her fingernails digging into her palms, so she consciously relaxed her hands releasing them from their fists of tension.

A drawn but determined looking Hermione walked by, her dark eyes focussed directly in front of her. The Headmistress noticed a black scarf trailing from under the younger witch's hat and looping over one of her shoulders in the fashion of the South her stomach dropped a notch.

Just as Hermione was about to mount the steps, a restless Katie Rose wandered unsteadily towards her, and a beautiful open smile enveloped the young woman's face. She bent down and said something to the blonde girl, who giggled, and it carried both in sound and contrast across the large room. Hermione guided the little girl back towards the Weasleys' row. Turning, she walked fluidly up the raised platform and sat down, angling the chair so she faced the casket, not the mourners. The professor felt a small measure of reassurance flow through her. Even that small gesture of sitting correctly showed Hermione did in fact know what she was doing. The older witch had been to funerals where the Leader incorrectly faced the audience.

All doubts vanished when Hermione started. The young witch was probably the most accomplished leader of the Chant the professor had heard in a long time. Hermione's chanting reminded her of a voice she had heard long ago when she was still a young girl. She could not quite remember whose voice it was, but it had the same harsh beauty it spoke of pain but also power. The Headmistress relaxed as she chanted along with the other mourners. She noted that Hermione's style was classical, almost bordering on archaic, and honestly had not heard some of those inflections since she'd sat in Professor Binns's History class as a schoolgirl.

Only ten minutes into it, Professor McGonagall was worried. This was the most precise, most powerful recital she had ever heard and was sure it was the same for all the witches and wizards sitting here. It was too good, too precise, too powerful. The rhythm, the tone, they had created a calming magic that seemed to be building in strength. Magic was something she had never associated with this Chant. It was recited only as a matter of tradition, nothing more. Professor McGonagall inwardly groaned. Hermione would be under a constant cloud of suspicion from now on, which was precisely what she did not want for the girl. The rhythm soon lulled Professor McGonagall, and she could not seem to continue her anxious thoughts. Soon, Professor McGonagall along with the other mourners was carried away by the power of the ancient words and led into the world of farewells giving collective strength to Ron in his passing.

## Four

### *Chapter 5 of 22*

Seven years after the death of Dumbledore, Hermione finally returns to Hogwarts. What will she find?

Many thanks to my beta, Soul Bound.

Hermione closed her eyes briefly, and exhaustion coursed through her. But with a child on her lap and the warmth of a real fire at her back, she could almost pretend she was back home where she ached to be. The witch slowly opened her eyes and from her cross-legged position on the floor took in the dim, crowded room...why was she looking out into a sea of wizard legs again? The young woman idly observed that sensible shoes ruled the day here with both witches and wizards. The witch sniggered quietly to herself that she must quell her desire to dash out and buy a pair of red, six-inch stiletto heels. Hermione moved her shoulders appreciatively as the relaxing heat from the fire slowly untied the knots in them. Magically enhanced fires could never do that, and they were useless for relaxing in front of--one always expected someone to pop out at any given moment. Full marks to the Weasleys for keeping a real fireplace intact, she thought.

The little girl in her arms stirred, drowsily opening her blue eyes and then shutting them again with a flutter. Hermione drew her black cloak around them, cocooning both of them in its warmth and protection. Katie Rose drifted back to sleep with a few snuffling noises, and Hermione smiled warmly down at her. The witch felt sorry for her. The little girl must have had a difficult few days with only adults for company. In the South she would have had at least three other children to be with, which would have helped insulate her from the surrounding grief.

Hermione was grateful to the child though, as she was able to sit next to the fire instead of having to try and engage in conversation with the people here. She was not exactly excelling in that area; nor was anyone rushing to seek out her company. In fact it was the complete opposite. Whereby the same people who had so easily included her only last night made her feel like she had contracted a highly infectious disease this evening. Hermione had been slow in working out what was going on. Sure, she had never been the most popular person, but she normally didn't repel people either. It was when Hermione found herself standing alone for the fourth time in quick succession that she thought something peculiar was going on. She dashed to the bathroom to check she had blown her nose properly during the service and to make sure she had not been mysteriously overcome with a stench that she had not been able to smell. With all her bodily functions seemingly in check, she had reluctantly emerged from the bathroom again.

Hermione had scanned the crowd and had seen a worn out Fleur struggling with an overtired Katie Rose. Close by there were a group of witches looking at the mother and daughter, shaking their heads and whispering.

'Hi, Fleur.' Hermione was rewarded with the first genuine look of warmth all evening.

'Hermione, I'm so glad to see you finally. Bill said he saw you last night.'

The two witches embraced, and Hermione nodded her head towards the huddle of muttering witches. 'Let's get Katie Rose away from these eyes, shall we?'

Fleur rolled her eyes and nodded. 'Please, yes. I hate it.'

Hermione squatted down beside Katie Rose. 'Hey, Katie Rose, do you live here?'

The little girl nodded, looking at Hermione in assessment.

'That's good. I'm wondering if you could help me because I'm looking for a warm fireplace to sit by. I'm feeling a bit cold do you know where one is?'

The girl nodded again solemnly but with a flicker of interest showing in her eyes.

'You do that's great. Could you show me where it is?'

The girl nodded again and, taking her by the hand, led her away. 'I'll show you some funny-shaped firewood too,' the little girl said conversationally without a backward glance.

Fleur looked bemusedly relieved as Hermione waved for her to stay if she wanted. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Mrs. Weasley with a harsh look on her face step forward and Bill interceding with a frown on his normally easy-going face.

It was strange, reflected Hermione, wrapping her arms closer around the sleeping girl; she had felt sure the chant went well. It had taken all her concentration to say it correctly in Latin, and she never entered the effortless dream state that she normally did when she led it in the ancient tongue. But when she finished, she could feel the room thrumming with magic and had sighed deeply in relief. Hermione was satisfied she had built the magic up, despite using Latin for the chant. It was the one thing she hadn't been sure she would be able to do. Also, when she met with Professor McGonagall briefly afterwards, the older witch's eyes were full of respect, and she had quietly said to her, 'Well done,' before moving away to do the mandatory social rounds in her roles as Headmistress and Head of the Order.

It was afterwards, here at this gathering of Order Members at the Burrow, that things started to go strangely. It was the way people shifted their eyes away from her, as if desperately hoping she wouldn't single them out and strike up a conversation with them. The young witch had thought she'd been so careful, but she must have made a faux pas unknowingly but what could it have been? She pondered for a bit, then looked down at the sleeping girl's face in perfect repose and sighed heavily.

'Hey, Hermione, are you okay? You look tired.'

Hermione glanced up as Fleur gently put a hand on her shoulder.

'I'll be all right. Just the last couple of days catching up on me, I suppose.'

'Thank you so much for looking after Katie Rose; I couldn't believe it when I looked over and saw her snuggling up against you.'

'I think she was really tired. She's just delightful, and I'm glad I could give you a break.'

'Hi, Hermione.' Bill grinned as he came and stood near his wife. 'I see you've worked your magic putting our daughter to sleep.'

Hermione laughed quietly and pointed out, 'There was no magic needed, only one sleepy little girl.'

Bill bent down and gently lifted the sleeping Katie Rose from her arms. He turned and quietly whispered, 'Thanks.'

The three of them slowly worked their way across the room and up some stairs.

No excuses now, Hermione told herself sternly as she stood up. She scanned the chatty crowd and saw Harry surrounded by a group of younger Order members, none whom were familiar to her. Hermione hadn't spent any time with Harry, so she decided this was a good opportunity to catch up. The young witch quietly moved her way towards him, people parting surprisingly easily, and stood on the periphery of the group. A sweaty, red-faced Harry was spouting forth with great passion on some finer details of Quidditch, and the younger Order members seemed to be lapping it up. But after listening to the tirade for what felt like ten minutes, Hermione had to restrain herself from rolling her eyes at his arrogance. Sure, she didn't know that much about Quidditch nor was she actually that interested, but even she could tell Harry was stating things which made him appear the only true expert on the sport. There was also absolutely no two-way conversation with anyone it was Harry who held the speaking stick, and he wasn't sharing. The younger witches and wizards made the occasional appreciative noises, and then Harry was off again, seemingly engrossed in the sound of his voice. When one tall, blonde-haired boy did hesitantly offer a differing opinion from one of Harry's more outrageous remarks, he just rudely talked over the boy, stating his opinion forcefully again. Hermione began to understand what Luna was talking about and the possible reason for the falling out between Harry and Ron.

'Hey, Hermione, I didn't see you there,' Harry boomed, focussing his over-bright eyes on her. Almost simultaneously, the mousy-haired witch and the tall, gangly wizard on either side of her edged away.

Hermione almost snorted in amazement. She had been standing here for ages, and he'd only just noticed her, which were impressively bad observation skills in anybody's books.

'Your Latin was incredible we didn't learn it like that at school,' he remarked loudly.

All the younger members looked at her and glanced away again with barely disguised disgust.

'I picked up on it when I was down South you know how traditional they are,' explained Hermione quietly, softly smiling up at him.

'Yeah, well, you always were a fast learner. You said 'traditional,' but from what I've heard, 'backward' is the best word...' Harry asserted aggressively.

Hermione was taken aback at his directness; this certainly wasn't the Harry she knew. Sure, he wasn't always the best at reading social cues, but this...

He said in a loud whisper, which meant the group instantly stepped in closer, '...I heard they only wash once a week, which probably explains why they smell so much. Ron told me that the women just, you know, do it with anyone, and nobody minds, and they have children literally pouring out of them, and none of them know who their fathers are. I'm just really pleased that you haven't taken up their ways, Hermione, or you would have had at least three children by now and probably be dirt poor. You've kept to what you are good at, you know, like learning. Just look at the way you spoke Latin today. Although I think it's a total waste, you living down there. They are just uncivilized and won't appreciate a proper witch.'

Hermione was horrified at Harry's rude outpourings. He barely had time to take a breath, so intent on what he was saying. When he stopped, she quite literally didn't know what to say she was beyond stunned. Hermione glanced at the faces of the others and noticed they also looked surprised, but she wondered if it was because Harry also appeared rude to them or because they actually believed what he said. The only thing she could think of to say was a tightly muttered, 'You shouldn't believe everything you hear, Harry.' Which afterwards, when she thought about it, was a lame reply.

Luckily, Ginny saved her from anymore of Harry's ill-informed ideas. The red-head called out and pushed past Hermione so that she could link arms with him.

'Harry, Mum would like a word with you now sorry to interrupt.' And without a look in Hermione's direction, she led Harry away.

Rapidly the younger members dispersed from around her, and Hermione was soon standing alone again. She looked about the room and saw Professor McGonagall with a glass of whiskey in her hand, deep in conversation with a long-bearded wizard. With a tired sigh, Hermione turned and saw a table of food and drink in the far corner of the room. She hadn't eaten in what felt like and probably was days. Well, maybe it would make her feel more positive and less tired, she thought, and she made a beeline for it.

There were considerably fewer people on this side of the room, and it was dimmer, she noted, but the food looked and smelt delicious, so she helped herself to a golden brown, cheesy sort of pastry and a big glass of pumpkin juice. Her stomach rumbled in anticipated appreciation. She took a big bite and promptly gagged at the dreadful, bitter taste. Hermione inwardly groaned. She kept forgetting it was customary here to use magic when cooking and found it hard to believe they couldn't taste it. Hermione glanced around and discreetly spat it out into a napkin and put it in a nearby bin. Frowning at yet another thing that had gone wrong this evening, she wandered away from the table, her stomach voicing loud protests. She sipped her juice; drinks at least were palatable, thank goodness, although they still had a distinctive metallic taste. Hermione then worked out that the Butterbeer and the Firewhisky last night was bitter, and it wasn't because of the alcohol. Hermione discreetly looked at her watch and stifled a groan there was no way she could politely leave without seeming rude. Nobody else was leaving, and she certainly didn't want to be the first.

Hermione looked about and was pleased to see nobody else close by; it made her feel less like a social pariah, especially when everybody else seemed so chatty. She located an empty armchair tucked away in the shadows of a corner; she would just sit there and have a rest until it was time to leave.

Hermione sat down with a groan of tiredness.

'Good Evening, Miss Granger.' A deep voice suddenly emerged from the shadow.

She leapt up in fright, spilling her pumpkin juice and giving an undignified yelp.

'Good Lord, you gave me a fright!' Hermione sat back down and peered to see who had spoken. Her stomach dropped when she made out the harsh features of Snape sitting motionless in the dark.

'Hmmm, so it would seem.'

Oh, yes, how could she have not recognized that voice after sitting for years in his classroom? There was an awkward moment of silence while Hermione grappled with the implications of sitting next to the Potions master. This was the person who murdered Dumbledore. What on earth should she say to him? What could she say? She also rapidly realized that, as much as she wanted to, she couldn't run in the opposite direction either. Oh, Merlin, strike her down now, please! There was only one route she had: politeness her mum had taught her well.

'Good Evening, Professor Snape. This is indeed a surprise. I didn't see you there.' Hermione tried to sound as unflustered as possible but knew she probably hadn't pulled it off.

'I believe that was the intention.'

Hermione's mind whirled in circles. What did he mean by that? Did he *heintend* to scare her? Or did he *heintend* for nobody to see him? And why would he *heintend* to do either of those things? She had fewer than twenty words from him, and already she was utterly confused. Hermione had no idea how to negotiate standard wizarding society without falling flat on her face. How was she supposed to have a conversation with the anomaly that was known as Professor Snape? The young witch owned the silence, and it

was deafening; she felt her cheeks redden and tried desperately to think of what to say to him.

'Oh,' she managed to utter. Even to her own ears, it was pathetic-sounding.

To her complete surprise, Professor Snape leaned forward, bringing himself out of the shadows. His sharp, black eyes turned on her, and Hermione felt she was being minutely examined in his intense gaze. Snape was exactly the same as she remembered him even down to the black robes over a black frock coat. At least at a funeral it was in keeping, Hermione thought wryly, forgetting for the moment the colour of her own usual attire. She then felt a whiff of something familiar about him but quickly forgot it when the wizard unexpectedly pulled from deep inside his cloak a sprig of silvery foliage. He held it out to her, positioning his long fingered hands correctly in the manner of an offering.

'I do believe it is the custom for service rendered,' he said silkily in no more than a whisper.

Hermione's jaw dropped, and she broke eye contact to quickly glance around nobody was watching, thank goodness. She rapidly thought, he knows... But how would Snape of all people know? Was he sympathetic, or did he seek to destroy? Hermione felt a momentary easing in her and knew intuitively what to do: she leant forward as gracefully as she could, given the situation, and accepted the sprig of wormwood with the traditional acceptance movements of an initiate and tucked it behind her ear. Hermione saw Snape's eyes momentarily widen, and to her amazement, Snape lowered his head in respect.

'Oh, Hermione, there you are. I can hardly see you. It is positively gloomy over here; no wonder everybody is squashed together on that side where they can actually see. They really should do something about the lighting,' came Professor McGonagall's quick voice.

Hermione swung herself rapidly around to face the older witch, and Snape disappeared back into the shadow.

The Headmistress stood in front of them and had the slightest smile playing on her lips. 'Oh, and a good evening to you, Severus. I'm pleased to see that you could make it.'

'Good Evening, Minerva. I am where I am expected to be, as you full well know.'

'Yes, and I appreciate the gesture, even if others do not,' she said in a quiet undertone Hermione could only just catch. Then she switched to her normal brisk tone, 'But I do think it is acceptable for us to leave now if you like. I most definitely need to go home, as I have another full day tomorrow. And you, Severus, if you want. We can leave together, and nobody can complain.'

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Despite her heavy tiredness, sleep did not come easily to Hermione as she lay in bed later that night. Her mind buzzed with agitation there were just too many unexpected twists today. Snape's apparent knowledge of her traditions was most definitely the biggest surprise. Hermione picked up the sprig of wormwood from the bedside table and breathed in its distinctive spicy bouquet. How could it even be possible? It just did not make sense Snape of all people. Hermione shook her head in amazement. But he had known it was appropriate to offer foliage or a flower to her and had placed his hands perfectly as a sign of an offering. Even Athena would have had difficulty positioning them as precisely. Snape had also bowed his head, which meant he understood her movements enough to know who she was. Someone had taught Snape, Hermione realized. He must have had a hidden family connection with the South.

But Hermione was not even sure what she thought of him. A cruel, sadistic but brilliant master came first to mind; she had both hated and loved Potions as a student. However, it had also not been a great surprise to hear it was Snape who murdered Dumbledore; everyone knew the Potions master was capable of it. But then Dumbledore's Pensieve must have been convincing to withstand the outcry from the public, who were baying for blood, and the reluctance of the Ministry to pardon him. Emotions were running high at that time, she remembered.

It was also interesting how the Potions master had been sitting virtually invisible in the shadows at the Burrow. Was he hiding? ... or observing? ... or maybe spying? Hermione swallowed nervously. She did not like Snape knowing anything about her or her life. He was a dangerous man.

Feeling the feathery small leaves and supple stems on her fingertips, Hermione decided to concentrate on a thing she did know: wormwood; an interesting choice of foliage to offer her, and Hermione was sure it was not a random choice, given what she remembered about Snape's precise nature and his previous and possibly current role as a spy.

The witch mentally went through the lists of wormwood usage: making absinthe, an ingredient in vermouth, martini and beer. Hermione chuckled when she realized it was the alcoholic uses she remembered first after all these years. She doubted Snape had given it to her for those reasons, however enjoyable. Hermione went back to her mental list: used to get rid of fleas, insects and intestinal worms. Nope, that can't be right either, she concluded, still smiling.

Wormwood... Artemisia Absinthium... Absinthium... bitter... hmm... Snape had taught it in potions as an ingredient in antidotes to poisons. It was also used as an antidote for the venom of water dragons not exactly useful. But an antidote to poisons could be something. What was Snape telling her? But exhaustion overtook her, so Hermione rolled over and fell into a restless sleep. She dreamed of a young Harry, scared and crying over and over and over again.

## Five

### *Chapter 6 of 22*

Seven years after the death of Dumbledore, Hermione finally returns to Hogwarts. What will she find?

Many thanks to my beta, Soul Bound.

A blast of icy wind straight off the lake hit Hermione full in the face, and her hair whipped violently about. The witch breathed in and was invigorated by its cold sharpness it was so different from the languid heat of the South. As she walked along the muddy track, it seemed her body was drinking in the beauty surrounding her. Sure it was not the strong sunlight and vivid colours of warmer climates, but it seemed nature was revealing her more sophisticated side in the muted grey and blue tones.

Hermione wrapped her thick scarf more securely and knew it was because of the ridiculous amount of clothes she was wearing that she was able to enjoy the stroll so much. When dressing earlier this morning, she had remembered what her dad had learned in the Army and had repeated often that 'the problem is never the climate, but how people dress for it.' With that in mind, she had put on so many layers that it occurred to her that she might waddle when she walked. But low and behold, her dad was correct yet again, and for the first time since arriving at Hogwarts, Hermione actually felt warm.

Some crows were squabbling up in a bare tree, so she stopped and watched them playing out their family dramas before wandering on slowly. Hermione hadn't slept well

and had woken to a feeling of great heaviness like a tremendous weight was pressing down on her. All last night, she had been tormented by the young Harry at the beach dream it was as if it had been put on replay the entire night. She knew every second of the dream in detail and was now heartily fed up with it. Hermione's task was to work out its meaning, but it was the oddest dream he had ever placed her in. None of it made any sense, and she had difficulty knowing even where to begin. So when the witch woke feeling groggy and saw the blustery autumn sky from her window, she just had to get outside quickly and have a walk in the elements to try and clear her head.

Hermione eyed a particularly boggy part of the track, successfully leaped over it and carried on along the narrow path. It was strange seeing Harry as a young boy and awful seeing him so frightened he had felt so small as he clung to her in utter desperation. But when the witch remembered the Harry she met yesterday, it baffled her. The wizard had been amazing when he spoke at the service; she'd never known he could talk so sensitively and so eloquently. He was the Harry everyone wanted him to be, and she'd found herself falling in love with him all over again. But later at the Burrow, he was pompous, arrogant, and if he had not been such a dear friend, she would choose to have no more to do with him. And even though Hermione wanted to believe it was Harry's grief causing him to behave obnoxiously, the way the Order members accepted his behavior as normal told her, unfortunately, otherwise. The witch sadly wished Ron were here to help her get a clearer picture of what was going on with Harry. Although she and Ron had come from completely different backgrounds, they always intrinsically understood each other. Whereas Harry had always been complex and at times difficult to understand, which wasn't really surprising.

Hermione paused and looked out across the steel grey lake, trying to catch a glimpse of the giant squid, but only saw some ducks flying low and fast, inches above the choppy water. She needed to concentrate on what she knew. Her dream was entirely about Harry so it was quite likely that he would be a pivotal person in what was about to...

...Her stomach cramped in agony, and all thoughts abruptly left as the witch doubled over, trying desperately to ease it. Her entire gut was tying itself into knots, and wave after wave of dizziness washed over her. Hermione focussed on her breathing and gradually everything eased. She very gingerly straightened and stood unsteadily, feeling pale and weak. The witch saw a tree stump a short distance off the path, so she moved carefully to it and sat down before she fell. It was the lack of food, Hermione suddenly realized. She tried to recall the last thing she had actually been able to consume and remembered the sugar cane on the boat. How many days ago had that been? But there was no way the witch could eat anything at Hogwarts even if she was starving to death as the house-elves prepared all the food using magic. When she bit into the savory the first night at McGonagall's rooms, for a moment she had thought she'd bitten into metal piping it had tasted so appalling. As far as Hermione knew, there were no normal cooking facilities anywhere in Hogwarts with the houseelves, there wasn't any need for them. Also, she didn't want to draw attention by actively seeking them out. Anyway, where would she get food to cook with? Hermione sat cogitating and finally let out a sigh of relief; she had a temporary solution, and it was just a matter of slightly adjusting her plans for the day.

Hermione got up and started walking back up the track, feeling chilled and unwell. As she re-entered Hogwarts, the same oppressive heaviness from this morning descended on her again. The witch was pleased it was early Sunday morning, with the corridors deserted, since nobody was around to see her walking so slowly. As Hermione stepped onto a moving staircase to go up to Gryffindor tower, she couldn't help shaking her head at the unbelievably extravagant use of magic. Moving staircases why?

The moment Hermione knocked on McGonagall's door, she regretted it. What if the professor was still sleeping? Last night, McGonagall had said she wanted to see Hermione in the morning, but had not mentioned a particular time. The door was opened by an alert and a very much awake McGonagall dressed in her usual green robes with her hair pulled back tightly into a bun. Hermione let out a sigh of relief.

'Good morning, Professor McGonagall. I hope I haven't disturbed you.'

'No, not at all. I am pleased you came. I wanted a word with you, and I have meetings all day today, so this is good,' she assured warmly. 'Let me take your coat and scarf you look like you have been out this fine morning.'

'I went for a walk around the lake it's lovely out.' Hermione unwound her scarf, shrugged out of her heavy cloak, and handed it to McGonagall.

'It does look like the perfect walking weather,' the professor said enviously and led her to the armchairs by the fire. 'Would you like some tea to warm you up?'

'Yes, that would be lovely.'

The professor clapped her hands, and the same fine boned tea set from last night appeared on the coffee table in front of them. The professor poured the tea, and Hermione added two lumps of sugar, then took a sip, suppressing a grimace. The witch glanced about; it was the first time she had been in these rooms during the day. They were decorated beautifully in a tasteful modern sort of way, and the professor had used the height of the ceiling and the length of the windows to create a light, airy space; there was a slight tinge of something floral or perhaps vanilla based in the air. It wasn't at all old ladyish, Hermione thought guiltily.

'Hermione, I wanted to talk about...'

Hermione brought her attention back and wondered if McGonagall wanted to talk about what she had done wrong at the service and why nobody wanted anything to do with her. She hoped she hadn't done anything too terrible.

Professor McGonagall shifted slightly in her seat and set her cup carefully down on her saucer. 'I will come to the point. I was wondering if you would be interested in doing some consultation work at Hogwarts.' Professor McGonagall looked at her over the top of her glasses.

'Me?' stammered out Hermione, completely surprised. Everything and everyone was acting most out of pattern.

'Our Divination and Ancient Runes curriculum have not been looked at in years, and I understand these are your areas of expertise.'

'Wow, I am honoured that you would even consider me,' the young witch replied, trying furiously to rally her thoughts.

Professor McGonagall smiled at her obviously stunned expression. 'If you do decide to accept it, you will be on a professor's salary with accommodation and meals included, of course.'

Hermione remembered the little boy with an almost physical feeling of pain. 'How long would it be for?'

'I am estimating between a fortnight and a month.' The older witch added almost apologetically, 'They have been neglected for some time.'

Hermione took a large gulp of tea, hoping the sugar in it would help her dreadfully muddled brain process everything.

'Athena said you studied under the Paramount Witch of Divination and Ancient Languages for many years, as well as with many other prominent witches and wizards in the South.'

'Yes, I have,' confirmed Hermione neutrally, but inwardly she tensed, wondering how much McGonagall knew.

'It would benefit Hogwarts greatly if someone of your caliber could look over what we are currently teaching in order to improve it. Few witches or wizards nowadays have the necessary training and experience in these subjects.'

'You do understand the approach taken in the South, particularly towards Divination and Ancient Runes, is completely different from here,' Hermione felt compelled to point out.

'I do indeed. I am led to understand the traditions you trained in are very substantial and in some ways more robust than ours. Both subjects are, as you probably recall, treated as soft options, but from what Athena has told me, and from what I have observed during my stays, that is not the case in the traditions of the South.'

'No, they are certainly never considered a soft option down there in fact, they are quite the opposite,' agreed Hermione. 'You know, the irony is Divination used to be my

most hated subject. I found it hard to believe when I studied it in the South that it was even the same subject.' The witch chuckled, remembering her shock when she found out.

The professor's eyes twinkled in amusement. 'I have to say also that until I had seen it practiced in the South, it was not a subject I put any credence in. But after gaining a rudimentary idea of the processes, it brought into sharp relief the inadequacies in the curricula being taught here.'

Hermione smiled at Professor McGonagall, impressed with the older witch's intelligence and understanding. 'It would be interesting for me to look over it as well.'

'I would imagine.'

'After many, many years of intensive study, I now know that at some point in history, the Southern approach and the wizarding approach were one.'

'Really?' McGonagall's eyes were alive with interest. 'But then you are in quite a unique position to know.'

'Yes, in fact, not in just this one area. It seems to me that over time the wizarding world lost some aspects of their magic but retained others.'

'And the South?'

'The same thing happened. I think, as both communities became more isolated from one another, the differences became more exaggerated and the similarities much harder to detect.'

'How fascinating.' Professor McGonagall's eyes became serious, and she slowly shook her head. 'There is a very long and complex history between our two communities with not a lot of it being positive. Many people, particularly now, would be horrified that I am even considering having someone with a Southern approach look over the curriculum, let alone the possibility of incorporating something of a Southern angle into Hogwarts. But I suppose you can never please those sorts of people.'

Hermione admired the Headmistress' clarity of thought. 'I will give your offer my deepest consideration and let you know my answer by the end of today.' She needed time to think things through.

They both took a sip of tea, and the wind blew loudly on the window, rattling the catches.

'I'm planning to visit my parents' graves today. I thought I probably should let you know that I'll be leaving shortly,' said Hermione, breaking the silence.

Professor McGonagall looked at her sharply as if she was a student asking permission for an outing to Hogsmeade. Hermione felt a tickling of irritation run through her.

'Hmm, it is not quite as straightforward as that, I am afraid...'

Hermione inwardly groaned, and a rush of anger coursed through her. For goodness sake, all she was doing was being polite and going through the formalities; she wasn't really asking for permission, and she certainly wasn't expecting there to be any difficulties. The young witch had traveled for years and knew how to look after herself.

Professor McGonagall must have seen the look in her face because she quickly added in a consolatory tone, 'Oh, of course you must go. I am not saying for a moment you should not, but I need to establish a risk assessment, you understand. I will also need to send some one from the Order with you...'

Hermione bunched her hands into fists, and a vein thumped heavily in her temple. The witch sat there seething until she realized suddenly the inappropriateness of her reaction. What was happening to her? Why did she want to hit someone over something as mundane as this? Her stomach growled angrily, and Hermione braced herself for another round of cramps, but relaxed when nothing happened. It was the incessant gnawing hunger boring into her, Hermione recognized, that was causing her intense reactions. All she wanted to do was go to the Strawberry Café, her favourite café in the village, order their lamb shanks served with mashed potatoes, mint sauce and thick brown gravy or maybe their Cajun chicken with the special sauce they made or maybe both. Her mouth watered in hungry anticipation. Salads were way down on her list now that she was close to starvation. Then she would finish with coffee and cake real espresso coffee, nice and strong and maybe a cheesecake; yes, that would be perfect, although a rich, dark chocolate cake could also be nice. Then again, custard would be...Hermione jerked to a stop when she realized she was daydreaming about food. This was getting out of control. She forced herself to listen to the professor.

'... So you see, Hermione, while you are here, it is best that you do not go anywhere unaccompanied.'

Hermione dutifully nodded, but she had no idea what McGonagall had just said. This was bad. She had never phased out when somebody was speaking before and felt too embarrassed to ask what the professor had said.

'... Now I need to see if I can find someone to accompany you at such short notice. Most of the higher-grade Order members are required to attend the meetings today, and unfortunately I do not want risk sending a lesser-qualified member with you. But do not worry, Hermione; I understand you need to visit your parents' graves today, and I will endeavor to find someone so you are properly protected. When I do, I will send them to your rooms.'

Hermione quickly masked her disappointment. She didn't want anyone coming with her. All Hermione wanted to do was go to the café, eat to her heart's content, wander around her village, browse in some bookshops, and then walk to the nearby Church and visit her parents' graves. It was a deeply personal visit, and the witch didn't want to share it with some stranger.

'Thank you, Professor,' said Hermione, trying to sound grateful, and she got up to leave. She felt guilty; it was hardly the professor's fault she needed to send someone with her. In fact, McGonagall was acting most responsibly. Oh, goodness, thought Hermione desperately; she needed to eat something so she could start thinking straight.

## Chapter 6

### *Chapter 7 of 22*

Seven years after the death of Dumbledore, Hermione finally returns to Hogwarts. What will she find?

Many thanks to my beta, Soul Bound.

Hermione was clipping her hair back when she heard the knock on the door. She frowned and wondered who McGonagall had found at such short notice. The witch hoped the person was at least familiar enough with muggle ways so as not to draw attention. And while she understood the rationale, Hermione still didn't like the idea of a witch or wizard accompanying her today...it was an invasion of privacy plain and simple. She took one last look at herself in the mirror, and even she could see she looked too pale. The witch wasn't happy with the long, black cloak either as it would stand out amongst the Muggles, but there was little she could do about it. At least her full-length

skirt and long woolen jumper were more in keeping, even if they weren't exactly cutting edge fashion.

Hermione opened the door not a little begrudgingly...oh, dear mother of God, no!...and fought an impulse to slam it shut again. Snape was standing bat-like in front of her, his oily hair partially obscuring his sallow face.

'I am to accompany you today, Miss Granger.'

'Oh, oh, right,' stammered out Hermione, 'I'll just get my bag, sir.'

Oh, God, this was too much, just too much, she fumed as she snatched up her bag. The one person who knew something of who she was...the one person she didn't want finding out anything more...just so happened to be the one accompanying her today. It seemed a bit more than a coincidence, and she didn't like it...she didn't like it one bit. And it wasn't fair. All she wanted to do was sit down and eat something...anything not tainted with magic...and then she would be in a better frame of mind to work out how to handle this precarious situation.

They walked down the corridors in silence, both their cloaks billowing out behind them. Nothing was said until they reached the Apparition point just outside the wards of Hogwarts.

Snape looked down at her with his hawk-like stare. 'Professor McGonagall informed me of the general location; however, I will need to know specifics if we are Apparating, Miss Granger.'

'Of course, sir.' Hermione felt her cheeks reddening. 'I doubt you've been there before. Um, it's the village shops near where I grew up. I hadn't realized until a little while ago that I needed to have someone with me; otherwise, I'd have arranged a Portkey with McGonagall... I mean, Professor McGonagall... um, I mean, Headmistress...'  
Hermione trailed off and looked at the ground. She felt like an immature student explaining why she was out after curfew.

'I would also like an outline of what we are doing today before we Apparate if I am to do my job properly,' he said in his deep voice.

Hermione was shocked...Snape was being polite. She'd expected him to hand out the usual barrage of insults the way he did in the classroom, but nothing. Not a hint.

'Sorry about that, sir; I was planning on visiting the local village shops close to where I grew up. There are a few places I'd like to see again, and then I want to visit my parents' graves. The church is relatively close, so I thought I'd walk there from the village.' Then Hermione's mouth and brain separated company. 'Is that okay? ... I mean, for security and risk assessment and... um... whatever other sort of stuff you are here for?' The witch winced at what came out of her mouth...since when did she use the word 'stuff'?

Snape continued to look steadily at her. 'Yes, that is why I am here. I have been informed you are in the highest risk category, and as such, I will need to stay close for the entire day.'

Hermione heard a touch of an accent to Snape's words; it was curious she had never heard it before in the classroom.

'Now, shall we?' Snape said with a hint of impatience and smoothly held out his arm.

Hermione breathed in, stepped closer to him and linked arms with his. He was much taller and more slender than she'd realized. She looked up at him, nodded and Apparated with a crack.

Hermione opened her eyes for a split second but quickly closed them again...the narrow brick alleyway was swaying violently under her feet. She felt a prickling of sweat as waves of heat coursed through her and heard a humming sound inside her head. Oh, no, Apparating on an empty stomach was not a good idea, she thought desperately, and automatically held onto Snape's steady arm, trying to center herself. It was as if the normal gravitational pull had gone askew, but she was determined she was not going to faint in front of Snape...that would be too much. Hermione cautiously opened her eyes but shut them again quickly.

'Are you all right, Miss Granger?'

'Just a moment, sir,' the witch whispered while she desperately willed for her nausea to settle. Please don't throw up...please don't throw up, Hermione repeated anxiously to herself. She doubted she could live herself down if she upended the meager contents of her stomach onto Snape's shoes. Slowly the humming subsided, and it wasn't as suffocatingly hot. The arm she was grasping onto was still and firm, so she cautiously reopened her eyes and looked about the unmoving alleyway in relief. Snape was looking down at her with a frown on his stern face.

'Sorry about that, sir ... um ... I haven't Apparated much in recent years. I'm not used to it anymore,' she feebly lied.

'I believe, Miss Granger, food is often beneficial when you feel faint,' Snape pointed out.

He saw through that one nice and easily, thought Hermione ruefully.

'Perhaps we should shed our cloaks. It is warmer here, and we will not draw as much attention,' the tall wizard noted.

Hermione realized she was still clutching his arm and quickly let go. Taking Snape's advice, she took off her cloak and draped it over her arm. The wizard had done the same and wore simple, unassuming black trousers and jumper.

'I know where we can go for something to eat. The food is good,' Hermione said with studied nonchalance.

With a nod, Snape indicated for her to lead the way out of the alleyway and down the busy high street. He walked by her side, his eyes scanning the morning shoppers. Hermione realized with a snort that this must be what it would be like to have her own personal bodyguard. It was a pity he didn't have a little microphone to talk into like she saw in the movies.

When they opened the doors to the café, Hermione went weak at the knees at the beautiful smells. All this food she could actually eat and not a tinge of magic anywhere. Snape stood taking in the casually trendy place with an easy confidence. There were only a few people scattered about, as it was still too early for the lunch time rush. Hermione wondered what the etiquette was for paying but decided since Snape had offered up his Sunday to accompany her, she should pay. Anyway, the witch didn't know if Snape had any Muggle money.

'The lunch menu is up on the board, Professor Snape,' Hermione pointed out quietly, not knowing if he had eaten out at Muggle cafés.

They both stood scanning the board in total concentration. Even reading the descriptions of meals on offer made her mouth water. She'd never known words like 'drizzle', 'garnish', 'pan fried' or 'roasted' could send electric shocks through her entire body. Hermione stepped closer to the counter, and a cheerful young man behind it greeted them.

'What would you like, sir?'

'Oh, no, Miss Granger, it should be I asking that question,' Snape replied formally, his face hidden by his lank hair.

'Sorry, sir, but you gave up your own time to be here,' insisted Hermione firmly.

The blonde haired man was following the exchange with an interested smile. Hermione realized that they were probably different from his usual customers.

'Absolutely not. It would be both my privilege and my honour.' Snape turned and looked directly at her.



Hermione looked sharply up at the carefully chosen words and saw he had bowed his head. She nodded in agreement, and Snape looked pleased for the briefest of moments. The witch turned to the man behind the counter. 'I'll have the lamb shanks, please.'

'Yes, and I will have the same,' Snape smoothly added. 'Miss Granger, if you could find a table. I am sure you will be wanting to sit down.'

Hermione nodded; she still didn't feel too well. 'I'll be out there in the courtyard.'

She picked up a carafe of water and two glasses and went out into a small, completely enclosed brick courtyard. It was empty. There were only a couple tables and chairs out; most were still stacked away against one wall. It seemed quiet after the noise of the café, and Hermione drew her cloak around her against the chill air as she sat down. Most of the courtyard was still in shadow...the weak northern sun hadn't reached over the walls to warm it up yet...but Hermione always preferred to sit outside whenever possible. She glanced up as Snape sat fluidly down, angling his chair so his back was against the wall.

The wizard still looked remote and imposing, but the witch noticed there was a small measure of approval in his eyes as he took in where she chose to sit them. This was surreal. Snape would be the last person on earth Hermione would have thought she'd be having lunch with here. The last time she'd come here had been with Emily, an old childhood friend. They'd giggled the afternoon away, drinking frappes and gossiping. The last Hermione had heard, Emily was studying to be an architect, but that had been seven years ago. Who knew where she was now?

'Thank you so much, Professor. You really didn't have to.'

Snape gracefully crossed his legs and shook his head. 'As I said before, it is my privilege and honour.' He met her eyes. 'My lady,' he added in the ancient tongue.

Hermione gulped in surprise. Luckily, she was saved from needing to reply as the waiter from behind the counter sauntered up to them with a bottle of red wine and two wineglasses on a tray. So... Snape drinks red wine, noted Hermione with interest. Ron would have loved that bit of information. The waiter set the wineglasses down on the table, uncorked the wine with a flourish, poured a little into Snape's glass and waited while Snape took a small sip, then nodded. The waiter filled the glasses up with the deep blood red wine. Hermione thanked him, and he withdrew with a nod and left, humming a tune. She glanced up, and Snape had for the fleetest of seconds a strange expression on his face as his eyes followed the waiter through the door.

'I hope you drink red wine. I took the liberty of ordering a bottle as it does go well with lamb,' Snape simply observed.

'It's been years since I've drank red wine, but, yes, I do like it,' Hermione commented with a smile.

Snape lifted his glass in a silent toast. Hermione returned the gesture and took a sip. The taste was strong and acerbic on her tongue but had undertones of warmth and spice. It tasted delightful...and most importantly, it wasn't sweet tea.

'It's lovely, thank you.' Hermione felt the alcohol go careening around her starved body, which might have given her the courage to ask her next question. 'Tell me, Professor, do you speak the old language?' The young witch couldn't be bothered trying to work out subtext and hints with a former and possibly current spy.

'I do indeed, my lady,' Snape replied using the ancient tongue smoothly if a little carefully.

'This is indeed a surprise,' Hermione replied in the same language, looking carefully across at the lean man sipping his wine. 'But since I was your student and you were my teacher, it would be better if we used these terms of address, would it not?' Establishing what terms of address to use was a well-known routine, and the witch felt instinctively more comfortable communicating in this language with Snape; it defined relationships more concretely than English.

'Oh, on the contrary, my lady,' insisted Snape fluently with a glimmer of a smirk playing on his lips. 'Since you are a lady, I will address you as one.'

'In any case, I will address you as 'my teacher' as that is what you are to me...my teacher.' Hermione grinned back, enjoying the game. Snape spoke the ancient tongue as a native speaker with not a trace of a Southern dialect. She sipped her wine speculatively and felt its warmth course through her. 'Pray tell, my teacher, how did you come to speak the tongue with such elegance?'

Snape's face became inscrutable once more. Hermione knew he was weighing up what to tell her. He sat back and swirled the dark liquid around his glass contemplatively. 'It was my maternal grandmother who spoke to me entirely in this language. But it has been many years since I have used it as an adult. It is indeed a pleasure to feel it rolling from my tongue once more, my lady.'

The waiter came out and put down their plates in front of them. Hermione honestly thought she'd died and gone to heaven.

'Bon Appetit,' said Hermione, itching to start.

'Bon Appetit,' Snape quickly replied.

They both started eating with equal relish. The lamb was soft and succulent, complemented with the sharp taste of mint sauce; the potatoes were perfect and the gravy rich. For a time there was no noise except for the scraping of cutlery on the plates and the distant buzz of traffic. Hermione genuinely couldn't remember eating anything as delicious as this in a long time and noticed Snape was eating with equal gusto. There was no pressure to fill in the silence with small talk, and by and by there was nothing left on either of their plates.

Snape elegantly put his knife and fork together and dabbed his lips with his napkin. 'That was indeed the finest meal I have had in quite some time, my lady.'

Hermione noticed he had the lovely smooth diction of the mountain area when he spoke.

'This café was where I used to come with my parents and my friends before I moved away. I am pleased the meals are done to the same standards.' The witch noticed Snape's usually sallow face had a warm flush to it, and he was looking fractionally more contented. The sun had climbed over the wall, and they were now bathed in sunlight.

'Where do you study in the South...do I detect a coastal lilt?' the wizard asked.

Hermione reminded herself sternly that she was talking with a former spy whom she still did not trust. 'Yes, that's where I live now, along the Smoky Coast. And where in the South did your grandma come from, my teacher?' she countered, hoping to move the conversations away from her.

Snape refilled her glass, and she took another sip of wine.

'From the Black Mountain region. I spent my childhood growing up there.'

'I know it well. I lived there a couple of years ago. I studied under a teacher there by the name of Ilak.'

Snape dropped his eyes. 'Teacher Ilak is in fact a relative of mine. She's my grandmother's cousin. My grandmother and I used to visit her often at different festival times. She used to let me sit on her lap and help her when she led the rituals.'

Hermione was also impressed that he was related to Teacher Ilak. The old Southern woman had been one of her hardest teachers and was both demanding and selective of the students she took on. It also confirmed her suspicions of last night that he had family from the South.

'Is she well?' Snape inquired, more gently than Hermione could have imagined.

'Yes. I saw her about a year ago, but a friend of mine is still studying under her, and I only spoke to him the other week, and he said she is well. She keeps herself busy

and is very involved in her family. She's certainly getting frailer, but considering her age, she is in good health.'

'That is good to hear.' Snape lifted his eyes and had an unusual expression on face.

'Now, is there any particular cake you like...I'm at least getting this...and would you like coffee or tea to finish, my teacher?'

'Ah, anything sweet for the cake and strong for the coffee.' Snape had a ghost of smile playing on his lips.

Hermione laughed, getting up, feeling his eyes follow her as she went to place the order. There was calmness in her body, which she realized was the absence of hunger. Straight away, the seemingly improbable scenario of having lunch with Snape no longer fazed her like it had less than an hour ago. She placed the order and made her way back to their table where Snape sat sipping his wine in the sun, observing her walking across the courtyard.

The young witch sat down and gave a mental shrug; she wasn't good at the indirect. 'Excuse me, my teacher, but I would really like to know how you knew what I am?'

'It was how you led the Other Realm Chant, my lady. I knew you had gone to live in the South, but of course that did not necessarily mean you had become so conversant with the different rituals.' Snape's normally cold eyes showed an infinitesimal glow of warmth.

'But how? Was it my Latin?' Hermione ventured with a frown.

'No, your Latin was perfect, my lady. It was how you led it. You created a build up of magic with it.' Snape had a faintly amused expression.

'But that's good, isn't it?' Hermione asked, still baffled, tapping her fingernail on her wineglass.

'We understand that it is expected in an Other Realm's Chant, but here it is done merely as a tradition, and it has lost all links with our type of magic. Also, it does require a high degree of aptitude to bring it to that level of power, especially in another language.' He gave an eloquent shrug of his shoulders. 'So it did not take much to work it out.'

'Do you think many others would be able to tell as well?' Hermione anxiously questioned.

Snape simply nodded.

Hermione groaned again and buried her face in her hands. Dammit, she'd been too good at the Chant...she could never have seen that coming.

'If it is any consolation, my lady, the vast majority of the wizarding community will not know what your position is, as I do. But unfortunately, any association with the South carries with it... how can I put this... a taint... shall we say, with most people here.'

'Ah, so that explains what happened at the Burrow...I couldn't work it out. I thought I had made some dreadful mistake and had offended everyone.'

'Of course, you are Muggle-born...this all makes more sense.'

'What do you mean?' Hermione asked sharply with a flash of anger.

'What I mean is you will not have been brought up with certain prejudices that most pureblood wizarding families seem to be born with.'

'And you, my teacher? How do you fit in?' Hermione questioned pointedly.

'In some very old wizarding families, such as mine, they have managed to hold onto their connections with the South, albeit quietly and discreetly,' Snape explained, fixing his eyes on the wine he was still swirling.

They paused as the blonde waiter placed the cake and coffee down in front of them. Snape sat silently until the waiter left. His eyes flicked upwards when a burst of conversation erupted into the courtyard as a young couple came through the door. Hermione turned and saw them take a table on the opposite side of the courtyard.

'Please, my teacher, choose,' offered Hermione as she gestured towards the two cakes before them.

His black eyes quickly flicked back to the cakes and the coffee, and his long-fingered hands hovered between the two cakes, then edged towards the chocolate cake. The wizard looked at her wordlessly; she tipped her head, and his hand claimed the cake. Hermione took a long sip of coffee, savoring its black intense strength on her tongue, and felt it rushing through every artery in her body. The young witch tasted the baked cheesecake...it was light and perfect. She glanced up and saw Snape close his eyes in pleasure as he took a sip of coffee.

'It's good, isn't it, my teacher?'

Snape's eyes snapped open as if guilty at being caught closed. 'Coffee is something unheard of at Hogwarts.'

'Well, tea just doesn't come up to the mark as far as I'm concerned, however strongly it is brewed,' commented Hermione with a small smile.

'I quite agree, my lady.' Snape took another long sip and another scoop of cake.

'Professor McGonagall has offered me a short-term position at Hogwarts.'

Snape paused, his cup in mid air. 'Has she now?'

'Yes, and I'm considering taking it,' said Hermione slowly, looking carefully into Snape's stark face.

'The Headmistress chose well asking you; you will be most suitable for the task.' A flicker of a smirk played on the wizard's lips. 'Although, I would imagine you will have to find more than a supply of coffee to keep you satisfactorily sustained at Hogwarts.'

## Seven

### Chapter 8 of 22

Seven years after the death of Dumbledore, Hermione finally returns to Hogwarts. What will she find?

Many thanks to my beta, Soul Bound.

Hermione sighed heavily, stopping to adjust the strap of her bag, which dug sharply into her shoulder. The tall wizard beside her quietly paused also. Snape had been a surprisingly unobtrusive and undemanding companion. He simply shadowed her without comment while she wandered about the village in, what must have been for him, a very erratic fashion. Just walking the familiar streets and taking in the shops and the faces of the people had been surprisingly reassuring. Everything about the village quietly asserted to her that she had once lived there happily, and even though not a trace of her existed there now, her memories were real and valid. However, Hermione chose not to walk down the street where she used to live she had her limits to nostalgia.

Hermione shifted her heavy cloak over to her other arm and wondered if they should have apparated to the church instead of walking, but instantly dismissed such silly wizarding thoughts from her head. They turned off the busy road, and the noise of the cars and trucks instantly cut out as they entered a picturesque lane lined with large oaks. The autumn leaves of orange, red and yellow formed a grand canopy overhead, and the afternoon sun dappled through, casting a honey-coloured light.

'It's only about another ten minutes, my teacher.' Hermione's legs felt heavy, and a great weariness was in her despite the beauty around her, and she put it down to the huge meal she had eaten earlier.

'That is fine, my lady,' replied Snape. He too had his cloak over his arm and actually had a tinge of colour to his normally pasty face. In his hand was a plastic bag with a thick book in it. When Hermione went to the rabbit warren of a second hand bookshop that she loved, she was quite certain she heard Snape let out a sigh of satisfaction as he looked about.

'What is on both sides of the lane, my lady?' Snape asked, curiously glancing about. 'They do not seem to be built on.'

'On that side is the village common.' Hermione pointed to her left. 'You can't see it because of the trees, but it goes for miles. And on this side are some fields and the church. This is the quickest way; otherwise we would have to go through the common, which takes another fifteen minutes or so.'

The lane seemed much quieter than she remembered; neither a car nor a person had passed them, and there was nary a breath of a breeze. Hermione's thick jumper was hot and itchy.

'It's a bit warmer than Scotland.' Hermione stifled a yawn.

'More comfortable temperature for you, I would imagine, my lady.' Snape wryly looked down at her.

Hermione snorted. 'Well, yes, I suppose, but this morning I finally figured out that I had to dress for the cold, and look how warm it is now? I can't seem to win.'

They walked quietly some more; somehow the silence made conversation feel wrong. The utter stillness and complete quietness was oppressive...as if the trees themselves were pressing down on them in unison; even the air felt thicker and more viscous, making it harder to breathe. Not a leaf moved in the trees, and it seemed like they were the only two living souls in existence. Hermione twisted up her hair and clipped it up in an attempt to cool herself down. She felt something resembling a gossamer thread move lightly through the air. There was something unusual in its movement that caused Hermione to notice it in the stillness...otherwise it would have passed without heed. The young witch glanced over and noticed Snape lift his head, as if he too felt something, but he carried on walking slowly without breaking his stride beside her.

'Goodness, I hadn't realized how tired I was until now, my teacher.' Hermione wearily groaned, her voice seeming ridiculously loud in the stillness.

'Hush now, Miss Granger; I believe we may have company,' he breathed ever so quietly in English.

Hermione frowned at the strange comment when so obviously there wasn't anyone else about. Then her heart lurched, snapping her out of her lethargy when she understood his meaning: an ambush. The witch somehow managed to continue walking at the same slow pace. All her senses heightened, but still the witch couldn't detect anything except the intense stillness. Snape moved infinitesimally closer to her so their arms bumped up against each other. They walked slowly, their steps in time with each other. It was agony. All Hermione wanted to do was run away...but from what? She couldn't detect any movement and didn't know what Snape sensed. From the corner of her eye, Hermione saw he had discreetly slipped his wand into his hand so it was partially hidden up his sleeve. Sweat broke out on her forehead. The witch glanced about uneasily, but couldn't see what Snape had noticed. The lane was eerily still.

'We have attracted quite a crowd, Miss Granger. We have at my estimate at least eight tracing us,' he muttered under his breath. 'Do not look at me, but count to ten slowly, and Apparate back to Hogwarts and notify the Headmistress at once.'

Hermione gave a tiny nod and slowly counted to ten. The noise of their footsteps sounded loud. But when the young witch Apparated, tight invisible threads clung to her, holding onto her arms, legs and neck tightly...not allowing her to move in the netherworld she was in. She struggled furiously, knowing if she hesitated, she would be more than splinched. It was through sheer terror Hermione found the strength to rip through the sticky ropes and push herself back down beside Snape once more. Her breath came in sharp gasps, and sweat trickled down her spine. Hermione staggered to try match Snape's regular stride again. Even though she felt she had run a marathon, she knew she would have appeared only to flick in and out.

Snape looked startled when he saw her beside him once more and held out his arm to steady her.

'So it was an Anti-Disapparation Jinx I felt. This makes the situation more complicated.' His brow furrowed, and his eyes looked worried.

'I still can't see anyone,' Hermione breathed, feeling disoriented.

'They will be making their appearances soon. You must try to outrun them and then Apparate to safety. I will block them, but you must run as fast as you can. The spell only works a short distance around the person who casts it, and while it is active, they also cannot Apparate,' explained Snape urgently in a low voice.

Hermione nodded, chewing on her bottom lip. 'Sir, can you see the lane we are coming to? I am sure they are expecting us to turn right to go towards the church, but what if I turn left towards the common...it might just give me enough time to get ahead to Apparate.'

Snape looked down at her, hawk like, his eyes impassive, and simply nodded.

Hermione quietly opened her bag and slipped her wand up her sleeve. As they approached the T-Junction, she thought she saw black shadows pass near some brambles on the corner. Both Snape and Hermione veered to the common side of the road.

'Run, Miss Granger, run!' barked out Snape.

Hermione threw down her cloak and took off as fast as her legs could go. For a distance there was only the sounds of her rhythmic breath, her boots on the pot-holed road and her bag slapping on her back. Her legs were strong and her body powerful in its movements. Then she heard a single crack of a hex but didn't see anything, so intent she was on running down the empty lane. Her back felt exposed, and Hermione expected to be struck down at any moment. She glanced about but didn't want to risk losing her stride by turning to look behind. Another shotgun like noise came ricocheting up the lane. Hermione swerved instinctively to one side. A curse came hurtling pass...inches from her...and a tree ahead burst violently into flames. The young witch put on another burst of speed, but curiosity overcame her, so she turned to look behind.

What she saw made her insides freeze. Hermione was looking at her death. Snape the betrayer stood alone in the center of the lane. His face was in shadow and his wand raised facing her. Hermione realized with horror he had set her up. He intended to kill her all along just as he killed Dumbledore and Ron. In a swift movement, Snape flicked his wrist. Hermione squeezed her eyes shut, expecting the worst, but reopened them a second later to see a flash of green shooting downwards towards a crumpled figure on the ground. Relief mixed with guilt rushed around Hermione like a tidal wave. Something caught Snape's attention in the wood next to the road; he deftly deflected

a curse shooting towards him and rushed aggressively off the road towards the source of it.

Hermione realized her vulnerability standing in the middle of the lane and, flinging off her shoulder bag, started running again. She leapt agilely over the flaming tree that had fallen across the road. The witch heard with dread the sounds of branches snapping coming from the wood alongside the lane. Hermione put forth another burst of speed, but still the sounds of someone following kept pace with her. So heightened were her senses, Hermione easily saw the hex coming and blocked it without faltering her step. But still the shadow kept pace with her. When another hex came shooting out barely missing her, Hermione on impulse veered off down a small track away from the lane. She stumbled on a raised root but quickly regained her footing; it was much trickier underfoot, and all her concentration went on negotiating the uneven surface. The track went sharply downhill through thick undergrowth. Soon she heard the sound of footsteps following her again. The track opened out onto a field, and just as she stepped out into the bright daylight, Hermione felt a searing pain in her lower back, which made her scream out in agony. She turned and saw a shaven headed man emerge from the track. Panic gripped her vice like again. The witch flung out a hex and saw it strike his wand hand, sending his wand spinning into the undergrowth. But almost simultaneously, Hermione felt a sharp pain in her hand, making her drop her own wand. The man spat out a growl of pain. Hermione spun on her heels and took off across the field, aiming for a stile in a hedge at the far end of the field.

Her back and hand burnt in blinding pain, so no other thoughts entered her head other than to run away. But she was starting to tire, and her chest heaved in effort to get more breath in. Hermione leapt over the stile, gripping the rough wood with one hand. As she did, she looked behind and saw the man pounding heavily across the field. The witch just had to get ahead; then she realized this was the man who had cast the Anti-Disapparation Jinx as he too wasn't Apparating in order to catch her. Hermione looked wildly up and down the narrow track; there was no clue to which was the better way to go. On impulse, she turned right and ran along the track. By now her whole body was aching, and the witch struggled to get enough air into her lungs. She heard a grunt as the man leapt over the stile. Hermione turned a corner and saw with dread the track stopped at an abandoned farmyard. There were no more places to run. She had made the wrong choice.

Hermione heard the man pounding down the track, so she leapt into the unruly undergrowth and wriggled behind a scraggly bush, wincing in pain as nettles found every piece of exposed skin. The witch crouched down, despite the thorns and twigs poking at her, and willed her breath to quieten. Her heart pounded so loudly in her ears that she feared the man would be able to hear it. Hermione ducked her head down even lower but lifted her eyes to peer through the leaves as the man emerged from the track and slowed down. The heavily built man was cradling his blackened stump of a wand hand, and he paused right in front of Hermione. All she could see was his dark trousered legs. Thick, short hands came groping down his leg. Hermione's eyes widened in horror when she saw him pull out a 12" blade knife from a under his trouser leg. Oh, God, no, Hermione thought, trying to quieten her breathing. The man stepped off the track towards her, his face smirking, and adjusted the grip of the knife in his hand. Hermione cast her eyes down and started praying.

'Come out, little Mudblood,' came a gleeful call.

The young witch slowly moved her hands around, trying desperately to find something to use. Her hand curled around a thick stick. The man crept forward, his shoes snapping a twig inches from her face. Hermione couldn't help glancing upwards and found herself looking straight into the round faced man's blue eyes.

'Ah, there you are, my little Mudblood...you think you can get away from me?'

Hermione quickly moved into a kneeling position with the scraggly bush still between them, clasping the piece of wood tightly. She didn't know how big the stick was, but it felt reassuringly heavy in her hand. Hermione fixed her eyes on the man.

The man lunged with the knife. Hermione rolled away to the other side of the bush, a branch slashing her across her face. The man quickly recovered his crouched stance with practiced ease. He lunged again. Hermione rolled away, but he abruptly switched directions and was on top of her. His black stump of a hand was clasping her tightly across her throat. The huge weight of his body was pinning her down, taking all her breath from her. His knife hand lifted to plunge. Hermione writhed and twisted desperately under his concrete weight and finally managed to unpin her arm from under him and raise the stick. The witch hit it across his head with all her might. The only sign that it had any effect was that the arm across her throat lessened its strangle hold on her. But Hermione's only focus was the knife still poised ready to plunge into her. With the last ounce of strength left in her, the young witch raised the piece of wood again, and with a surprisingly soft thud, whacked it against his head. This time the effect was immediate. The man's weight collapsed down on top of her, and Hermione heard a ripping sound and felt a burning sensation in her chest. Hermione desperately wriggled, trying to move out from under the leaden weight. With Hermione's entire body searing in agony, she twisted and turned until she was free. She staggered ungracefully to her feet, swung around and landed another blow to the man's head with her piece of wood.

Laying face down, blood poured from the man's gapping head wound, pooling onto the ground. But Hermione still wasn't satisfied. He might attack her again. He might hunt her again. She hit down once more with tremendous force, feeling the bone give under her strength. She wiped her hair out of her eyes and felt stickiness everywhere. Unconcerned, Hermione focussed on watching the still form for any movement, ready to pounce again. There was none.

After an unknown amount of time, her focus widened, and Hermione became aware of her surroundings once more. A thrush trilled out a tune. With one last look of pure hatred at the body on the ground, Hermione moved slowly back through the undergrowth to the track, stumbling over a branch, but catching herself before she fell.

Once standing upright on the track, Hermione readied herself to Apparate back to Hogwarts, but was arrested by an intense sense of wrongness. Snape, realized Hermione bleakly, where was Snape? A sharp crack of rage raced through her, and the pain in her body receded as if it was but a trivial thing to be endured. How dare they try to hunt her down and kill her like she was some sort of game animal? She turned abruptly, stalking back up the track, feeling him running parallel to her in her mind.

Looking back afterwards, Hermione didn't know quite at which point they merged, but her awareness was already starting to alter as she moved carefully along the uneven path. The witch heard a nearby fox stirring within a rotten tree trunk, listening to her pass, and smelt a hedgehog obliviously asleep, tucked up under a nearby hedge. The movements of the trees told her rain was to come later that night. By the time Hermione got to the stile, she was aware that he was with her and felt a thrum of excitement shoot through her. He was taking her hunting. She leapt over the stile hurriedly and loped over the field, watching the swifts swooping inches above the ground for insects in the blinding sunlight. Hermione paused for the briefest of moments before she reentered the dark, muddy track leading back up to the lane.

The young witch heard noises of what she knew to be men, but simultaneously heard it as he heard it, a high pitched buzzing sound. She strode up the track strongly, abruptly bursting out into the dapple colored lane. There were the backs of at least five men pacing intensely towards Snape, who was edging backwards, hunched over but still deflecting the hexes and curses they were hurtling at him. Three bodies laid randomly about the lane. Snape's face startled when he saw her, and one of the men glanced behind and spotted her.

'Oi, look...it's the Mudblood, ' came the guttural voice.

At that point, Hermione's mind was scooped upwards. She was with him, and they were watching the scene together as he saw it. The figures were trivial little beings too caught up in their own self worth to be of any importance to him; yet he hated them because she hated them.

A figure of putrid water stepped towards them, and they felt the intention of death radiating off him in its perversity. This wasn't the way things should be. The figure wasn't hungry; it didn't have a family to feed. The man lifted his weak arm, holding a pathetic twig, and they saw him try to move something towards them, so they sent the element of pure fire back. The man exploded. The water within him boiled and burst outwards, spilling the man's body contents onto the lane.

They turned their attention to the next figure of stagnant water moving at them, so they again sent fire towards him, and he too erupted, his life force spilling out from within him.

The man of spring water, who the part that was Hermione recognized as Snape, continued to counter the curses raining down on him, but they saw his water was becoming murky with tiredness and fear. Hermione felt him focus intently on the man of spring water for a time, as if curious.

They then turned their attention to the next figure of polluted air and used the element of earth to cut off his life force. He clutched his throat in a desperate attempt to breath, falling to his knees and tipping forwards onto his face...his neck straining for air. But he was no longer of interest to them.

The man of spring water sent out two rapid death curses in quick succession, and two figures fell to the ground. Such trifling magic she felt him scoff.

The last figure stood still, its fire moving uncertainly within it. Without much effort, they sent out water, which doused the flame in an instance.

He gently moved throughout her body in one last reassuring and knowing caress and left her abruptly.

Hermione saw the ground come rushing up to her. Her head hit something solid, but strangely it didn't hurt. She was wearied...all she wanted to do was sleep and not feel anything. Hermione's eyes fluttered, and she heard a loud buzzing. Something annoying lifted her head...not letting her rest. She forced herself to open her eyes, but they refused to focus on anything...everything was a murky brown anyhow. Her stomach gave out, and she vomited up her large lunch, but had hardly the strength to keep her head upright. Two hands pushed her hair back and held her head firmly as the contents of her stomach heaved out of her. Hermione was so exhausted she didn't even care anymore...all she wanted to do was sleep. Eventually, her body slowed its heaving, and the awful taste of her mouth filtered through. Hermione felt something rough wipe over her eyes and winced as a sharp shot of pain went over her forehead, making her forget for an instant the pain everywhere else. But she was now able to see and could make out a black form crouching next to her. Sounds were rushing over her, irritating her by not letting her rest, but still they came until she could work out the words.

'You must stand, Miss Granger. You must stand, my lady. We need to Apparate quickly, but you must help me. I am going to lift you now, my lady.'

Hermione felt something tug under both her arms, and then an agonizing pain of hot needles ripped down her left side. She blearily saw the ground from a standing position, although her legs were not capable of supporting her. Hermione tried to move, knowing somehow she should help, but couldn't. Her head lolled forwards, and she looked down and saw a startling pair of white, slim hands clasped around her middle.

A deep voice spoke, 'Ready, my lady,' and they Apparated away from the lane with a crack.

## Eight

### *Chapter 9 of 22*

Seven years after the death of Dumbledore, Hermione finally returns to Hogwarts. What will she find?

Many thanks to my beta, Soul Bound.

Professor McGonagall arranged the mass of papers on her desk into neat piles, scowled at them and rearranged them again. She then sighed heavily, taking off her glasses, and rubbed her eyes wearily. When would Madam Pomfrey come? She had Flooed to the hospital wing as soon as she had been notified of the attack on Hermione and Severus, but a grim faced Madam Pomfrey interceded and blocked her from entering the ward proper to see them. The mediwitch informed her that Hermione had life threatening injuries...whereas Professor Snape had a minor surface wound to his upper arm...before quickly dashing back into the ward through the swinging doors.

It was Monday again tomorrow, and Professor McGonagall looked at the neat, organized piles of work waiting for her. Deciding she should make use of this time in the office, the older witch put her glasses back on, picked up the proposed teaching schedule for next month and started reading. Her eyes moved along the lines of words, but her mind refused to link them up with their meanings, so she slapped the schedule back down again angrily. It was completely futile. When would Shackbolt arrive anyhow? Sometimes Professor McGonagall wished she had been born in a different time. She would have loved to be an Auror. The physicality of being out amongst everything really appealed to her...much better than being stuck behind a desk at any rate.

A green whoosh of flames lit up the fireplace. Professor McGonagall thankfully stood up and walked around her desk to greet Shackbolt, who stood dusting the ash off his broad shoulders. At last some accurate information...the gossip around Hogwarts had been running red hot. Shackbolt was the consummate, discreet professional who would report clearly and concisely. It was for these reasons that she had yanked him and Jones from Ron's investigations. This attack had to be handled carefully and judiciously. It had huge potential to spiral out of control.

'Good evening, Mr. Shackbolt. Thank you for coming by; please have a seat.' Professor McGonagall indicated a chair at a communal worktable at the center of her large office. She clapped her hands, and two cups of tea appeared before them.

The tall man sat down wearily. 'I came as soon as I finished. Hestia is writing up the report now, and you'll have it on your desk tomorrow morning.'

'Good, thank you.' The professor sat in the chair opposite, placing the ink and parchment tidily in front of her. She looked down at the blank parchment and twirled her quill. 'So, what information do you have?'

After quickly taking a sip of tea, Kingsley spoke evenly and clearly. 'When Hestia and I arrived at Foxtan Lane, we found and recovered nine bodies, all males. We identified five of them as known Death Eaters. They operated out of the western cell and had been under surveillance on many occasions. The other three are unknowns, so we are running wand checks right now to find out their identities. We need to know if they have any links to the western cell division.' The Auror hesitated, then added, 'There may be one other.'

Professor McGonagall looked up with raised eyebrows from her note taking, her quill poised mid air

'We had just finished the investigation when a Muggle police car drove up the lane quickly. We heard more noises of Muggles and cars, so Hestia and I went to investigate. All the commotion was coming from a nearby farmhouse, which is about ten minutes from Foxtan Lane. The place was swarming with Muggles, and there was a body covered with a white sheet, but we couldn't detect any traces of magic within the immediate vicinity. The Muggles were highly agitated, so it was difficult for us to investigate further.'

Professor McGonagall stared into the middle distance and said thoughtfully, 'No, it's too much of a coincidence. I would like you to monitor all the Muggle newspapers from that area. We need to find out more information to see if the incidents are linked.'

Kingsley nodded, his gold earring glinting in the candlelight. He then frowned and rubbed his chin. 'You need to be aware also, Headmistress, that the causes of death were ... unusual. Five had been killed with a standard killing curse that traced back to the Professor Snape.' He paused, then, shaking his head, declared quietly, 'But four were killed by some curse or hex I have never encountered before.'

Professor McGonagall raised her eyebrows in surprise.

'They are so unlike anything I have seen. I couldn't even say if it was magic.'

Professor McGonagall tapped her polished fingernail in thought and asked, 'How did they die? Was it some sort of new Muggle method?'

'No, I wouldn't say that either. Two of them looked as if they had exploded from the inside out. At first I thought they had been hit by something a Muggle would use like a hand grenade, but on examining the remains that were left, it wasn't consistent with that possibility.' Kingsley added frankly, 'It was a gruesome sight.'

The professor was surprised at his comment. The man sitting in front of her was a veteran Auror whose very line of work exposed him to the uglier sides of wizarding life in all its gruesome glory.

'The third body's physical symptoms indicated the cause of death as suffocation, but again, we couldn't find any traces of known magic nor any physical evidence. And finally, the fourth body seemed to have suffered some sort of cardiac arrest.'

He looked at Professor McGonagall directly, the whites of his eyes standing out in the low light. 'Miss Granger seems to have some unique abilities.'

'Ah, yes, it does appear that way,' the professor replied mildly, but inwardly lurched at the shock of what Hermione was capable of.

Just then Harry came bursting through the door without knocking, his brow furrowed. Both the professor and Shackbolt looked up, momentarily startled at the sudden noise.

'Oh, Shackbolt, I hadn't realize you were here...good to see you.' Harry's expression changed in an instance. Smiling, the young wizard strode up to him and pumped his hand energetically.

'Nice to see you too, Harry. Well, professor, I'll take my leave now. The report will be on your desk tomorrow, but I'm available if you want to talk more.'

Professor McGonagall said a silent thanks to Kingsley and his discretion in front of Harry. She nodded her gratitude and walked the tall wizard to the fireplace where he disappeared in a whoosh of flames. The professor breathed in deeply before she turned to face Harry, who was pacing the length of her office, running an agitated hand through his hair.

'Have you heard any more news?' he questioned anxiously, collapsing dramatically into the chair in front of her desk.

The professor calmly collected her notes from the worktable and sat down behind her desk. 'Nothing yet. Madam Pomfrey will be up the moment she can to let me know Hermione's progress.'

'Isn't it time you actually *do* something, Professor?' Harry's eyes were flashing.

'What exactly do you mean by that, Mr. Potter?' she asked, her tone as cold as steel. How dare he question her.

Harry swallowed nervously. 'Well, about Snape? I mean, there is another attack only days after Ron. Hermione's seriously injured, and he has nothing more than a scratch... It sounds highly suspicious to me.'

'You do mean *Professor* Snape, don't you?'

Harry flushed and nodded, but his eyes were still burning angrily.

'I quite assure you, Mr. Potter, that if I had any suspicions about Professor Snape, you would be the first to know. Right now the Order is stretched to capacity investigating two attacks in less than a week, so I suggest you keep any personal issues you may have with Professor Snape to yourself. I do not have the time or the inclination to listen to any more of them.'

The young wizard dropped his eyes and started picking at his fingernails despondently.

With a twang, Professor McGonagall felt sorry for the complex young man in front of her and offered in a much softer tone, 'As soon as I know anything more about Hermione, I will let you know immediately.'

Harry looked up; his eyes were shining with unshed tears. 'I went over to the hospital wing, but they wouldn't even let me in to see her.'

'They are not letting anyone in, Mr. Potter. They did not let me in either. It is so they can concentrate on working on Hermione. She is in the best possible hands, and I have full confidence that they will be able to help her.'

'Yeah, I know, but what if she dies like Ron? It's something nobody wants to talk about, but I know Hermione was badly hurt. Everyone is talking about it. I feel so useless, so helpless. There seems to be nothing I can do. Everybody else is out actually doing things...making a difference...and all I do is sit here nice and safe behind the wards while my friends are getting attacked and killed because of me.'

Professor McGonagall weighed her words carefully. 'I know it must feel that way, Mr. Potter, but you do make a difference. I listened to you at Ron's service, and you truly moved me, and I know you touched everyone there in a significant way.' She saw Harry wanted to interrupt and held up her hand. 'I know you are going to say that they are only words...but you must believe me when I say words can mean everything when said at the right time. All we can do is leave Madam Pomfrey be so she can concentrate on healing Hermione. She is the only one who can do that. Like you, I am waiting on what she can do.' The older witch saw Harry's leg jiggling in suppressed agitation and tried to steer the conversation towards his studies. Harry took his apprenticeship very seriously, and she knew it gave him a sense of purpose and achievement that was vital to his well being. 'How is your reading coming along? Have you finished McKernal's works yet?'

Harry's leg stilled and his brow furrowed. 'Yes, but I'm still unsure about some of the physiological calculations he wrote about. I didn't find it very clear, and I need to write on it this week.'

The professor let out a quiet sigh of relief that he changed topic so readily. 'I agree. I think that was his one area of weakness. It's good that you picked that up. What you need to read now is Adam's work on Inanimate and Animate Conversions and Calculations; that's the area he excels in. I have a copy of it here if you want to borrow it now?'

'That would be wonderful, Professor. I need to get a better understanding of the underlying principles, and McKernal just confused me further.'

'I will just be a moment.' Professor McGonagall lifted a nearby lantern and went to the back of her office, which was lined with floor to ceiling bookcases all in shadow. She lifted the lantern so that it cast a wider circle of light and spotted the book on the top shelf. As the professor was moving the nearby step ladder, she heard the door opening and Harry's voice snarl, 'You traitor.'

And Severus' deep voice replying, 'And a pleasant good evening to you, Mr. Potter. I see you are being as useful and effective as ever, sitting and relaxing while others are out actually achieving things for the Order.'

Professor McGonagall groaned...trust Severus to go for the jugular...and swiftly hopped up the ladder, grabbing the book. She needed to intercede as fast as she could; she rather liked her office as it was...intact.

'I know all about you, Snape. Your days are numbered.'

'Goodness me, I am positively quaking with fear. The Great Harry Potter has spoken,' Severus drawled.

Professor McGonagall moved quickly to the front of her office in time to see Harry reach for his wand. 'That will do, Mr. Potter,' she barked out.

A red faced Harry looked over at her scowling, but lowered his wand. She fixed her eyes firmly on Harry's. 'Here is the Adam's book; I suggest you go and read it. I will be in my office all day tomorrow should you want to discuss it.' The Headmistress handed him the book and led him by the elbow to the door. 'As soon as I hear anything, Mr. Potter, I will inform you immediately.'

Harry nodded and left.

When the door closed, Professor McGonagall let out a sigh and turned to see Severus standing still and upright next to the fireplace. 'You do understand, don't you, Severus, that you do not make my job any easier.' All she got was an irritated grunt, which was all she had expected.

The witch grabbed fresh parchment, a bottle of ink and a quill from her desk and sat down again at the worktable. Severus moved soundlessly across the room and sat down opposite her. As always, she treated the man in front of her with a great deal of caution. His face looked more drawn than normal, but nothing in his movements indicated he was hurt.

'Madame Pomfrey informed me that your arm had been injured.'

Severus waved a hand dismissively at his upper left arm. 'Virtually healed now...a simple hex wound.'

Professor McGonagall dipped her quill into the ink. 'So tell me what...'

But she was interrupted by a flushed-cheeked Madam Pomfrey coming rapidly into the room. Did nobody know about knocking around here? Professor McGonagall thought irritably.

'Thank goodness you are here too, Professor Snape. I need to talk to you both about Hermione.'

Professor McGonagall's heart sank, and she quickly gestured for the mediwitch to sit with them. 'What is it? Is she all right?'

The plump woman quickly glanced at the only other chair next to the black robed wizard, hesitated, then sat down next to Severus with a frown, edging her chair away from him. 'I'm having difficulties stabilizing her. It's all highly irregular. She's not responding to any of the healing treatments or potions. I've never encountered anything like it. Norah is monitoring her now.'

Professor McGonagall saw Severus frown, making his features even harsher, and he drummed his fingers on the table, his sharp eyes fixed on the table in front of him.

'Is she responding at all to any of the treatments? And if so, how?' he asked abruptly, his eyes still on the table.

'Yes, but not in the usual way. The simple wound healing charms have caused her wounds to fester, and the standard anti-infection potion isn't having any effect. I don't dare treat the curse wound eating into her back for fear of what might happen. She needs to be stronger before it can be treated,' replied Madam Pomfrey, avoiding looking at the wizard.

'What are her vital signs like?' Severus turned and looked sharply at the small woman.

The mediwitch shifted uneasily in her seat. 'Highly erratic...but she's fighting strongly. I would appreciate it, Professor Snape, if you could come and cast your opinion. I am at a loss to know what to do, but the back wound needs treating urgently.'

Severus nodded slowly, his gaze still fixed on her. Madam Pomfrey made to stand but stopped when Severus started speaking in a low voice, his eyes back gazing intently at the table in front of him. 'I think there is information about Miss Granger that given the circumstances is imperative that I must impart.'

Professor McGonagall was instantly curious. What could Severus, of all people, know about Hermione that she did not? Although, she had been surprised when he had volunteered readily to accompany Hermione, but she had not given much thought to it, so relieved she was at finding someone at such short notice. And last night...was it only last night?...she'd found them sitting together at the Burrow. Nobody ever sat next to Severus voluntarily. How interesting.

'But first you must understand that I will only tell you things that are pertinent to the immediate situation...do not question me further. As it is, I am informing you both of things that by rights Miss Granger may not agree with you knowing. So your utmost discretion is required.'

Professor McGonagall nodded and saw curiosity written all over the mediwitch's face as she too nodded in agreement. Severus adjusted his teaching robes on his shoulders and cleared his throat, which after knowing him for almost all his adult life, told her that he was nervous. How intriguing...it was not an emotion she often observed in the Potions master.

'As you are aware, Miss Granger has been living and studying in the south, but what you probably are not aware of are the vastly different and complex magics and traditions that permeate the area. Now, Miss Granger has practiced these magics at some of the deepest levels. How I interpret the current situation is that there is a conflict between Miss Granger and the type of magic used here. That is why the standard treatments are not working as they should.'

'Please explain some more, Severus. What do you mean there is a 'conflict'? I have never heard of that before.' Professor McGonagall looked at him piercingly.

The wizard flicked his eyes to hers. Even after years of being around the man, the Headmistress still found his cold gaze disconcerting, and it took all her will power not to look away.

'Miss Granger must be completely immersed in one of the many possible types of southern magic which is resistant or more likely in conflict with the type of magic used here.'

Professor McGonagall carefully weighed up the situation. Although the man sitting opposite her was grimly repellent, his redeeming features, which she often had to regularly keep reminding herself about, were his intellectual might and his ability to give the correct information at the right time. The fact that he chose to reveal what he knew about Hermione and risk raising interesting questions in both her and Madam Pomfrey's mind about him meant that he considered it consequential enough to take that risk.

'I've never heard of any of this before,' Madam Pomfrey said with a huff, 'and I've seen many different things in my time...different magic in conflict, indeed.'

'You had better believe it if you don't want another death on your capable little hands,' he snapped. The mediwitch flushed deeper.

Professor McGonagall quickly interceded. 'What do you suggest can be done for Hermione?'

'I have never had direct experience with this, but I do believe knowing the underlying reason will help us to formulate an appropriate approach.' Severus replied with only a hint of irritation.

'But how can it be possible? In all my years as a mediwitch, I've never seen, read or even heard of a 'conflict of magic' or whatever you want to call it. Why should we believe you?' challenged the plucky mediwitch.

Professor McGonagall suppressed a groan. It was all so predictable. Madam Pomfrey would do a bit of blustering and try perhaps to aim a few jabs at Severus, who may or may not explode, and then eventually accede to him. She only hoped it would not take too long or would not be too volatile.

Severus' lip curled in contempt. 'Tell me what choice you have? I know that the curse on her back is further weakening her as we speak. So please take your time at getting your tiny little mind around the idea that there may be traditions other than your oh-so-perfect one which might provide the answers. So please, Madam Pomfrey, there is absolutely no hurry. Or better yet, you tell me your ideas, as I am sure that was what you were rushing into this room to do, and you have got plenty of them.'

The mediwitch flushed and opened her mouth to reply, but Professor McGonagall quickly asked, 'What suggestions do you have, Severus?'

'Given we do not have access to the magic Hermione is accustomed to, we may have to borrow from some of the Muggle methods,' replied Severus in a controlled way, Madam Pomfrey looked startled and blurted out, 'Oh, Merlin, their barbaric ways! I have no knowledge at all of their ghastly procedures.'

Severus rolled his eyes contemptuously at the woman. 'And why am I not surprised? Would not want to break out now, would we?' Then, as if pulling himself into check, he pointed out slowly and clearly as if talking to a very young child, 'Muggles do not use magic, which is good. We cannot use magic on Miss Granger.' He let out an irritated sigh and looked at the Professor. 'I have Muggle medical textbooks that I can check on, and the more conservative aspects of Potions, which don't use any magic, could be used as well.'

The mediwitch shrugged her shoulder in resignation. 'I do believe this is the only path we have left for Hermione, which is more than what I had when I came in. And I suppose I did ask for your opinion, Professor Snape. I have no alternatives but to give these new methods a try, but I do hold grave concerns about it all.'

That was not too bad, thought the Headmistress, and she had to respect the mediwitch's ability to put her patient's needs first, even above her own prejudices and pride. She saw a muscle twitch in Severus' clenched jaw and knew that the wizard was restraining himself as well. He too must want Madam Pomfrey to quickly accept the situation; otherwise he would not have contained his temper as he had.

'I'll come down and see her now.' He stood up fluidly, tall next to the small witch.

The witch and wizard nodded their distracted farewell to Professor McGonagall and exited the room rapidly.

The Professor slowly picked up her parchments and wandered over to her desk and started to file them. What an interesting evening...Severus actually revealing something about himself. In all her years of knowing and working with the wizard, he never once let slip his knowledge of the south nor had Albus even hinted at what Severus knew. Maybe the former Headmaster had not known either, which would be surprising to say the least. As far as the witch knew, Severus was as disdainful about the south as everyone else. Although, she reasoned, he was very quick to be disdainful and contemptuous of most things.

But he certainly had an in-depth knowledge to recognize Hermione's symptoms as he did, and he was correct about the complex traditions; it was something northern witches and wizards knew nothing about. In fact, most witches and wizards she knew had a generic view that it was a poor, dysfunctional area with loose morals. Mind, she had been exactly the same until Anthena fell in love and eloped there to the scandal of entire wizarding community. Professor McGonagall flung her quills and ink into the drawer of her desk. What a mess that was...but there was no way she was going to abandon her sister, despite the huge pressure and isolation she had to endure. Anyway, as it turned out, Anthena never once regretted her decision, and Tonga was a good man in every way to her. The professor lifted the lantern and casually extinguished the remaining candles with the flick of her wand. It was certainly was a fascinating evening, she thought and closed the office door with a click, warded it and made her way slowly up the corridor.

## Nine

### *Chapter 10 of 22*

Seven years after the death of Dumbledore, Hermione finally returns to Hogwarts. What will she find?

Many thanks to my beta, Soul Bound.

Pain. Thirst. Hermione became aware of searing agony radiating out from her back. Her aching body told her that she was lying on her side, her head on a soft, unfamiliar pillow. She tried swallowing, but her mouth and throat were stuffed with gravel. Had she really eaten gravel? Hermione couldn't work it out. It didn't make sense, but it felt like it was true. There was an echo of distant footsteps, and it took her all her effort to open her eyes. The dark room meant nothing to her, so she dropped them closed again. Hermione breathed in and recognized a Hogwarts smell to the pillow. She was safe. She allowed nothingness to carry her away from the pain.

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Heat. Pain. Voices swirled about her, fading in and out.

'This is not good. She is too hot.'

There was urgent murmuring.

'What has been her fluid intake?'

Hermione felt people moving about her, but so all-consuming was the heat and the pain that it was difficult to follow anything. She felt a waft of coolness as blankets were lifted from her.

'Water, you must use water.'

'You mean a bath?'

'Are you all incapable of doing anything that does not require the use of wands? I mean sponge her down with water in order to cool her down she is too hot.'

The terrible pain in her back overcame her, and she faded away again.

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Coolness. Fragrance. Softness. A gentle breeze flowed softly over her skin, and Hermione knew she was naked. Hermione sensed him next to her, and relief swept through her. He had come for her. He had finally taken her away from the pain and the sadness.

'I am here,' came his sound.

She moved her body slightly. There was uneven wood beneath her, and the firmness of his soft fur supported her. Hermione opened her eyes and looked out across a stretch of still water, which was mirror-like in the moonlight, to the dark shadow of trees on the other side. She was sitting on a great log, her feet dangling in the deliciously cool water. A night bird called out, and the great trees above her creaked as they moved gently. The air was warm and damp.



'I am glad. I long to be here always.' Hermione turned to look up at him sitting languidly beside her, gazing out at the beauty.

Slowly he turned and looked down at her, his big cat eyes gentle and full of concern. 'As am I, but you cannot stay long. You must go back.' There was firmness in his voice.

Hermione couldn't hide her disappointment. She dropped her eyes, looking down at her naked thighs, dreading going back to the pain and the sadness. The witch felt his warm breath and his velvet fur on her cheek as he rubbed his face against hers, understanding what she was feeling. She breathed in his musky smell, loving him.

'Come, my love; come into the water with me. I will carry you while you are weak.' He slipped smoothly into the silky water, causing barely a ripple, only his great head and shoulders visible near her feet, the white of his geometric stripes standing out in the silvery light.

Hermione hesitated. She was not use to her body being frail and vulnerable. With a push, she cast off from the log with a loud and uncoordinated splash. The water was fluid bliss running over her body. She kicked downwards...the water was deep.

'Put your arms around my neck, and I will support you.'

Hermione wrapped her arms around him, smelling his warm, wet fur close to her nose. He gently moved away from the log, his body swimming powerfully under her, towing her along smoothly. She allowed herself to relax against him and watched the ripples of their movements advance outwards in concentric rings across the still water. The moon was rising from behind the trees, casting the river and the trees in a silvery light. There was no stress in any part of her body, and pain was a distant memory. The water flowed over her body, washing away all hurt. As they moved towards the center of the river, Hermione dipped her head under the water, wetting her face and hair. The coolness went to the very heart of her. She felt weariness throughout her, but not from pain...rather from the joy of no pain. Wrapping her arms more securely around him and feeling the warmth of his body beneath her, she rested her head on his thick neck and drifted off with the sound, smell and feel of water all around her.

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Thirst. Water. Pain. Hermione slowly opened her eyes and saw a pair of long-fingered hands wringing a cloth out over a blue and white enamel bowl and draping it neatly over its rim. She smelt the familiar smell of bleach, and in a moment of confusion thought she was at home with her mum.

'Ah, Miss Granger.' A voice came from a distance.

Her eyes moved up the hands that were drying themselves on a towel, over startling white forearms; the witch lingered on a dark tattoo and then moved to the rolled up black sleeves at the elbow. She then made the leap, with effort, and looked upwards. It was Snape, his height and his black clothes making him stand out against the sterility of the small, white room. He moved to her side, quickly rolling down his sleeves.

'Hello,' she croaked out in barely more than a whisper.

'Are you thirsty?'

Hermione gave the smallest nod, so Snape filled a goblet from a jug on a small nearby table, carefully propped up her head and held it to her lips while she drank. He's done this before, noted Hermione, and not a drop was spilt.

'It should taste good.'

It did. Hermione drank hungrily and fell back shortly in exhaustion, but felt the water nourishing her very soul. She realized the oddness of being here in this small room.

'What happened?'

'Do you remember we were attacked?'

The images came crashing back into her. The running; the pain; the raised tree root on a muddy path; the man; the pain; the stile; the nettles; her heartbeat; the knife; suffocation; the blood; the pain; the swifts on the field; water; fire; bodies; pain; white hands.

Hermione nodded, closing her eyes, and slipping back into the ancient tongue. 'Thank you, my teacher.'

'Pardon?'

'You drew them away from me.'

'No, thank *you*, my lady. You came back for me.'

Hermione groaned.

'Are you in more pain?' Snape's voice sounded anxious.

Hermione shook her head.

'You must tell me if the pain increases or if it changes in any way. It is very important.' Then, still seeing the frown on Hermione's forehead...'Well, what is it? Tell me.'

'I didn't... you know... over you... did I?' Hermione croaked out between dried lips.

There was a chuckle. 'I have had years of avoiding exploding cauldrons, my lady. I quite assure you I excel at evading sudden, fast moving liquid.'

Hermione started to laugh but quickly stopped. It hurt too much.

'Now that your temperature has dropped, I need to examine your wounds and change their bandaging, my lady.'

Hermione nodded, dreading the pain that would go with it, then realized the strangeness of Snape being here, tending her in the hospital wing.

Snape had moved to a small table near the single, narrow window and had his back to her.

'Madam Pomfrey?' she asked.

'I suppose you are asking why I'm here, my lady?' he said, turning.

'Err, yes,' Hermione admitted, knowing he had completely seen through her question.

His expression changed, and she recognized it with a shudder as the same one he wore when a student in Potions did something *very* wrong. 'I'm afraid nobody around here is capable of doing anything manually anymore.'

But he didn't make any sense. 'What?'

'Your body has grown resistant to the magic used here, my lady. That is why you are sick. And since we are unable to use standard magic practices to heal you, we have

had to use other methods. Madam Pomfrey and her medical staff, while perhaps excellent in their area of expertise, have had great difficulty doing even the most mundane tasks without magic. Hence you have me treating you.'

'Oh.'

'I do assure you, my lady, that while I have had no formal medical training, there is a great deal of overlap between Potions and Muggle medicine. And out of necessity of my work, I am quite dexterous.'

'I didn't mean that.' Hermione breathed in. It took such an effort just to speak. 'I don't understand... resistant?'

'I take it by the enthusiasm you had when visiting the café we frequented that you discovered the unpleasantness of the food and drink here.' Snape sat down wearily on the chair, crossing his legs and looking at her.

Hermione nodded, grimacing at the thought. 'It's awful.'

'That is the expected reaction if you have been exposed to the more usual magic of the south, my lady.' Snape rubbed his thumb against his fingers in thought. 'Although I am of the opinion that it is in fact the reverse. Rather the witches and wizards here have become resistant to the overuse of magic, and it is we who are more sensitive to magic being used excessively and inappropriately.'

'You too?'

Snape nodded. 'That is what happens when the first ten years of your life is spent in the south amongst the circle. I have over the years become accustomed to the magic here, but it remains unpleasant all the same.'

The tall wizard stood up slowly and rolled the small table alongside her bed. On it was an array of instruments, potions and bandages neatly laid out in the same manner as a dentist's tray.

'However, your reactions are far more pronounced, and it seems you are also reacting to the magic used in the healing. This is unusual. It is only associated with exposure to very deep magic,' he explained, nonchalantly looking at the items on the table.

Hermione swallowed. 'Does anyone else know?'

'Only Madam Pomfrey and Professor McGonagall, but they do not understand the full implications of it.' Snape glanced up at her quickly.

'Good.'

'Now drink this, my lady; it will help the pain.' He lifted a cup to her lips again. It tasted familiar to her, but she couldn't get her mind to work enough to figure out what was in it.

The room grew hazy, and her eyelids became heavy so she let them drop shut. Hermione felt Snape lean close to her and then a tugging on her forehead. She could hear his quiet rhythmic breath as he gently took the bandaging off. The air felt odd. She knew she should move her head so that he could work straight on, but that meant moving from her side to her throbbing back. She tried to straighten her head all the same.

'No, do not move. I can manage like this. But I do need to put a towel underneath your head.'

He must have managed the maneuver as she only felt the smallest movement and breathed in the antiseptic smell of a clean towel near her nose.

'I also need to keep your hair out of the cut.'

She felt him lightly pull her hair back and secure it somehow.

'This is non-magic injury, which will be easier to heal. Head injuries always bleed a lot, so I need to clean it and have a look at the cut.' He then muttered in a much lower voice, 'Pah, there is dirt still in it. They really are useless, and then they are so shocked there is an infection.'

Hermione opened her eyes partially when she recognized a snapping sound and saw Snape putting on a pair of surgical gloves. She hadn't seen a pair of those in a long time. The water felt strange, but it didn't hurt, which was what she had feared. A trickle of water...or was it blood...ran down the side of her face. She felt a wipe of a sponge mopping it quickly up.

'It is a ragged cut, my lady, and it is still bleeding heavily. I need to stitch it closed.' Hermione heard him move to the table.

'I scraped my head on a branch, my teacher.'

'Hmm, yes, it looks like it. You will feel a sting, but it will soon be numb.'

Hermione kept her eyes firmly closed and felt the sting. The witch heard him moving away and the rattle of instruments on the table. She peered through half-closed lids again, and he was back leaning over her. His hair had been pulled back out of the way, giving her for the first time a good view of his face close up. Yes, his skin really was sallow, and his nose was big and hooked. She felt a tug on her forehead and dropped her eyes shut again. It didn't take long before the wizard had stitched and bandaged her cut and removed the towel from under her head.

'Madam Smith,' Snape called out loudly, taking his gloves off and depositing them in a large bin. 'I need more bandaging and some fresh water.'

After a pause, the door swung open, and the sharp smell and the loud noise of the general hospital ward came flooding in. Hermione peered through partly closed eyes and saw a blond woman about her own age come hesitantly through the door, glancing sideways at Snape. She was carrying a large jug awkwardly and, unfortunately for her, slopped some water on the floor just before she put it on the table. Hermione was surprised when Snape only looked at her pointedly, raising his eyebrows in obvious disdain. But when the witch instinctively took out her wand to clear up the water, he roared at her, 'Put that wand away at once!'

Hermione flinched at the sudden noise. The mediwitch dropped her wand in fright and almost skidded on the slippery floor when she hastily retrieved it. Just as she was bolting for the door, Snape barked out, 'Bandages, I need bandages, or are you not capable of carrying that either? And perhaps the floor also may need mopping unless you desperately want another patient to treat. You are able to mop a floor, are you not?'

The witch nodded, her cheeks flushed, and dropped her eyes. She was soon back with a tray of neatly rolled bandages and gauzes. It took her much longer to wipe the floor over than Hermione thought possible, but at last the floor was dry, and the woman exited the room with a thankful look on her face.

'Unbelievable,' muttered Snape, moving to sit close to her. 'Now let me see what other injuries you have.' Snape unwound the bandaging on her right hand. 'Hmmm, this is more difficult because it is a magic-sourced injury.'

Hermione peered down at the blackened, blistered hand and winced at the sight...it looked as bad as it hurt.

The wizard ran his fingers gently over her hand. 'Can you move your fingers at all?'

Hermione flinched as sharp needles of pain shot up her arm when she moved her fingers infinitesimally.

'That is good. It is not an eating type curse. A burn salve will work.' He turned and opened a large bottle. The throbbing pain in her hand intensified, but she forced herself to stay focussed. Snape moved back beside her and started applying the salve, liberally covering her entire hand. It felt cool and tingly, but more importantly it sealed the burn from the air, and the pain immediately lessened.

'That feels much better...what a relief. I hit his wand out of his hand, but he got me back with the same.' Then Hermione realized, 'Oh, my wand, I don't have my wand.'

Snape started winding a clean bandage around her hand, gently lifting her hand to pass the bandage underneath. 'We will need to do something about that, my lady, but right now you need to stay as far away from magic as possible to allow healing to take place.'

Once he had finished, the tall wizard stood up abruptly and moved away to the single window in the room. He appeared distant and stern. Adjusting his black shirt at the shoulders and clearing his throat, he stated, 'I will need to look at your chest wound, my lady. If it distresses you, I can ask for a female mediwitch to be present.'

'You forget, my teacher, that I am accustomed to the ways of the south. Those are mere northern sensibilities.'

'Ah, yes, my lady, but I thought it prudent to check all the same.' He dropped his eyes to the floor in front of him.

'I'd rather not have anybody else in the room. But I don't want any more pain...it's so bad right now, especially my back

Snape nodded, glancing uneasily up at her. 'I have already examined your back wound. It is the one that will be the hardest to treat. However, I need to prevent any chances of further infection coming from your other injuries and further weakening you. I will give you something more for the pain.'

The wizard walked silently over to the small table and measured out another potion and lifted the goblet to her lips. She drank deeply again, wanting anything to numb the pain. Snape stood and leaned over her, his face impassive, and untied the strings of the hospital gown done up the back. He smelt of disinfectant.

The witch automatically flinched away from any risk of contact with the throbbing pain on her back. 'Sorry, my teacher!'

'I know this is uncomfortable, but I will try not to cause you any unnecessary pain.' He gently eased her arm through the hospital gown sleeve, and Hermione saw him notice her rune tattoo on her forearm. The wizard brought the gown forward, revealing a blood sodden, raggedy bandage running from her sternum to underneath her left breast.

'That certainly needs changing,' she muttered.

'Indeed.' Snape let out a breath and leaned forward to unpick the bandaging. His face was only inches from hers, and she could see his cheeks had the slightest pink tinge to them.

He's finding this difficult, Hermione realized, remembering the Victorian-like modesty she'd encountered at Hogwarts. Oddly, his unease started to flow onto her, and suddenly her left breast seemed very naked. For once in her life, she was pleased she had small breasts, but strangely right now they felt huge. Unfortunately, she glanced at him at the same time as he looked at her and she started to blush. His eyes darted back down to the bandaging again, obviously avoiding looking at her. Ron would have had a field day if he had known the situation she was in now, Hermione thought.

A hot bolt of pain stabbed her, and all modesty vanished in an instant. 'Ow, bloody hell!'

'Just one more piece.' Snape's professionalism came to the fore, and his brow furrowed in concentration. Hermione watched him deftly remove the last piece of blood soaked bandaging, and she grimaced at the dragging around the wound and on her skin. The cut ran like an angry red ribbon down her white skin and under her breast.

Snape contemplatively ran a finger above the length of the wound. 'At least it is clean even if the bandaging was awful. It is a shallow cut, although it starts deeper, higher up. It does not seem to be a magic-sourced wound, which is good, but all the same I need to know what caused it.'

'A knife.'

Snape looked sharply at her, lifting his eyebrows. 'No magic?'

Hermione shook her head and glanced away. Thankfully, Snape must have understood that she didn't want to talk about it as he then casually commented, 'It was lucky you were wearing thick material then; otherwise it would have been more serious.' And he left it at that. Hermione was grateful to him. He had moved to the small table again and was arranging everything carefully on the tray in preparation for stitching the wound up.

Hermione felt a wave of exhaustion sweep over her and shut her eyes. There was the snapping of surgical gloves, and she felt the sting of a needle. Everything was too much; her back throbbed incessantly, and she was so very tired. There was a movement of blankets around her, but she couldn't for the life of her open her eyes again. Hermione felt herself tip thankfully over the edge into oblivion.

## Ten

### Chapter 11 of 22

Seven years after the death of Dumbledore, Hermione finally returns to Hogwarts. What will she find?

Many thanks to my beta, Soul Bound.

A loud, incessant clanging woke Hermione from her deep sleep, but the young witch moved deeper into her blankets, trying to recapture the strange dream she'd been having. She yawned deeply as the metallic noise continued to pound into her and gagged at the rotten stench. Hermione opened her eyes and saw an odd bobbing movement near the wall of the darkened hospital room. The witch rolled over to get a better look...the blue and white enamel bowl was hitting the wall. It took longer than usual for Hermione's sleepy brain to register the strangeness of what she was looking at, but when she did, the witch sat bolt upright and glanced about the dim room. There was murky water swirling around the legs of the bed instead of the expected shiny, tiled floor.

Hermione couldn't believe it...water...here in the hospital wing? And how it stunk... Hermione pulled her blankets up to cover her nose before she choked. Other than the bowl clanking, there was complete silence. But Hogwarts was not normally this quiet. In a castle full of students, teachers, ghosts, portraits, and houseelves, there were always slamming doors, murmurings, footsteps and countless other sounds that echoed about the castle.

Plumbing. It's got to be the plumbing, Hermione realized. It was the only thing that could cause flooding like this to occur. She knew absolutely nothing about plumbing...let

alone plumbing in the wizarding world, but remembered the Basilisk lived in the pipes under Hogwarts for years. If great labyrinths were dedicated to the plumbing, she reasoned that it must be fairly complicated. Hermione wondered how the wizarding world went about fixing this sort of problem. Did they call a plumber? No, that was such a straightforward, Muggle thought; they would have to use copious quantities of magic and complicated spells, Hermione thought cynically.

Her stomach churned from the awful smell, and she realized horribly that there probably was sewage in the water as well. Maybe the sewage pipes had burst too?...what else could cause this smell? It was something she didn't really want to dwell too much on mostly because Hermione knew she was going to have to wade through it to find someone. The young witch sat there a bit longer, hoping to hear a noise other than the bowl hitting the wall. Nothing, no other sounds could be heard. Maybe they'd evacuated everyone and forgot about her, although that seemed so unlike the Madam Pomfrey she knew. Still, it shouldn't be too difficult to find someone in a whole school full of students and teachers, she thought. Hermione swung her legs around, unable to stand the bad smell any longer, and gingerly lowered herself into the thick, mud-coloured water.

'Oh, gross,' muttered Hermione out loud, her voice echoing strangely in the watery acoustics.

The cold water came up to her knees, so she tucked her hospital gown into her knickers to stop it from getting wet. The witch moved carefully to the door, using the bed to help keep her balance. It took several attempts to open it, and in the end she had to give it a hard yank, which sent ripples into her room, making the bowl bang furiously against the wall. Hermione knew straight away from the eerie silence that nobody was in the darkened general ward either. She stood in the doorway, the cold water swirling around her knees, and looked out at the hospital beds, which were like strange rectangular islands in neat rows.

Gritting her teeth, the witch stepped out into the ward warily; the water was murky, and she couldn't see where she was placing her feet. Luckily, the water was still, so Hermione worked her way easily across the room towards the door. She was about half way across when a sharp pain ripped through her right foot and she stumbled forward into the water, sending a wave out from her. Hermione scrambled to her feet, spitting out the water...it tasted disgusting. She held onto a nearby bed and inspected the cut...it wasn't too deep but was bleeding profusely. Hermione determinedly ploughed towards the corridor door.

Again she stood for a bit in the doorway, trying to orient herself; by now she was shivering with cold and uncertainty. The water and the darkness were playing with her sense of direction, and the witch didn't want to become disorientated. The water in the corridor was moving swiftly towards the stairwell, which it gushed noisily down. The witch knew she couldn't easily go against the water flow, so she edged along the corridor wall towards the stairs. It was a deceptively strong current and tugged incessantly at her knees; every time she moved her foot forward, the water wanted to tip her over. Hermione yelled in fright when something touched the back of her knee; her scream was submerged by the noise of the water pouring down the stairwell. She looked down and saw a woman's black shoe float swiftly past her. Worry started to creep into her. She still hadn't seen or heard anyone, and where was the woman whose shoe it was? Where had it come from? Maybe something more serious than overflowing pipes had occurred. The noise of the water became louder the closer she got to the stairs, and the flow of water around her knees increased in its strength. Hermione firmly gripped the handrails at the start of the stairs to stop her feet from being swept from under her.

Then above the sound of the water, Hermione heard a murmuring. Was it a voice? She strained her ears...yes it was most definitely a voice. There were more murmurings. Two people talking...she wasn't alone. Hermione sloshed forward but stopped abruptly. She couldn't work out which direction the voices were coming from. She peered back up the corridor but couldn't see anything except blackness, and she couldn't yet see down the stairwell.

'Hello! Where are you?' Hermione called out and was startled to hear it come out in the ancient tongue. The witch distinctly heard women talking, and relief flooded through her. But she still didn't know which direction they were.

'Miss Granger.' An urgent voice came echoing towards her.

'I'm here!' she called out with relief, but was puzzled that it came out again in the ancient tongue. It was as if her English had disappeared all together.

'What is she saying?' A voice swirled towards her.

'I don't know. Go and get him, now.'

'But he's teaching.'

'I don't care...just get him.'

The conversation did not make any sense to Hermione. She paused, shivering, trying to decide which way to go and decided at last to carry on going down the stairwell. The thunderous noise of the water cascading down the stairwell became louder the closer she got. Straining against the strong, relentless tugging at her knees, Hermione edged along, holding tightly onto the handrail. At last she reached the top of the stairs and looked apprehensively down. It was a white churned up waterfall...the quantity of water going down the stairwell was extraordinary; she never knew Hogwarts used this amount of water. Hermione carefully slid her foot to the edge of the step, but the strength of the water finally knocked her off balance, and she slid rapidly down the stairs. Hermione furiously tried to grab hold of something, but it was only at the last step that she finally managed to seize a banister and hold onto it. Coughing and spluttering, Hermione looked about and instinctively wrapped herself more securely around the sturdy post.

The ground floor corridor was dim, and a river of deep, fast flowing water was raging up from the dungeons and out the main doors. The witch didn't know what to do. Going back upstairs wasn't an option, but casting herself off into the torrent seemed like sure death. An upturned basin bobbed swiftly by, and by its speed, Hermione knew she mustn't let go of the banister. A much larger shape rolled towards her from deep within Hogwarts, and with a jolt, the shivering witch realized it was a body. Thinking it was futile but needing to all the same, Hermione called out, 'Hey! Reach for me!' Her voice barely raised above the deafening roar of the water. As the body drew nearer, Hermione saw the man's face; his eyes were open, and he was struggling to keep his mouth out of the water.

'Reach for me!' she yelled desperately.

Slowly the man moved his arm towards her, trying to reach for her, and with that movement Hermione knew it was Harry.

'Harry, reach for me!' she cried as the wizard drew closer. Not knowing what else to do, the witch reached out as far as she could with one arm, hoping beyond hope she could grab hold of him. The water dragged furiously at her, so she closed her eyes and used all her strength to hold onto the banister. A cold touch...Hermione grappled furiously, not wanting him to slip past her. Cold fingers, then a cold hand, came into hers, and the witch pulled with all her might and felt Harry moving towards her. But when Hermione opened her eyes, she saw a dark shape floating past her towards the main doors. Yet she felt Harry's cold hand in hers. The witch looked down and saw his rotten, grey hand in hers. It had been torn off at the elbow, and dangling from it were sinews and muscle. It was too much. Hermione closed her eyes and screamed, feeling herself falling into the foul waters and being dragged under. And still the witch screamed until she could no longer feel the water around her...could no longer feel Harry's hand in hers. But Hermione didn't open her eyes...couldn't open her eyes to the horror.

She felt him around her and in her as she was around him and in him, but still panic gripped her. Warmth, darkness and pulsating rhythm soothed her soul. Still she screamed. But there was no sound; it had been absorbed before it could become an actuality. Hermione moved closer in to him than ever before, and he allowed her to seek solace in that. He started to shift around her, and Hermione knew he wanted to set her back down into the sadness and the pain again.

'No!' she cried out against him for the first time ever and clung still closer to him.

'But I must, my love. You cannot stay here yet.' He continued to shift around her.

'No! It's too much! You ask too much of me! Too much!' Hermione sobbed with all her heart.

He moved around her, calming her, reassuring her, comforting her, and the blind panic flowed away, leaving her only with an all pervading sense of sadness.

'But I long to be here with you. It's where I want to be,' Hermione softly cried.

'I wish it also to be so, but it cannot be. You hurt so.'

He caressed her gently, and she leaned into his touch, accepting his wisdom and regretting her outburst.

'But how will I find my way back?'

Her known route back didn't exist. He had come to her rather than her seeking him.

'I will guide you back. The man of spring water will draw you in.'

Hermione was surprised...he had never named another person before. He carefully scooped her up and drifted her away from him, lightly, as if she were a balloon being wafted across a room. Hermione relaxed, feeling secure that he was there, and then he quietly faded, not disappearing...he would never do that...but stepping back from her.

Hermione breathed in, smelling the grounding oil, and felt a steady warmth in her hand...where Harry's cold, dead hand had been. The ancient drawing incantation flowed over her, and the witch became aware of the deep throbbing ache in her back, the sharper pain down her chest and her hand, the discomfort of her forehead and the awkward position she was laying in. Amongst it all, she could feel pins and needles all down her right side from lying unmoving for all this time. But the horror of what she'd seen still lurked close by. Hermione slowly opened her eyes and saw Snape's face cast downwards, his eyes shut, with a frown of deep concentration on his forehead. She listened to his rhythmic, flawless chanting and his rich, deep mountain accent.

'My teacher,' she croaked out finally.

Snape's eyes snapped open, and relief poured from the dark eyes. He closed them again briefly, letting out a puff of air and moving his shoulders to release their tension.

Hermione was mortified to feel tears well up, making Snape's face move in crazy ways. She didn't want to cry, but everything she had seen, smelt and felt crowded in on her and threatened to swamp her. For the first time in her life, she felt a sliver of resentment; she didn't want to do this anymore...didn't want to be shown things like that...didn't want to have to try and work them out. Maybe she should go and live a quiet life as a Muggle...it sounded so good to her right now.

'I am pleased you have returned, my lady,' Snape said gently, reopening his black eyes.

Unable to meet his gaze because of her tears, Hermione looked down and saw Snape still holding her left hand. His hand was in the precise drawing down position, and all up her forearm were the ancient symbols of earth marked in white. Snape had drawn her back. She was back again at Hogwarts. Back in the hospital wing. Back to Ron's death. It was too much. But it didn't feel real. What was real anyway?

'I didn't want to come back, my teacher. I wanted to stay. It's not where I want to be, but he made me come back, but I didn't want to. I didn't want to.' Hermione closed her eyes...then at least she could pretend he wasn't watching her crying. She really did sound ungrateful even to her own ears. Hermione felt a roughness on her wet cheeks and, opening her eyes again, saw Snape wiping her tears away with his thumb.

'He is right, my lady; you need to be back amongst us. I cannot even pretend to know what it is like, my lady, but I do understand it is a difficult skill you have. And I only know that I am pleased you have returned,' he said in barely more than a whisper with his eyes cast down.

'But I saw Harry, and it was awful. Everything was flooded and stank. This room, the ward, maybe the whole of Hogwarts, I don't know. I saw Harry floating by, so I reached for him, but his arm was rotten and came off in my hand, and then he floated away. Oh, it was horrible and so real,' blurted out Hermione as the images pounded back into her.

Snape gently stroked his finger soothingly across her cheek as if knowing she needed touch as much as the incantations to anchor her to this reality. 'Shh now, my lady; it is what he has shown you, but that is not our reality. Look at the room; look at the floor...there is no water. This is our reality. We are at Hogwarts in its hospital wing, and I am sitting beside you. Behind that door is a ward full of sick children. Well, most of them are trying to avoid the first round of tests coming up...but that is neither here nor there right now. Madams Pomfrey and Smith are tending the children right now. Harry is entertaining...oh, I mean, teaching...fourth-years as we speak. The students are about to finish their afternoon classes. You are here now. This is our reality.'

Hermione looked about the reassuringly bland, small room she was in and breathed in the smell of bleach, trying desperately to chase the images away.

'But it seemed so real. I'm so pleased it wasn't real. It truly was awful.' Then she looked into his black eyes and noticed the dark rings under them. 'I am sorry about that; I don't usually cry and that sort of thing, and I am truly thankful to you that you drew me back as you did. I am indebted to you that you were there. I don't want to sound ungrateful.'

Snape moved a lock of hair out of her eyes and shook his head; his eyes had a curious light in them. 'Do not apologize, my lady, I am given to understand that it takes tremendous strength and courage to do what you just did and would imagine that for you, it does not finish abruptly when you are back amongst us. Remember it is a great privilege for me to aid and abet you at every possible opportunity I have.' Then his lips twitched. 'Besides which, my dear grandma would have been delighted to know that I am finally using the skills she so rigorously taught me in a beneficial way. Though I doubt even she could have imagined the caliber of magic I am interacting with now.'

'Your grandma must have been a conversant woman to have taught you the drawing in chant,' observed Hermione.

'Yes, she was indeed,' came his soft reply.

There was a gentle tapping on the door, and Snape quickly took his hand from hers, straightened, and moved his chair away to a more neutral distance. His absence of touch left Hermione lurching, unsure and unsteady.

Madam Pomfrey's head popped around the door. 'Shall I let Professor McGonagall know?' asked the mediwitch from the doorway, as if reluctant to come in when she saw Hermione awake.

Snape curtly nodded, his lank hair obscuring his face.

'Is there anything else you will be needing, Professor Snape?'

'Ask Professor McGonagall to arrange for the Thestrals to be harnessed and ready. We will be leaving shortly.'

Madam Pomfrey nodded and quickly disappeared back behind the door.

When the door clicked shut, Snape let out a tired sigh. Hermione noticed Snape was wearing his teaching robes and that afternoon light was coming into her room. Not only were her different realities wanting to merge, but her sense of time also seemed wrong; she wanted his touch again to regain her balance.

Snape looked at her steadily and rubbed his chin slowly. 'My lady, I think it is best that you are moved away from Hogwarts. There is too much magic here, and it will not allow the necessary healing to take place. There is a cabin in the Forbidden Forest that is far enough away from Hogwarts and its magic, but still within its protective wards. The forest will also provide a further insulating layer. We will be taking you there shortly.'

Hermione nodded. What could she say? She was just so pleased to be away from the flood dream that anything else was inconsequential, although her back still hurt dreadfully. The young witch truly didn't have the energy and was just pleased somebody as clever as Snape was making these decisions for her. As soon as she thought that, Hermione realized it was a true indication of how strange her life had become. But still something nagged her...one of her worst things was having her sense of time messed with. Why was it the afternoon? Why was Snape in teaching robes? She couldn't quite work out what had happened when. What was the last thing she could

remember? Even that seemed a strain, as if she was reaching back into her memory for years gone by, but that obviously wasn't the case.

Snape must have noticed her frowning. 'What is it, my lady? Is it about the move? It really is the best place for you, and I will make sure the move is done painlessly.'

'No, it's not that. I hate it when I can't work out the sequences of things. What happened?'

Snape settled into the chair and ran his fingers wearily through his hair, pulling it back from his face, revealing his harsh features. 'I gave you a sleeping draught last night, so you slept through the night and most of today. But this afternoon you became highly agitated, and Madams Smith and Pomfrey were worried that you were having a turn.'

'I remember voices, women's voices, but they didn't make any sense. How strange, I've never had that happen before.'

Snape was listening intently to her and looked as if he was about to ask her a question, but paused, then picked up on what he was saying again. 'Madam Smith called me from the classroom, and I recognized what was happening to you and was able to bring you back. Of course with his good grace.'

'How long was I gone for?'

'Three hours.'

'Three hours!' Hermione gasped. 'I've never been away for three hours!'

'I thought at different stages I was failing. It has been many years since I had recited that chant, but then you fortunately fell back into pattern.'

Hermione knew how utterly draining the drawing chant was for someone else to do. Then she remembered he'd been teaching this morning, tended her last night, and had withstood the attack yesterday. 'You must be exhausted, my teacher.'

'Yes, I think I will sleep well tonight,' he agreed, 'but I will be happier when you are moved away from this magic.'

Hermione felt exhaustion crash into her and nodded wearily. She wanted anything to stop the aching, throbbing pain in her back. Snape stood up fluidly and moved soundlessly to the table where he measured out a green potion into a goblet. He stepped close to her and held it to her lips. 'You need to drink this, my lady; it's to protect you during the move.'

Hermione drank it down; it tasted surprisingly nice. She moved her head deep into the pillow and saw Snape sit back down beside her, and without thinking, she held out her hand, needing touch to keep her in this realm. Snape looked at her deeply for a second and then placed his hand back into hers. Secure that she wasn't going to leave this world, Hermione's eyes dropped shut, and she knew no more.

## Eleven

### Chapter 12 of 22

Seven years after the death of Dumbledore, Hermione finally returns to Hogwarts. What will she find?

Many thanks to my beta, Soul Bound.

Professor McGonagall lifted her green robes so that they would not drag in the mud and quickly walked up the track, creating puffs of white smoke in the crisp morning air. She stopped to catch her breath, annoyed at her lack of fitness; the trees around her were black, still, silent and the ground hard with frost. *Winter wants to come early this year*, the professor thought quietly as she continued towards the hut. The trees gradually thinned, letting in more light, and she smelt the smoke of a nearby wood fire; she must be getting closer. When Severus had suggested moving Hermione here, away from the magic at Hogwarts, it had taken her a moment to work out what hut he was talking about. Professor McGonagall had quite forgotten it was even here. But then she had never been keen on traipsing about the Forbidden Forest, even in her younger days when she had been up for most things; it always had an ominously heavy feel about it.

The track opened up onto a grassy clearing, and the small wooden hut with its rickety porch sat bathing in the weak sunlight. Professor McGonagall noticed as she walked up the steps that the porch was swept, and there was a neat stack of firewood by the door. Harry had been busy. When she had asked him to help, he had smiled broadly, obviously pleased to finally have a job to do. Harry had not even questioned the oddity of the tasks, and when she had said not to use any magic, he had simply shrugged casually before charging off to ferret out some Muggle cleaning utensils.

Professor McGonagall paused at the door, wondering if she should knock. She listened but couldn't hear anything. So, worrying that she may disturb a sleeping Hermione, the witch gently pushed the door open and promptly stepped backwards, reeling. With her eyes streaming and a choking sensation in her throat, the professor quickly covered her nose and mouth with her robe. It was the same extreme magic she had felt in Hermione's room, but with at least ten times the intensity. Professor McGonagall was not even sure whether it was magic that was swirling and throbbing in the small room. Just as she had done before, the professor closed her eyes and slammed up her shields. The intensity lessened, but she still felt her stomach rolling in abhorrence and sweat trickling down her spine. It took several deep breaths through her robe to calm her body down enough to even be conscious of her surroundings. She reopened her streaming eyes and stepped warily through the door; it took a moment for her to adjust to the dimness of the room.

Severus was sitting on the far side of the room and nodded in acknowledgement of her arrival. How could the Potions master sit there seemingly unaffected by it? While she had always known that he was a powerful wizard, she had never known he was *this* strong. The witch was sure even Albus would have struggled. The black-robed wizard was sitting close to a low-lying bed where she assumed Hermione was. The wizard's sharp eyes followed her as she worked her way across the room. The magic swirled faster around her, becoming thicker and stronger the closer she got to them. Her shields starting to shake as the strange magic crashed in on them. Professor McGonagall had to stop mid-way across the room to reinforce them so that they were firm and strong again, despite knowing Severus was observing her closely. It was like wading through thick, grimy mud that was threatening to swallow her.

'Headmistress.' Severus stood and gestured deferentially for her to take his chair. He looked tired, but his eyes appeared even blacker and more penetrating than ever before.

'Severus,' whispered Professor McGonagall, and she nodded her thanks as she sat down.

The wizard moved to the other side of the cabin to where there looked to be a kitchen of sorts.

Hermione was lying on her stomach, her head to one side, with the bedding tucked in around her. Her hair had been pulled back away from the bandaging on her forehead. She looked awful...her colouring was wrong, and her dark eyes seemed too big for her face.

But the young witch looked up at her and smiled happily in greeting. 'Hi, Professor,' she croaked.

'Hello, Hermione. It is good to see you awake.'

'Yes, it's a bit of a surprise for me as well. I'm still sleeping absolutely loads, but I feel better.'

'The move went alright?'

'Yes, although I wasn't awake for any of it, thank goodness. I still feel tired, and my back is sore, but I can actually string sentences together again.'

'That is a good thing.' Professor McGonagall smiled.

'It's certainly useful.' Hermione returned the smile, but her face looked drained.

Severus came soundlessly beside her, and the professor only noticed because Hermione looked up at him. He was holding a goblet that smelt like a pain relief potion.

'Headmistress, I need to give Miss Granger her potion.'

'Of course, Severus.' Professor McGonagall stood up and almost swayed...so powerful was the peculiar magic pressing in on her.

'Oh, no.' The young witch did a theatrical sigh. 'I was just settling in for my first chat in days, Professor Snape.' Hermione's eyes were twinkling, and a grin threatened to burst across her face. 'Not that chatting with you wasn't engaging, sir.'

Professor McGonagall's eyes widened, and she braced herself for a nasty retort from Severus. Years of living and working around actively hostile people had taken the Potions master's already bad temper and nasty tongue to previously uncharted depths. Foolish Hermione... Nobody, absolutely nobody, bantered with this wizard, even if they were sick, without being chewed up and spat out. She thought the young witch would have known better.

But to her utter amazement, she saw his lips twitch slightly as he looked down at the young witch with an odd expression, saying something rapidly. It couldn't be the ancient language, could it? Yes, the professor caught a word or two, and it had the right sounds. In all her years of knowing the man, she had never known he could speak the ancient language, and she felt her jaw dropping. No wonder he was recruited as a spy; his ability to keep secrets astounded her beyond measure. Hermione rolled her eyes in response to whatever he said, but had a smile in her eyes and replied fluently back to him. The only words she recognized were 'my teacher.' Languages had never been her thing.

'Goodness me, that is a surprise,' muttered Professor McGonagall, and she forced her mouth to close with a clunk.

Severus and Hermione turned and looked at her, and the witch felt their eyes boring into the very depths of her soul, as if her magic as one of the most powerful witches in the wizarding world meant nothing at all to them. Then as one they both dropped their eyes from her, and she realized with a shudder that it had been but a second in time.

'Indeed, I'm sure it was,' replied Severus in an emotionless voice.

Professor McGonagall was too shaken to want to pursue this topic of conversation and just left it at that while scrambling to rebuild her shaken composure. She was not used to the feeling of utter powerlessness she had just experienced.

Severus moved the chair closer and gently helped Hermione to lift her head, holding the goblet while she drank. As Professor McGonagall watched, she thought to herself, *he's done that before...that's a tricky maneuver, and he didn't spill a drop, nor did Hermione splutter once.* The professor realized that she had learnt more about Severus in the last twenty-four hours than she had in the last twenty odd years of knowing him.

'I was wondering, Headmistress, if I might have a word,' he quietly asked, straightening as Hermione's eyes fluttered to a close.

'Yes, of course, Severus. I was hoping for an update at any rate,' replied Professor McGonagall blandly while mentally reinforcing her shields some more.

They moved across the hut to a small table near the door. Professor McGonagall glanced out the window and had a pang of longing to sit outside in the sunlight away from this swirling, disturbing magic.

'Would you like to sit outside on the verandah, in the sunshine, and I could make some tea?' Severus politely asked, as if reading her mind.

Professor McGonagall looked sharply at Severus, but he looked mildly back, waiting for her response. There was no way he could have read her mind; he had not even been looking at her when she had thought that...but still, it was most disquieting.

'Yes, that would be lovely. I have cleared my schedule to the shock of everyone, so yes, I do have time to sit in the sun this morning.'

Severus nodded and moved towards the kitchen to prepare the tea. There was no magic in this hut because of Hermione and of course there was no Muggle electricity, remembered the older witch.

Stepping out onto the verandah was like stepping back to normality, and Professor McGonagall happily shut the door behind her. Breathing in the cool morning air, she smelt the trees of the Forbidden Forest and heard the occasional bird. It was like the release of a huge weight that had been pressing down on her, and her heart rate dropped back down to within the normal range again. She glanced about and saw two battered outside chairs set back under the shade, but Professor McGonagall chose instead to sit in the sunlight on the edge of the porch with her legs dangling off the side. She took her hat off and leaned back on a post, enjoying the feel of the sun on her face. It was actually quite a nice spot, she thought, if you forgot about the miles of dark, menacing forest that surrounded it.

As the professor idly watched some black birds hunting for worms in the grass, she felt her shoulders slowly relax and the knot in her stomach unfurl. By Merlin's balls, what a horrible experience that had been. A young, inexperienced or even weak witch or wizard would not have been able to withstand that sort of magic...it had taken *her* to the uppermost limits of her powers, and that never happened nowadays. And what strange magic it was too.

She remembered when she had had her first whiff of that peculiar magic. The professor had gone with Athena and her family to a chanting night, as they often did, and she had first noticed the woman by how the people were behaving so deferentially towards her. The professor had been sitting next to her sister with one of her grand nephews on her lap and had felt her stomach rolling in revulsion. Professor McGonagall had been thinking it might have been the fish they had eaten for lunch when her sister had leaned across and whispered in her ear, 'Do you feel it too?'

'Do you think it was the fish?' she had asked.

Her sister had shaken her head and nodded in the direction of the woman. 'It's from her. One such as her very rarely visits, and it is only wizard-raised people like us who feel their magic this way.'

'You mean it is not the fish?'

'No, and I suggest you don't go any closer to her because I can tell you by experience it gets worse.'

Professor McGonagall had realized that the feeling in her stomach was more than bad food. It was as if the air around her was wrong. She had looked again over at the woman at the other end of the open-air compound. The dark woman was middle aged and had her black hair tied back in an intricate braid. But what made her stand out in this colourfully dressed crowd was her pitch-black robe that was tied in a most complicated way.

'Who is she?'

Her sister's normally open face had become uneasy, and she had hesitated as if not sure what to tell her. 'They hardly ever visit us, so I'm sure you won't feel it like this the next time we come.'

'But what is she?' she had asked again more insistently, almost rolling her eyes at her sister's feeble attempt to distract her.

Anthena had looked surprisingly unsettled and then, making up her mind, leaned in closer to her and spoke in quiet undertones. 'She is a member of the circle or an initiate...I'm not sure which...it's hard to tell them apart. They are never talked about. I don't actually know a lot about them myself, but they have rare powers.'

Because Professor McGonagall had been visiting the South on a regular basis for so long, she was no longer surprised to hear something as odd as this. Just when she felt she knew the place and its people, something strange and unexpected always turned up. But the witch knew from previous experience not to directly pursue the topic, as it would put her sister into an awkward position. Over the years, however, she continued to hear regular hints and oblique references to them and was surprised at how integral they were to the fabric of southern society.

The professor looked back down at her black shoes that she was hitting idly together, admiring how their green stitching matched her green robes. Now Severus, she mused, what a surprise he was. Being able to sit amongst that seething magic with no ill effect, speaking the ancient language fluently, knowing about Hermione's reaction to Hogwarts magic and his astonishing knowledge of the South. Professor McGonagall almost groaned out loud at how obvious it was. Somehow he had connections to the circle and had kept it quiet all these years.

Just then, the door opened. Severus came out with a tray, placed it carefully beside her and sat smoothly down. Magic had leaked out when Severus opened the door, and Professor McGonagall felt revulsion run down her spine that lessened once the door swung shut. The Potions master squinted in the sunlight and poured the tea. The witch realized there had only been a few times she'd seen him in direct sunlight. He was dressed in his normal black teaching robes. Just a moment... Had she seen him wear any other colour? Of course not...it had been the joke of the staff room for years, and then she thought about the black robed woman at the gathering all those years ago. How very interesting.

'Headmistress.' Severus passed the teacup over to her.

Right, better get her mind back to business, the professor thought firmly. 'So, tell me how Hermione is, first off.'

'The move using the Thestrals went well. Miss Granger remained stable throughout the journey, and it has not seemed to interfere with her healing. Since being here, even this short amount of time, Miss Granger's body is starting to heal itself with the help of the Muggle medicine and potions.' Severus took a sip of tea and continued, 'However, it is her injury on her back that is proving problematic.'

'How?' asked Professor McGonagall sharply, placing her cup back down on the tray. Her stomach still felt too uneasy to even think about drinking something.

'The problem is that it is a magically sourced eating type curse.'

'Normal magical healing charms still cannot be used?'

'Precisely.'

'Is her reaction to this curse any different because it is a magically sourced injury?' Professor McGonagall questioned carefully.

'Yes, it is moving a lot quicker than it should. I had hoped that by moving Miss Granger away from Hogwarts, it would slow down, but it has not. In fact the very opposite is happening.'

'What are our options then, Severus?' Professor McGonagall looked carefully at the wizard, hoping with all her heart that he had an answer.

The tall man looked down at his teacup. 'It is a difficult situation. If we leave it any longer, she will die as it eats into her vital organs.' He looked up appraisingly again at her. 'There is one other option, but it would require your utmost discretion.'

'Yes?' Relief washed over her. Discretion she could do, and of anyone, she knew this repulsively clever wizard would be able to come up with a solution.

'As you may have already worked out, Headmistress, I have had some dealings with the South and am somewhat familiar with the magic Miss Granger has become accustomed to.'

'I am aware now, yes, Severus,' the older woman replied evenly. She had millions of questions boiling away, but more than anything, she wanted him to be able to heal Hermione, even if that meant never having her questions answered.

'What I propose to do is use her type of magic to transform the flesh eating curse into a solid object, and then use Muggle medical methods to remove it from her back. By doing it this way, it circumvents the need to use healing charms.'

The professor nodded slowly, impressed with the unique approach. 'And you are proficient enough in both skills to perform this healing?'

Severus nodded grimly. 'It has been many years since I have performed this type of magic, but the necessary spell itself is actually a relatively straightforward one. But all the same, I will consult with Miss Granger to ensure it is done correctly. However, the second part I will need assistance with. I understand you visit your sister in the South on a regular basis.'

It was the first time Severus even acknowledged knowing about her sister in the South. The professor nodded slowly. 'If you are asking if I am able to perform tasks without my wand, then yes, I can. I have also been at the births of all my nephews and nieces and most of my grand nephews and nieces as well. So although I am no mediawitch, I am not put off by the sight of blood and am capable of doing mundane tasks without a wand.'

Severus turned to her, and for the first time in her life, she saw a flicker of warmth in his cold eyes. 'All I will ask of you, Headmistress, is that you aid me in the second stage. What I will be asking you to do is pass me instruments that I require. I simply will not have enough hands to do it myself.'

'And the first part?' the professor asked curiously.

'I doubt, Headmistress, that even you will be able to enter the hut. In fact, I must warn you that for the second part of the healing, the magic will still be present, and while it will have lessened in intensity, it will be stronger than what you experienced this morning. Do you still think you will be able to assist me, Headmistress? I do not ask this to challenge your power as a witch, but only because I will need to rethink how to proceed with the second part if you cannot.'

The older witch swallowed and looked down at her untouched tea on the tray. She remembered entering the hut this morning and visiting Hermione in her rooms and the types of shields she had scrambled to erect. But now that the witch had time, she could think of other methods of reinforcing her defenses, which would be more effective and less tiring. The Headmistress looked up at Severus and saw him looking at her steadily...again with a certain tinge of gentleness to his demeanor. 'Yes, Severus, I can assist you. When do you propose to do this healing?'



'This morning. We cannot wait, and I have everything prepared.'

The professor nodded solemnly in agreement; she had rather guessed as much. 'And Hermione, does she know what is to be done?'

Severus nodded and glanced down at her. 'It was on Miss Granger's suggestion that I spoke the ancient language in front of you. Now, I need to consult with Miss Granger about the first part, and then I will go over what we are to do for the second part.'

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Professor McGonagall felt a trickling of sweat down her forehead and quickly wiped it with the corner of her robe before it dripped into the bubbling green potion and ruined it. She continued to stir steadily in the prescribed figure eight movement and breathed in the smelly, sharp fumes puffing up from the cauldron. The witch was actually enjoying herself. It had been many years since she had had to make a Blood-Replenishing Potion from scratch, and Potions was a subject she had enjoyed while at school. At one stage, she had even contemplated taking it further, but was quickly discouraged by her family as an unsuitable choice of occupation. Professor McGonagall looked assessingly at the potion and was pleased with the colour, smell and consistency. The witch, taking a rag in both hands, heaved the cauldron onto a nearby bench.

The professor heard a door from the hut open, so she quickly covered the cauldron and left the small cooking shed for the hut. She felt nervous and hoped that the first part had gone well for Hermione. Then, remembering what she was entering into, she put all her formidable strength into building her shields, making sure she threaded protective strands through them.

Severus' pale face appeared at the door and quickly nodded at her before disappearing back inside. Professor McGonagall breathed in deeply and stepped into the room, feeling the impact of a huge weight on her shields; it was as if the magic was testing them, seeking out holes or any weaknesses to exploit. Her shields heaved and strained but withstood the onslaught and remained strong; she glanced up and saw Severus looking at her with a frown, so she nodded to him to indicate she was all right. Hermione was laid on her stomach on a small, narrow bed in front of the fire, and by her stillness, she was obviously sedated. There was a light blanket covering her lower body, but her slim back was exposed. Beside her were three trolleys with an array of instruments and potions on them. The professor moved to the kitchen and scrubbed her hands with soap, rinsing them in a bucket of clean water. She put on a pair of surgical gloves and moved back towards Severus.

It was only then that she noticed what Severus was wearing. It was a black robe tied in a complicated manner, although it was clearly worn in a southern style. His shoulders and chest stood out startlingly white in their nakedness, but it was the ease with which he moved with it on that told her his familiarity with wearing the garment. The professor moved to the wizard's side and looked down at Hermione's lightly tanned back. The wound on her lower back, although not big, looked like it was starting to fester. The professor recognized the fading jagged lines radiating outwards from the wound as the remnants of the flesh-eating curse.

'How did it go?'

'Well. Miss Granger is completely sedated, and we need to remove the object quickly now. I am neither sure what material the curse has materialized as nor how deeply it is wedged.'

Severus leaned in to examine the wound closely, probing it with his gloved fingers.

Professor McGonagall examined the utensils carefully on the tray so she could easily reach for them when asked. The witch looked back at the wound on Hermione's back, and even within this short amount of time it had reddened some more. Severus wiped the wound with what smelt like an antiseptic lotion.

'Do you know how large the object is, Severus?'

'No. Could you please hold both sides of the wound open while I try and locate it.'

Professor McGonagall nodded and, using tweezers, held the skin gently apart, exposing the red flesh of the wound that was oozing out blood.

Severus picked up a pair of small tongs, delicately inserted them into the wound and after a moment of careful prodding said, 'Yes, I can feel something; it is not too deep, thankfully.'

Very slowly, he pulled out a long, bloodied stick of metal and held it up to scrutinize it carefully. Professor McGonagall looked at Severus and saw relief in his eyes, but quickly turned her attention to mopping up the blood that had come pouring out of the wound with the metal. She then wiped an antiseptic solution all about the wound again while Severus threaded a needle and started neatly stitching the wound up. When he had finished, he looked at her and let out a sigh. She smiled back in unspoken agreement.

'So this is now considered a non-magical injury?' she asked all the same.

'Yes, it will now heal normally,' he stated with satisfaction in his voice.

## Twelve

### *Chapter 13 of 22*

Seven years after the death of Dumbledore, Hermione finally returns to Hogwarts. What will she find?

Many thanks to my beta, Soul Bound.

Hermione breathed in deeply, smelling the flax mat she was lying on. A gentle sea breeze touched her face, and with it came the sulphur smell of the rivers. Home, she was at home, and a sense of peace flowed through her. Hermione moved her head to snuggle deeper into the pillow, but there was awkwardness about the movement that pulled her from her tranquil sleep. Opening her eyes, she looked over a darkened room, which was gently lit by an orange glow of embers in a fireplace. There was a scratching noise, so the witch moved her head around to look and was surprised at the ease of movement. In fact, her entire body, though stiff, was free from the deep, all pervading pain coming from her back. It's worked, thought Hermione in relief.

Snape was sitting at the table with a lantern encircling him in a small pool of light. His forehead was furrowed in concentration; he had a pile of parchment next to him, but his posture was relaxed and unguarded. Was he doing marking, maybe? Of course, Hermione realized guiltily, he had to maintain his teaching commitments in spite of what had happened. Snape had been amazingly knowledgeable and accommodating of her and her situation, which made it hard to reconcile him with the vile teacher that had haunted her school days. As if sensing her eyes on him, Snape looked over; his brow smoothed and he put down his quill.

'My lady?'

'My teacher, it worked then,' stated Hermione with relief.

'Yes.' He allowed a small smile play on his lips. 'I approached it how you recommended and managed to transform the curse. It changed into a long sliver of metal, which I extracted successfully.'

'Thank you. I owe you my life.'

Snape looked away as if uncomfortable and shook his head slowly. 'It is the very least I could do, my lady. How are you feeling?'

'Good. I just had a wonderful dream,' she replied drowsily.

Snape's eyebrows shot up, and he moved anxiously over to sit near her. 'What sort of dream, my lady?'

Hermione wasn't sure if it was the complimentary dim light, but his face didn't look as stark nor as drawn as it had been. But that made no sense considering what his last few days had been like. No, it must be the dim lights, she told herself.

'Oh, no, not that sort of dream, my teacher...a normal dream,' she quickly assured, realizing what his startled response was about.

Snape's sharp eyes were examining her very carefully. 'A normal dream?'

'Yes, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you, my teacher. I thought I was back home. It made me happy. I haven't dreamt like that in such a long time, and it was just so nice to dream normally for a change.' Realizing she was rambling, Hermione pulled herself to a halt.

Snape must have been convinced as his face relaxed, and the intensity went out of his eyes. 'How is the pain, my lady?'

'Much better, thank goodness. I can still feel it, of course, but that intense ache has gone. I just feel stiff, I suppose.' Hermione then asked, 'What time is it?'

'Late.' Snape leaned back on his chair, stretching and stifling a yawn.

Hermione realized that these were the most relaxed movements she'd witnessed him do in front of her. He had obviously removed his teaching robes...they were slung over the back of the kitchen chair...and wore black shirt and trousers, similar to what he'd worn the other day. *Boy, would the girls of her year be disappointed with that boring bit of information*, Hermione smirked to herself. There had been speculation for years about what the Potions master wore under his teaching robes...most of it hilariously funny and none of it as mundane as shirt and trousers.

'Do you mind if I check the bandaging on your back?'

'Goodness, as if I'd say no considering what you've managed to do to heal me.' Hermione laid down straight on her stomach, her face buried in the pillow.

'True enough,' came an amused reply.

She felt the blankets lift from her back, him untying her hospital gown, and she realized suddenly that she didn't have any other clothes or belongings here. There was a prodding as he felt the bandaging.

'What's it like, my teacher?' Her voice was muffled by the pillow.

'Good, the bleeding has slowed down how it should. I will change the bandaging tomorrow at the same time as the others.'

The witch felt the weight of the blanket being pulled back up over her waist, and she shifted her head to see Snape moving towards the kitchen and coming back with a tray.

'Do you think you will be able to sit up, my lady? You need to drink this tea.'

'Yes, I think so. I'll give it a try at any rate.' She rolled to her side, and using her arm, she tried to lever herself up, but didn't quite have the strength to follow the movement through. Snape helped ease her up, and she found herself sitting up for the first time in what felt like days. Her body was incredibly sore and restricted in its movements, but there was no real pain. Snape had moved a pillow behind her, so she leaned back gingerly on it. As Snape still had his arm around her, she adjusted her weight so that she wasn't relying on him as much for support.

'It is best to try and move your body as soon as you are able to. Do you feel all right, my lady?'

Hermione nodded. It felt good to be sitting again. Snape removed his arm gently and picking up a cup, handed it to her. Using her left hand to hold it, she slowly sipped at it. The over riding taste was parsley, which luckily she didn't mind. Snape moved from her side and sat back in his chair.

'It's good to be sitting again. It's like everything is getting back to normal.' She sipped the tea again; it was as if her body was hungry for it. 'This is good.' She drained the cup in three big gulps, and he took the cup from her.

'Your body is needing liquids to restore its balance.'

There was a pause, and then Hermione fixed her eyes on Snape's. 'I want to thank you for everything you have done. I know it's not what you want to hear, and you looked uncomfortable when I said it before, but I do need to say that I am in your debt, and if you need anything of me and mine, you only need but ask.' She leaned forward, clumsily moving her heavily bandaged hand, and placed it under his chin, as was the way of showing deep gratitude and indebtedness amongst friends.

The wizard dropped his eyes, and the slightest tinge of pink touched his cheeks. But he covered her hand with his to indicate acceptance of her thankfulness. 'I truly do not deserve this, my lady; I truly do not.' He hesitated as if unsure whether to continue or not, then quietly added, 'It is I that is thankful. Through these unfortunate circumstances, I had an opportunity to act for the betterment of all. That alone allows me to try for an internal equipoise after all the ills I have committed in my time, my lady.' He dropped his head, gently sandwiching her hand between his chest and his hand. Then after a moment, he released it, but his eyes still did not lift. 'I am pleased beyond all measures that it was successful.'

'I am too...I can quite assure you,' said Hermione with a smile. 'I only now understand how ill I was becoming. When I try to think back, it's all quite blurry, and I can only remember pieces yet they somehow don't seem related.'

He looked back at her with his dark eyes and said in a normal tone, 'My lady, you must rest now. We can talk later about what happened. Your body needs rest more than anything.'

Hermione nodded, feeling tiredness flow through her and tendrils of sleep pulling her in. Snape gently eased her back down until her head was on the pillow once again. Sleep engulfed her, and she knew no more.

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Hermione saw swirling oranges, reds and browns through her eyelids that pulled her from sleep. She opened her eyes carefully and squinted at the brightness; it must be the middle of the day. The hut was empty, although there was a fire crackling in the fireplace and cups and saucers on the table. Hermione yawned, very gently moving her head and stretching her stiff muscles. She heard the door click open and glanced over to see a hooded figure pause for a time at the entrance, then scurry in. The person

then stopped with a start, throwing back the hood.

'Hermione, you are awake.' It was Professor McGonagall, who moved quickly beside her. 'How are you feeling?'

'Much better now, Headmistress.' She gently eased herself up into a sitting position, pleased at how much easier the move was to make.

'Good,' the older witch said sharply. 'Professor Snape will be back later this evening to check on you once he has finished his teaching duties. Here is some tea for you to drink. He is concerned about getting nourishment back into you.'

Hermione looked at the Headmistress and was shocked to see how drawn she was. Every one of her many years was etched deeply into her face, and she had an annoyed looking frown. Hermione smelt the tea; it was the same as last night's, so she drank it down hungrily. The professor refilled her cup without looking at her. Feeling more sated, the younger witch took smaller sips, but felt awkward with the silence. The Headmistress seemed different. Aloof, cold, and every so often she would close her eyes as if under considerable strain. Hermione felt guilty at the burden she was placing on Snape and McGonagall, who were both already busy people. She wondered if McGonagall resented her time being taken up like this.

'Thank you so much for being here, Headmistress,' she said, needing to fill the silence.

'You are welcome,' McGonagall curtly replied, but she avoided looking at her, making it seem insincere.

Hermione was baffled at the abrupt change in her, but tiredness flowed through her again, and her body wanted the nourishment of sleep. 'Headmistress, I think I'll just lay down and have another sleep.'

The professor nodded and promptly got up, hurrying away to the kitchen with the teacup and teapot. Hermione closed her eyes and felt the healing sleep take her away.

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Hermione woke when Harry came bursting through the door, his teaching robes flapping, holding a large, brown parcel.

'Hello, Headmistress. Here's the parcel from Snape.'

'Professor Snape,' McGonagall reminded him absently. She was doing something in the kitchen and wiped her hands before taking it

'Yeah, sorry,' came the insincere reply. 'Hey, Hermione, you're awake.'

Harry charged across the room. Hermione was amazed at the vitality in him...he seemed like a burst of sunlight in a closed up room. He looked good too, and the green jumper under his robes made his eyes stand out incredibly. No wonder he was popular with the students.

'Hi, Harry. Yeah, I'm awake...amazing, isn't it?' The witch smiled warmly at him; she really was pleased to see him.

Harry promptly sat down next to her on the bed and stroked her arm sympathetically. 'How are you feeling now? Are you in much pain?' He had such a depth of concern in his voice and his eyes.

'A bit battered and bruised but much better now. I'm so pleased to see you.' Hermione clasped his hand in her good one and gave it a squeeze.

'Yeah, me too.' Harry's face became flushed with emotion. 'You gave me one hell of a fright, Hermione. I thought I was going to lose you too.'

Hermione saw tears well up in his green eyes, and he furiously blinked them away. His intensity of feeling overwhelmed her, and she could feel her own eyes start to fill as well.

'No, no, Harry, it takes a bit more than mere Death Eaters to get rid of me,' she joked, trying to lift the mood.

Harry smiled at her and shook his head slowly. 'You're a tough one that's for sure. Everybody is saying how you've managed to get away with it twice. Once all those years ago and now you've done it again.' He then added half jokingly, 'Have you got some sort of secret weapon we don't know about or something?' 'Cause Voldemort will now be very interested in you.'

Hermione swallowed nervously. 'I think it's a simple thing known as sheer and absolute terror. I never, ever, want to be in those situations again. It was bloody frightening both times.'

'Oh, god, I would imagine.'

'Do you really think Voldemort will be more interested in me now?' Hermione asked with a knot of fear in her stomach.

'That's what everybody is saying. So welcome to my existence. Your world has now been reduced down to the size of Hogwarts and its wards.'

'Oh.' Hermione knew she had to stay close to Harry after her first vision, but the idea of being stuck here made her feel claustrophobic. All she wanted was to work out the visions like usual, advise McGonagall and go back home. Her heart sank.

'Yes, somebody is watching you; otherwise that attack would never have happened. The moment you step outside the wards, I imagine there will be another attack.'

'But I will need to get back home at some stage,' Hermione protested weakly.

'Yeah, but there are only a few Apparation points active down there, so they can easily monitor them.'

'Oh, God.' Hermione realized Harry was right. Nobody had expected her to go South after the first attack, but this time they would know where to wait. Anyway, she reminded herself firmly she *did* have to stay here. The unusual way the visions had been presenting themselves indicated something big was brewing.

Harry rubbed his scar the way he did when he regretted something. *He wasn't supposed to tell me any of this*, realized Hermione.

'And what's this about you having some sort of reaction and being sent out here to the middle of nowhere? That's a new one on me.'

'You and most people. Apparently, it's a rare magical reaction. I don't know a lot about it, but it's to do with different types of magic or something like that,' explained Hermione, deciding to play the topic lightly.

'I've never heard of different types of magic before.'

'Not many people have. Anyway, I'm out of danger, and I'll be right in a couple of days once all my cuts and scrapes have healed.'

'I'm just so pleased you're feeling better.' Harry smiled and then looked up at the darkening room. 'Hey, I've got to chop some firewood before it gets too dark. I'll come back and sit with you when I'm finished. Don't you know I'm only needed here because of my brawn?'

'Well, get to it then, and flex those fine muscles of yours.'

'Now I know you are feeling better,' he said laughing over his shoulder as he peeled his teaching robes off, flung them over a chair and walked out the door.

Hermione eased herself up into a sitting position. She felt a lot better. McGonagall walked towards her with a tray. Hermione had never seen her look so strained before, and the guilt came rushing back. She smiled at the professor and graciously accepted the cup. McGonagall curtly nodded, then promptly went back to the other side of the room and picked up the package that Harry had brought. As Hermione drank her tea, she watched the older witch pause with her eyes closed, as if pulling herself together, and then start walking slowly across the room towards her again. Hermione hoped McGonagall was not becoming sick; her behavior was so strange. She drained her cup and leaned forward to place it back on the tray. She smiled to herself; all these little insignificant movements were becoming easier and easier. Hermione looked up when McGonagall sat down in the chair next to the bed.

'Do you want some more?'

'Yes, please.' She accepted the refilled cup of tea, sipping it slowly.

McGonagall opened the parcel, and Hermione looked curiously at the contents. It was black material. The professor shook out a black cloak. 'These clothes are for you. Professor Snape got them especially made by his tailor.'

'Oh.' Hermione was surprised. Didn't she have some clothes back at Hogwarts? Why would Snape do something like that?

'But before you put them on, I need to sew runes into the inner seams. Good, he sent the book as well.' McGonagall picked up a note attached to the book and started to read.

'Runes? What do you mean?'

'I will leave Professor Snape to explain the details to you, as I don't entirely understand it myself. All I know is that I must follow these instructions exactly and hand sew these runes into every piece of clothing before you use them.' McGonagall looked totally put upon. 'Now, Hermione, if you have finished your tea, I will start this sewing at the table in the stronger light.' She quickly bundled everything together and almost ran back to the other side of the room, but in her haste forgot to take the tray. Hermione was now seriously worried about McGonagall's state of mind.

With a perplexed sigh, Hermione settled herself down and dropped into that lovely netherworld between sleeping and waking. Every now and then, she would hear an exasperated 'Oh Merlin!' or 'By Merlin's Balls!'...but mostly she heard the crackling of the fire and the noise of Harry chopping the wood.

Her eyes snapped open when she heard Harry come loudly through the door.

'Headmistress, are you all right? You look awful!' Harry must have finally noticed. He had his sleeves rolled up and was rosy cheeked.

McGonagall looked up from her sewing with the foulest look on her face. 'Thank you, Mr. Potter. I feel so much better for your astute observations. And I take it you feel fine?' Hermione winced at the ice in her tone, but Harry blithely ignored it.

'I'm fine. I'll make you a cup of tea,' he offered and turned to the kitchen. 'I don't know if there is anything to eat here.'

'Tea will be fine, Mr. Potter,' said McGonagall hastily.

'And you, Hermione? Or are you drinking this medicinal tea here?'

'Medicinal tea for me, thanks.'

'Sure, no problem.'

Waiting for the water to boil on the small wood range, Harry walked back to where the professor sat sewing. 'What are you doing, Headmistress?'

McGonagall frowned over the top of her glasses at him. 'I have to sew these runes into every article of clothing here.'

'I can help if you want me to.'

McGonagall's eyebrows raised in surprise. 'Really?' she said with disbelief in her voice.

'Yes, really. My Aunt Petunia was an avid sewer, and I used to help her when I was younger. I'm actually pretty good. Show me what you need doing, and I'll do it for you if you want, Headmistress. You look like you need to have a rest.'

'Let me see what you can do. This needs to be done accurately.'

Harry shrugged his shoulders. 'Sure.' He sat down next to McGonagall and read the instruction page. 'So, it needs to be sewed using the red, gold, green and blue threads? And it's these runes here?'

McGonagall nodded.

'This is like cross-stitch, actually. Hey, Hermione, please don't tell anyone about this, okay?'

'Yeah, no problem, but I actually think it's sweet,' said Hermione with a smirk.

There was silence as Harry worked on the cloak with McGonagall observing closely. Obviously satisfied with what he was capable of, McGonagall let out a sigh of what sounded like relief.

'So, is this good enough, Professor?'

'It appears so, Mr. Potter. You really have done this before.'

'I'll stay with Hermione and do this if you want, and you can go back to get some rest. It looks like you might be sickening for something.'

Hermione noticed the amount of concern in Harry's voice; he must be close to her after all these years.

'I think I will. I am not feeling well, but I'm pleased that you feel all right, Mr. Potter.'

Hermione thought that was an odd comment and saw Harry frown in puzzlement as well. The professor got up rapidly and left the hut without looking behind once. The kettle started to whistle.

'Hermione, do you still want that tea?'

'Yeah, that would be great. Are you having one?'

'Only the normal sort. Hey, I haven't heard one of these kettles in years.'

'Me neither.'

Harry brought the tea over and handed her a cup. He settled into the chair and started threading the needle with gold thread. 'Why am I doing this again? I didn't think I'd ever be in a situation of needing to put my sewing skills to use again.'

'I'm not entirely sure.' Hermione had an inkling of what it was about, but didn't want to say too much.

'Oh, well, I'm used to these sorts of mysteries after how many years of living at Hogwarts.' He grinned and shook out the black cloak. 'Don't tell me the man in black got you these clothes.'

'No, I don't usually mix in those musical circles...but my mum had all his records.'

Harry snorted and rolled his eyes, but wasn't distracted. 'It's strange that Snape got you these. Although, I dare say I probably could have guessed by the colour and the cut.'

'Yeah, well, he's actually been... very... quite... um... accommodating... really. If it wasn't for him, I doubt I would be alive right now.'

Harry gave a disbelieving grunt. 'Just be careful about him, Hermione. He hasn't changed one bit since our school days. I know...I still work with him. And don't forget what happened to Dumbledore.' He looked like he was about to say more, but only added with a growl, 'Snape is a very dangerous, crafty man, and he is out to do harm...I know it.'

Deciding to drop this prickly topic, Hermione sipped her tea and watched Harry's needle glint in the darkening room as it dove in and out of the material. Occasionally he would pause and recheck the instruction sheet, taking a sip of tea.

'So, Hermione, you must be happy living in the South.'

'Yeah, I am. It's my home now, and I feel I have family again.' Hermione knew Harry understood what it was like to have no family left and the almost instinctual drive to find another one. It was why the Weasleys were so important to him.

'That's just wonderful. I bet you they are nice people too. I have to say I did miss you when you went...it was awful you not just being around. I know Ron missed you heaps, and I think it took him years to really get over you.'

'I missed you guys so much...you have no idea.' Hermione's throat tightened.

'It was a tough time for everyone, but I am happy that you found what you needed.'

'It would be great if you could come and visit me...if and when I get back. I'd love you to meet everyone. I've talked loads about you, and believe it or not, they don't know anything about the famous Harry Potter, so they'll just be meeting you as you.'

'Boy, that would be a first.' Harry grinned and rolled his eyes.

'And besides, it's beautiful down there...warm too. I'd love you to come and see for yourself.'

Harry sighed heavily. 'Yeah, me too, but you know what it's like here. It's a major security operation if I want to go to Diagon Alley to pick a few things up. And London, well, that would take at least six months of advance planning and three high security meetings before it could even be considered.' He then perked up with interest. 'Is it really beautiful? Only, nobody actually talks or writes about what the place is really like.' Hermione knew Harry was being polite by not mentioning what was said.

'It's stunning. Sometimes it's hard to believe it's even real, and the food's great as well. Listen to me, I sound like a travel brochure.'

'No, it's interesting for me. I love hearing about different places...it makes the world seem more real, somehow,' Harry said, glancing up from his sewing with warmth in his eyes. 'Are you still studying? I was awfully impressed with the Latin you used at Ron's service.'

'I am.' Careful now, thought Hermione to herself.

'So, what subjects then?'

'You're never going to believe this.' Hermione chuckled, shaking her head.

'Go on then. I'm waiting.' Harry looked up again with curiosity in his eyes.

'Divination and Ancient Languages.'

'What! No way. I don't believe it. You of all people studying Divination.' Harry roared with laughter. 'This is too good. I now believe that life is full of ironies.'

'Yeah, it's true,' Hermione admitted, laughing, and then pointed out with a smirk, 'Mind you, look at you, the person who hated Snape the most at school is the only one who has ended up working at the same place as him. That's got to be considered a joke too.'

'You are so right, Hermione, and I still hate him,' chuckled Harry, shaking his head, and then he looked skywards and asked, 'Oi, what's going on here?'

'Oh, that's not all. McGonagall has asked me to stay here for a bit to look over the Divination and Ancient Runes curriculum. But I couldn't...'

Harry drowned out the rest of her sentence with laughter, doubling over. After a bit, he calmed down enough to wipe the tears from under his glasses. 'That's one of the funniest things I've heard in ages.' He then added softly, 'Ron would have loved it too.'

'Yeah, he sure would have. Oh, god, I would have so got it from him,' said Hermione with a soft smile. They both thought of Ron in comfortable silence.

'And are you going to take it?'

'Yes. I haven't had a chance to tell McGonagall yet, but I will as soon as I can.'

'It's actually not so bad, is it? I mean, you're going to have to be here for a little while until they figure out what's going on with the security, so it gives you something to do while you are here.' Hermione knew that Harry was trying to be positive to make up for dumping the bad news on her at the onset of the evening.

'That's true, I suppose. How about you? How's the Transfiguration professor coming?'

'It's great, but the theory has been a challenge. I've only got one more thing to submit, and then it's a done deed. I can't quite believe I'll actually be a professor...it sounds so grown up and serious. Mind you, the teaching part is fun...I enjoy that.'

'So, you're going to be Professor Potter. My, my, doesn't that sound grand,' teased Hermione.

'It still sounds very strange to me...I'm not use to the idea yet.' Harry ran his hand through his hair, looking embarrassed.

'Well, you should be. You've worked hard, and you deserve it. I knew you'd do well in whatever you settled on doing.'

'Thanks for that, Hermione; that means a lot to me.'

'What's it like working with McGonagall?'

'She's tough but fair. The good thing is that she never asks me to do anything that she isn't prepared to undertake herself. I've heard some horror stories about apprenticeships, so I guess I'm lucky. It worked out well for both of us actually. McGonagall had just taken over being Headmistress and was in the process of becoming head of the Order, so she was swamped with work. After what had happened, I needed to stay close to Hogwarts and was looking to get an apprenticeship, so it kind of clicked into place really. We actually get on well.' Harry shook out the cloak. 'There, that one is done.' He then unfolded a rather masculine black shirt. 'Oh, aren't you both going to be matching twins then.'

'Ha, bloody ha.' Hermione rolled her eyes. 'I guess they're better than no clothes at all though, which is my present predicament.'

'True enough, I suppose, although if I'd known, I could have tried to get you something a little less black. At least you don't have to worry about mixing and matching.'

'Thanks.' Hermione laughed and finished up her tea, lying back down on the bed, and watched Harry sew.

'So, do you have a significant person in your life?' Harry asked with a mischievous glint in his eye.

Hermione inwardly tensed...what on earth was she going to say? She hated to tell lies, but there was no way she could tell the truth here. 'Ah, well, you see, it's a bit complicated,' she hedged vaguely.

To her relief, Harry grinned in agreement. 'Tell me when it is not? I think that's relationships for you. They are never easy. That old, boring saying, 'you can't live with them...you can't live without them,' is so bloody true. It's the same with me and Gin, but mostly we get on nowadays.'

'I always knew you two would end up together.'

'But that sometimes is part of the problem. Yet I also couldn't imagine my life without her. And there you have it.'

'Hmm, I could see that becoming a pressure. But anyhow, I think it's wonderful that you guys are together. She's such a nice person. I hope I can catch up with her when I get back to Hogwarts.'

Harry looked for a moment a bit hesitant. 'Sure, that would be nice. There you are; the trousers are done as well...you have a complete outfit in black.' He put the clothes back into the brown bag and collected the cups, yawning.

'You haven't had dinner yet, have you?'

'No, I came straight from class, but that doesn't matter.'

'I don't think there is any food here. Honestly, Harry, if you want to go, you can. I am perfectly fine here until Snape comes. I'm just going to sleep.'

'Are you sure? It's just I haven't eaten, and I've got loads of marking to get through. I should have brought it here with me, but I forgot. Also, Gin was sort of expecting me to go over to her family's house tonight as well. I'm sorry about this. If I'd known that I was going to stay, I would have cancelled.'

'No, not at all, Harry. It's really important that you are there for all of them. They'll really need you now. Of course, I'll be fine. But come back and see me when you can. I actually don't know how long I'll be here for, but I really want to make use of my time here and at Hogwarts and see loads more of you.'

Harry leaned over and planted a kiss on her head. 'Yeah, me too. I'll be over as soon as I can get away tomorrow. Are you sure you'll be okay? Sorry about this.'

'Listen...don't worry. I'll be fine.'

'Okay then. I'll see you tomorrow.'

'Goodnight.'

'Goodnight.'

## Thirteen

### Chapter 14 of 22

Seven years after the death of Dumbledore, Hermione finally returns to Hogwarts. What will she find?

Many thanks to my beta, Soul Bound.

Hermione wrapped her cloak around her and tried to get comfortable in the armchair, but couldn't. Her forehead itched like hell, her mouth tasted like a dump, and she knew she stank to high heaven. Her hair was in dreadlocks, her stupid right hand was so heavily bandaged it was utterly useless, the muscles in her back hurt, and she was bored, bored, bored. The problem with being sick, Hermione grumbled, was that at some point, one has to get better. Now, she was utterly grateful for the important fact of being alive, but right now she wanted to go back to that netherworld of blissful unawareness. On second thought, Hermione realized, there was no way she wanted to return to the all-consuming pain. But still, today felt like the real world came crushing in, and she wasn't sure she was up to it yet.

Hermione moved again, trying to ease the muscles in her back, but it was utterly impossible to get comfortable; too many hours of lying on her side, unable to move, had sent her muscles all askew. But she couldn't spend another minute in bed either, and sleep as a means of an escape was unfortunately no longer an option. Not being able to settle, Hermione eased herself slowly out of the chair and sat down on the mat in front of the fire, groaning like an old woman. This was far more comfortable even if the mat smelt old and musty. The cloak she wore was itchy, but she had to have something on other than her silly, skimpy hospital gown, which did nothing to keep her warm or actually cover her at all. Hermione had tried valiantly this morning to put on the black shirt from Snape, but couldn't fit her bandaged hand through the sleeve, and there was no way she could have negotiated the buttons on the trousers. So she was stuck all day wearing her hospital gown with the heavy cloak over it, not that anyone was around to notice, thank goodness. But then again, she was grateful for its warmth when she made the long treks outside to go to the loo. Outside toilets...oh, the joys of rural living.

Hermione had also closely examined the runes Harry had sewn in her clothes at least a hundred times. She'd actually made a fairly good guess at the reasons for them, but was still impressed and surprised at the unique application. When Snape had come by late last night, he'd explained that both the runes and the type of material used acted as an insulating shield between her and the magic prevalent at Hogwarts. Apparently, the type of cloth used was quite rare, so Snape had sent some of his clothes to a tailor to be altered to her size. Hermione had almost laughed out loud when Snape told her that, thinking it must be some sort of joke, her having to wear Snape's clothes, but stopped just in time when she saw the uptight expression on his face.

Snape hadn't stayed long last night but brought with him a delicious, thick broth for her to have. She suspected he had cooked it himself, but he was in distant mood and looked tired, so she didn't feel right asking. Hermione thought he must have been overseeing detentions or had some staff or head of house meeting, as he didn't arrive until late and seemed distracted. He'd efficiently checked her bandaging, brought her the broth and left again shortly. Snape had said that he'd come after class this afternoon to check on her again.

The first part of the morning had actually been okay. She'd woken alert but restless, so she slowly wandered around the hut, exploring and generally poking about. There wasn't anything of interest, not even a book to read. Hermione then started missing her mum, who she always remembered more intensely when she was sick, and that then led on to her thinking about her dad, who had been incredibly supportive of her. It was he who had encouraged her to attend Hogwarts when they'd received that letter all those years ago. The day carried on in an ever-descending spiral of loneliness, homesickness and worry. She missed her people back home, especially her little boy, and wondered indulgently if they were missing her too. Hermione couldn't work out when the Nine-Night feast was, but she knew it must be coming up and found some happiness thinking of them busy with the preparations, abuzz with excited anticipation. She realized with sadness that it would be the first time in seven years she wasn't with them to celebrate it.

Her grief for Ron reawakened, and she wept for him until no tears were left, and she had to have a cup of tea. While sipping on it, Hermione knew with a harsh clarity that Ron's last moments alive would have been awful in their sheer terror. She would never tell anyone, but knew it for the certainty it was. Hermione's hate for Voldemort pulsed through her, tangible in its intensity. Her years away had faded the brutal cruelty of his actions, but she had been sharply reminded again. If it hadn't been for him, Ron would be alive, her Mum and Dad would be alive, Harry's parents would be alive, Dumbledore would be alive, Hagrid would be alive, Percy and Mr. Weasley would be alive and countless others would be alive right now. How many people had had their lives filled with grief and despair because of him? Hermione seethed; what gave him the right to decide if a person should live or die? How dare he even think about trying to kill her? For all the people he had killed and for all the lives shattered as a result of him, she wanted him destroyed out of existence. Hermione knew she was a very different person from who she'd been when she went into hiding all those years ago and pondered long and hard on how to use her skills to annihilate Voldemort. There would be a way...she just knew it.

Her mind turned to the question of how the Death Eaters had known when and where to attack her and Snape. Somebody must have leaked the information out to them...but who? Hermione recalled how Snape had become aware of the Death Eaters' presence in the lane. It was like he was listening into another frequency...one she wasn't tuned for. Hermione found it intriguing in its oddness. She would have been a sitting duck if Snape hadn't been there...that much was obvious.

Hermione realized how grateful she was to Snape. If he hadn't been there both during the attack and afterwards to take care of her, she wouldn't be here right now...plain and simple. Not many wizards could have withstood an attack of that intensity, and even fewer would know about the complexities of the different magic and also be knowledgeable enough to know how to heal her. The young witch understood deeply that Snape had been fated to be with her that day. She decided that she would no longer think of him as Snape the vindictive teacher who tormented students for fun, but would relate to him as she would a member of the circle. It was just too difficult to reconcile the two versions of the same man. In any case, Snape had set the tone by revealing himself to her right from the start and relating entirely to her as a member would to an initiate, never as a teacher to a former student. When Hermione thought about the extreme manner in which the visions revealed themselves to her, she was surprisingly comforted knowing that he was around. She knew the coming weeks would be difficult.

Hermione sighed deeply, bunching up her cloak into a pillow and laying her head down on it. For the first time that day, the muscles in her back relaxed as the fire warmed her. She must have dozed off, as the next thing she heard was the door, and she saw Snape in his full teaching robes stalk into the hut in the same manner he would enter the Potions classroom...his eyes sharply registering everything in the room in one cool sweep. Hermione became aware that she was lying down with her stupid, skimpy hospital gown twisted up around her and quickly sat up covering her legs with the cloak.

'My lady, how are you feeling today?' He lowered himself into one of the armchairs with a flick of his robe and looked carefully down at her sitting in front of the fire.

'Oh, all right, I suppose, my teacher,' Hermione replied, trying to drum up some enthusiasm in her voice. She was sure he wouldn't want to know what a miserable day she'd had after all he'd done to heal her.

Snape must have heard the tone in her voice as he continued looking at her with an eyebrow raised, as if expecting her to carry on, but when she didn't, he asked, 'And the pain?'

'Much better. I've been up most of today and only fell asleep just before you came.' Hermione fiddled with the edge of the cloak, feeling miserable and hating herself for feeling like that.

'That is good. Have you been drinking the tea?'

'Yes, and I finished off the broth as well. I can't seem to do much with my hand bandaged like this; even simple things are difficult.'

'Yes, I would imagine,' Snape said, standing up. 'I will take a look now.'

Hermione got up clumsily from the mat, wrapping the cloak around herself for modesty's sake, moved across the hut and laid down on the bed. Snape had gone to the kitchen to gather the things he needed.

'I will start with the forehead, my lady.' He removed the bandages and wiped antiseptic lotion over it. 'I can take these stitches out.' Hermione closed her eyes, felt the tugging and heard his slow breathing. The wind had picked up outside; she listened to it blowing around the corners of the house and the creaks and groans of the trees in the Forbidden Forest. She remembered that Harry was supposed to call by sometime today. She hoped he wouldn't come while Snape was here...that would be awkward.

'You will feel better with these out, my lady,' Snape commented quietly as he finished putting a lighter bandage over her forehead. He moved onto her wand hand and was starting to unwrap it when the door burst open, and in came a sweating, shirtless Harry, carrying a huge load of firewood.

Ah, he still has the most superb body, sighed Hermione. All those years of Quidditch playing really did amount to something. Oh, shit...Snape...she quickly glanced up and caught him running his eyes appreciatively over Harry's body before his guard came crashing quickly down. So... Snape likes to admire a fine form too, noted Hermione to herself, finding it amusing.

Harry frowned, and his eyes flashed angrily the moment he saw Snape. The Potions master, however, continued to unwrap the bandage as if nobody had entered the hut, but Hermione knew he was acutely aware of Harry.

'Hermione. Professor Snape,' Harry curtly acknowledged as he strode rapidly across the room, dropping the wood in the box with a crash.

'Mr. Potter,' Snape replied briefly without looking up.

'Hi, Harry,' Hermione greeted almost guiltily. She couldn't help feeling as if Harry had caught her with another lover.

'I'll catch up with you later, Hermione, when you are not busy,' he said as he tossed a few stray logs into the wood box.

'Yeah, sure, thanks for doing that.' Hermione smiled at him but felt the electric-like hostility running between Harry and Snape. She could tell that Harry was only being civil because she was present.

'No problems.' Harry gave her a small smile, turned heel and rapidly exited the room, slamming the door loudly behind him.

Snape returned his attention back to her hand and quietly muttered, almost to himself, 'Of course, he is Muggle raised.'

'Sorry, my teacher?' Hermione frowned.

'Because he is Muggle raised, he cannot feel the magic as strongly.' He continued plastering her hand with a cooling lotion.

It was a strange comment for Snape to say about Harry. 'What do you mean, my teacher? I don't understand.' Hermione looked down at her hand. It looked a lot better than it had, and the blistering had gone down considerably.

'Normally, a wizard or witch, even a powerful one, would have difficulties even entering this room, but I now remember Mr. Potter was not wizard-raised.' Snape started rebandaging her hand again.

Hermione was surprised at how neutral Snape was about Harry; she was expecting some sort of hostility towards him, but couldn't detect any. 'So you mean, the magic I reacted to at Hogwarts is similar to what wizards and witches would feel if they come in here?'

'Yes, only they feel it more physically. But generally, Muggle-raised wizards and witches' reactions are not as severe, hence Mr. Potter being able to walk in here seemingly unaffected by it.' Snape finished the bandaging of her hand. 'How does that feel?'

Hermione moved her hand and saw the bandaging wasn't wrapped as thickly, which allowed her fingers some movement. 'Much better, thank you, my teacher. So the magic they feel, where is it coming from?'

'Us...but I have to say mostly you, especially after you had your vision. That was partly the reason I moved you so rapidly away from Hogwarts.'

Hermione sat up and tried to ease her gown forward so Snape could look at the wound on her chest, but got into a tangle.

'Just a moment.' Snape leaned around her, untangled her gown and eased her arm through the sleeve. He smelt of aniseed or fennel or some other potion ingredients. 'Just lie back now.'

Hermione lay down and watched Snape as he peeled off the bandaging. 'I haven't heard or even read anything about this before. Of course, I had some idea about the magic at Hogwarts...I could taste it in the food, but I had no idea that they could sense the magic in me...I mean us.'

Snape looked down his hooked nose at her for a moment, then returned his concentration to unpicking the stitches. 'That is why it will be important for you to always wear the clothes I have provided when you return. They are not only designed to protect you from the type of magic used at Hogwarts, but also to prevent your magic from leaking out and affecting those around you.'

Hermione winced at the tugging and looked down at Snape with his furrowed brow and his rather elegant fingers unpicking her stitches. She thought, it's amazing how people can get used to the strangest things. Here was Snape, inches away from her naked left breast, and she was not heaving in disgust nor reddening in embarrassment, but having a civil, informative conversation with him. Hermione almost shook her head in wonderment, but remembered that she had to stay still. She then asked, 'Is that the reason why Professor McGonagall was acting oddly yesterday?'

'Quite likely. Your magic was flowing strongly as a result of your vision, and then on top of that, I used our magic to heal you. So wizard-raised people like the Headmistress would have struggled to withstand it.'

'But the Headmistress is such a powerful witch,' Hermione stated with surprise.

'Yes, and that is why she was the one I asked to assist me. Any other witch or wizard would have buckled under the strain. I also allowed Mr. Potter to come for that same reason, forgetting that he had the added strength of being Muggle-raised. They were the only people at Hogwarts who were close to you and could possibly withstand it.'

'I didn't know anything about this.' Hermione thought it was interesting that Snape put Harry on par with McGonagall in terms of magical strength and that he allowed Harry to visit her despite the animosity between the two of them.

'Not many people do.' Snape carefully bandaged the long wound. 'Now sit up.' He helped ease her arm through the sleeve again and retied the hospital gown up at the back. 'If you can roll over, I'll have a look at your back.'

Snape quickly changed the bandaging on her back, but with her face in the pillow, it was hard to continue the conversation, so she listened to the wind howling around the hut instead.

Hermione felt the bed move as Snape stood up and moved away. She stiffly rolled over and sat up. Snape was in the kitchen, clearing away the bandages and potions he'd used, so she carefully got out of bed, wrapping the cloak slowly around her again, and went back to the armchair next to the fire.

Snape moved soundlessly over to her and handed her a parcel without meeting her eyes. 'I have collected a few more items that you may need.' He returned quietly to the kitchen.

'Thanks.' Surprised, Hermione untied the string and unwrapped the brown paper. Inside was a neatly folded, black frock coat. She ran her hands over it and felt the same heavy material as her cloak. When she unfolded it, she saw that runes had already been sewn into the velvety lining. Snape must have done that, thought Hermione, laying the coat to one side. She looked back at the parcel and rifled through it. There was a hairbrush, a toothbrush, a long black nightshirt, thick black leggings, several pairs of thick socks, several pairs of black knickers and a couple of bras. Hermione gulped...Snape had got her underwear as well...then shrugged; it was very practical of him, and it looked like he had picked her size with amazing accuracy, which was not surprising really. Everything here was badly needed if she wasn't going to biodegrade into a smelly mess on the floor.

'Thank you very much, my teacher,' she called over to the kitchen. 'I really do appreciate it.'

Snape turned from what he was doing and inclined his head at the thanks. 'I thought you needed a few more things. I know the cut of the clothes are rather old fashioned and somewhat masculine for you, but the only tailor I know who can work with this material is limited in the style of clothes he makes. If I had mentioned your gender to him, I am afraid you would have been wearing corseted dresses with matching bonnets. He is rather stuck in the fashions of his times, but they should fit you well. There will be more articles of clothing coming over the next few days.'

'Thank you, my teacher.' Hermione wasn't really sure what she thought about this, but she knew she was grateful to the wizard for organizing it all for her. 'I hope I haven't used up too much of your clothing.'

'No, not at all. I have acquired a fair amount of it over the years.'

Snape came over to her with a huge basin of steaming water and a towel draped over his arm. 'Unfortunately there is no running water here, so this will have to suffice for washing. I will be cooking outside in the shed should you need anything.' He set down the basin in front of the fire and placed the soap, cloth and towel beside it. He walked over to the fire and threw more logs onto it before leaving with a sweep of his robe.

When the door closed with click, Hermione got up out of the armchair eagerly and went over to the basin, shucking her cloak off quickly. She longed to be clean again and knew that she would feel better for it. The young witch dipped her hand into the water to feel its temperature...perfect...scalding hot, just how she liked it. Hermione then tugged at her hospital gown, but couldn't get it off. Of course, it was tied up at the back. Hermione yanked at it a few more times, but that particular movement hurt her.



'Damn,' she cursed, hating being so reliant on Snape. Hermione stalked over to the door, and opened it. 'Excuse me, my teacher, could you help me for a moment.' Amongst the smell of trees, smoke and dampness, she could smell onions frying.

Snape strode over, his robes flapping and his black hair pulled back from his face. 'Everything all right, my lady?' He looked at her sharply, but there was no annoyance in the look.

'Um, just a bit of a problem with getting this gown off, my teacher.' Hermione shivered in the cold air.

'Of course, come inside.' Snape entered the hut. 'Turn around, my lady.'

Hermione felt him untying her gown. 'I can't even get this off by myself. Thank you, my teacher.'

'Everything will improve as your wounds heal. But now that I think of it, you may have some difficulties with the quantity of buttons in your new clothes. The tailor insists they are an important part of the shield, but I think he uses them as a way of tormenting me. I was not very nice to him at one stage.'

Hermione sniggered at Snape even admitting his ill temper and felt the cold air on her back as the last of the ties were undone.

'There you are, my lady. Try not to get the bandaging too wet. Is there anything else?'

'No, thank you, my teacher.'

Snape nodded and left the room, shutting the door firmly behind him.

Hermione returned to the basin next to the fire, and even though it was hardly a luxury bath, it certainly felt like one to her as she picked up the soap and used it to work up a lather in the flannel. Washing herself from a basin reminded her of the method used in the dry areas of the South. Stepping out of her hospital gown with considerable relief, she slopped the warm water all over her body; it felt like she was washing away all the torment of the last couple of days. Feeling much cleaner afterwards, she dug out the nightshirt, leggings and socks and managed to put them on without too much difficulty, then went over to the kitchen to clean her teeth.

She felt a lot better, but still had the underlying restlessness that had pursued her all day. On the spur of the moment, Hermione pulled on her thick cloak and opened the door to walk out to the shed. The night air smelt nice, and it was so good to be outside the hut...she'd started to feel too confined in there. The wind whipped at her robes, and she pulled the hood over her head as she padded along the path. She smelt fish cooking, and her mouth watered. Hermione could see Snape stirring the cauldron in a relaxed manner through the open door.

'My lady, what are you doing out here?' He looked up sharply.

'I thought I'd come and see what you are doing. I hope you don't mind, my teacher. I was just sick of being in the hut.' Hermione hesitated, not sure if she should have come. Maybe she was intruding on his private time. She saw a play of different emotions run across his face but was unable to interpret any of them.

At last he gestured gracefully to her. 'Come in out of the cold, my lady.'

Hermione squeezed past him to get into the small, narrow room, which was no bigger than a small garden shed. It only consisted of a fire, above which was the cauldron with two benches on either side, and very little standing room.

'What are you cooking, my teacher?' Hermione asked, peering into the cauldron.

'Sole with mushrooms and capers.' He looked down at her closely. 'I think it would be best, my lady, if you sit down. While I understand you wanting to have a change of scenery, I do not want there to be any regression in your condition.'

Hermione looked about; there was nowhere for her to sit. Snape put his hands on her shoulders, guiding her to one side of the fire, and without any warning, lifted her effortlessly onto the clear corner of the bench and turned back smoothly to the cauldron. Hermione leaned against the wall, watching him take a bottle of wine and uncorking it with a practiced ease.

Snape glanced up at her, taking in her raised eyebrows, and eloquently shrugged his shoulders in the most Southern manner. 'It calls for it in the recipe.'

Hermione grinned. 'Of course.'

He pulled out two battered tin mugs and poured the wine into them.

'Do you think it will be all right?' Hermione asked, although wine sounded like a great idea to her.

'I think a small amount will do no harm. You are no longer taking any potions that would react adversely to it,' Snape said, handing her the mug. 'Best I can do, given these rustic conditions.'

'That's quite all right.' She watched him pour some wine into a bowl and add flour to it. 'Oh, I forgot. Cheers, my teacher.' And she lifted her mug to him.

Snape touched his mug to hers with a decided metallic clunk and said, 'To successful outcomes.'

'To successful outcomes,' replied Hermione, smiling. She took a sip from the mug, enjoying the taste of the dry white wine. There was a comfortable silence with only the crackling of the small fire and the howl of the wind around the hut. Snape was concentrating on stirring the ingredients in the bowl.

'Do you feel better for bathing, my lady?' Snape asked while adding the wine and flour mixture gently into the cauldron.

'Most definitely. It also feels nice to have clean clothes on.'

'Yes, I could well imagine. Once you return to Hogwarts, you will be able to have a proper bath. It is more difficult here with no plumbing.'

'Oh, no, it was fine,' Hermione absently assured. But the mention of plumbing sent her mind plunging back to the vision she had of Hogwarts under flood. It was the most intense, most horrible vision she had experienced. 'My teacher?'

'Yes?' Snape looked at her and must have read something in her face as he set down the ladle.

'When you drew me back that night, did I talk to you about where I'd been?' Hermione couldn't recall much other than the flood vision, but had a feeling of being embarrassed about something.

Snape leaned back on the bench and looked at her contemplatively. 'Yes, you did, my lady.' He looked about to say more, but stopped.

Hermione swallowed nervously at how she could have possibly reacted in her distressed state, but at the same time, she felt relieved that she'd instinctively trusted Snape enough to tell him. It meant that she could talk about the vision with him. 'He knew you were there to draw me back. He's never done something like that before.' Hermione looked down at the chipped mug.

'Really?' Snape sounded genuinely surprised.

'Yes, he knows of you. He has even got a name for you.' Hermione looked up again and saw Snape's black eyes full of curiosity.

'Really? Are you able to tell me what it is, my lady?'

Hermione smiled at Snape's rare, open expression of interest. 'Man of spring water. It's the way he sees people. I know it sounds strange, but it's hard to explain. When I am with him, it seems normal, and it's only when I talk about it that it sounds weird...not that I usually talk about it, actually.'

'No, no, it does not sound strange to me, my lady. I was honoured that you trusted me enough to tell me what you saw, but now to hear that he knows of me and on top of that has a name for me, well, I feel truly privileged.' Snape lowered his head in respect, then picked up the wine bottle and topped up her mug. 'If I may ask, how does he know me?' Snape set the wine bottle back down and absently tucked a stray lock of hair behind his ear and away from his face.

'He noticed you in the lane during the attack. That was when he first named you. He sees all humans primarily as elements.'

'Is that how you both killed the Death Eaters? That was a sight I have not seen before.' Snape leaned on the bench she was sitting on, his eyes glinting.

'Yes, and I have to say he wasn't impressed with your death curses,' Hermione said, remembering how dismissive of it he was.

'I am not surprised, considering the magic you both used. A death curse is mere child's play in comparison.' Snape smiled, shaking his head.

'When I am with him, it doesn't feel like that...it feels right somehow. Although, taking anyone's life is never done lightly.'

Snape nodded in agreement and took a sip out of his mug.

Hermione frowned in annoyance at her own incessant need to know. 'I hope I was all right after you drew me down.'

Snape looked thoughtfully at her and finally, after a time, answered her honestly. 'You were distressed, and it took some time for you to settle back into this reality...you did not want to come back...you wanted to stay with him.'

Hermione flushed as the images poured into her. Yes, that was why she had the feeling of embarrassment; she had behaved like an ungrateful child. 'I am sorry, my teacher. I don't usually behave like that.'

Snape placed his hand on her arm and gently chided her. 'Don't you apologize, my lady. You had been through a traumatic vision, and you did not even have a single person in support. I doubt many people could do what you do and still function in society. In addition, you had a curse eating into your back, putting your physical body under considerable stress. Do not ever apologize again...it is not right nor necessary.'

It was as if Snape's unexpected gentleness pierced her tightly held emotions, and to her horror, she felt her cheeks burn and her eyes start to well up. Hermione couldn't believe how out of control her body was and tried fiercely to beat down these emotions, wiping her hand over her face before she gave anything away. What was it about Snape? But Snape must have noticed, and she felt his arms go around her and was pulled in close to him, smelling the wood smoke on his robes. But that only made matters worse as now her nose started to run, and she had to sniff furiously.

'Here.' Snape put a black handkerchief into her hand, but didn't let go of her.

Hermione wiped her nose; she must have looked a right sight. 'I am so sorry, my teacher; I normally never cry for anything. I really don't know what has come over me these last few days. I am usually much stronger than this.'

He rolled his eyes at her and said in tones reminiscent of her former Potions master, 'I do not think you heard what I last said, my lady, about apologizing. Trust me...if I thought you needed to, I would be the first one to tell you.'

'Oh, yeah, sorry.... Oh, shit, I didn't mean that.' Hermione stumbled out, kicking herself at her stupidity, but was pulled into Snape's arms again, and she rested her head on his shoulder. It felt nice.

After a bit, Snape straightened and asked curiously, 'Are all your visions this intense, my lady?'

Hermione shook her head. 'No, nothing is working to a pattern. Even the manner in which the visions are coming to me is different. It's hard to fathom meaning without references. And yet their intensity tells me of their importance, which means it is vital for me to decode them. It's been frustrating because since the attack, I haven't been able to put any thought into them, and they nag me constantly.'

'Have you had any other visions since coming to Hogwarts?'

'Yes.' And she recounted her Harry as a child on the beach vision to him.

Snape took a sip of wine and commented, 'It seems Mr. Potter is an important person in what is to unfold.'

Hermione noted how neutrally Snape talked about Harry. She would never have known how they hated each other by his tone of voice. 'That's what I had worked out. So when McGonagall offered me a position here, it confirmed it even more.'

Snape frowned. 'But how, I wonder? It goes against the belief that he has no more role in this battle than anyone else.'

Hermione shrugged her shoulders resignedly. 'I honestly don't know, my teacher. This is the first time I haven't been able to work out my visions within a matter of hours.'

Snape stroked his chin contemplatively. 'The fact that it is you that has come could also be a factor in this as well.'

His comment triggered a bout of furious thinking. 'It's about Voldemort,' she said, then paused, unsure, 'but that can't be right, yet he's the reason I am here. He killed Ron. He's who we all thought Harry was to battle even if nobody believes it any more. Voldemort and Harry are linked if by Harry's scar and nothing else. I don't know how, but it has to be. Then there was what Voldemort did to me and my family.' Hermione stopped, not wanting to talk about what had happened all those years ago.

Snape nodded slowly. 'I think you are right. Your visions are somehow about the Dark Lord.'

Hermione tapped on her cup thoughtfully and noticed her ragged fingernails absently. 'But don't you think it's strange, my teacher, that the Southern ways are involving themselves with this wizarding society? It doesn't make sense.'

'It is not entirely surprising to me, my lady.' And for the first time that evening, Hermione noticed Snape's body tense as he moved away from her. 'The Dark Lord has had a fascination with Southern magic for some time, and he has a working understanding of its power.'

Hermione frowned. 'But for Southern magic to become involved, it must have been used enough for a pattern to be established.'

Snape dropped his eyes from hers. 'I do believe the Dark Lord is conversant in Southern magic enough to use it.'

Hermione swallowed at the horrifying thought. 'Oh. That changes everything, doesn't it?'

'Yes, my lady, I do believe it does.' Snape's face was expressionless.

Hermione would need to think carefully about these developments and was pleased that she could talk with Snape, although it was obvious he was edgy about something. Then she remembered what Harry had said last night. 'Harry told me I may have to stay at Hogwarts for a while.'

'Did he now?' Snape looked sharply at her.

'He said that Voldemort would be very interested in me now and that there could be an attack the moment I step outside Hogwarts' wards.' Hermione beat down her deep longing to see her brown little boy again.

Snape sighed. 'I must agree with Mr. Potter, although I abhor his lack of discretion. Yes, the Dark Lord will be interested in you now after the attack in the lane. It will be obvious to him, especially after the peculiarities that occurred during the first attack on you, that you are involved in Southern magic at a very deep level. He is invariably lured by any great power, and since Southern magic holds great fascination to him, you would be a great asset to him. I imagine your every move will be monitored.'

Hermione looked sharply at the black robed wizard and felt compelled to ask, 'Not by you, I hope, my teacher?'

Snape swallowed nervously, but looked her directly in the eye for a moment. Then completely unexpectedly, he leaned in and kissed both her cheeks in the manner of close friends and whispered into her ear, 'No, my lady, I give you my oath. No matter what it seems, I will never to do anything to place you or yours in danger. Moreover, I give you my oath to protect you and yours.'

Hermione nodded and automatically kissed his cheeks in return as acceptance of his oath.

Snape straightened and moved over to check the contents of the cauldron. 'This is now ready, my lady.' And he deftly poured the fish and the creamy sauce into a dish.

Hermione smiled. 'It smells delicious.'

Snape moved back to her and smoothly lifted her down from the bench. Hermione wrapped her cloak firmly around her and paused at the door to allow Snape walk through first.

## Fourteen

### Chapter 15 of 22

Seven years after the death of Dumbledore, Hermione finally returns to Hogwarts. What will she find?

Many thanks to my beta, Soul Bound.

Hermione idly tested the mobility of her fingers by trying to twirl the quill, but dropped it with a clatter on the desk in front of her. At least it didn't send ink splats over the heavy parchment she was reading through. Although her wand hand now had a considerably lighter bandage, she still had difficulty writing legibly for any length of time, and that frustrated her. Reading through the second-year Divination syllabus made her itch to write the lists of improvements needed...she could sail battleships through the number of holes in it. Adjusting her robes on her shoulders, Hermione looked about the deserted staff room. It was a funny place to find herself. She'd tried working in her beloved library, but was disappointed when the constant use of magic had made her head cave in with the pressure, so in the end, McGonagall set up a desk for her in the corner of the staff room.

Hermione enjoyed being able to observe the professors ebb and flow out of the room in the rhythm of the teaching timetable. Sometimes they would come in and moodily grab a cup of tea, slouch down in a chair and look dazedly into space. Other times they would come in and rant about the stupidity of the students or discuss a tricky question asked, and yet at other times there would be a whirlwind of witty repartee, which Hermione loved dearly but never participated in. And that really summed up the week she'd been here, wanting to enjoy it but invariably feeling uncomfortable, isolated and never able to join in. Of course, Hermione had a ton of reading to get through, and that made the days go by, but it was the lack of any social contact in a school full of people that wore her down and made her feel lonely. The professors avoided her at all costs. It hurt her when Professor Sprout and Professor Hooch almost fell over themselves to not be near her, and even Professor Flitwick could only manage a reserved hello without meeting her eyes. After the third day, Hermione gave up trying to be social; she couldn't stand seeing any more pained expressions on people's faces.

Harry and McGonagall were the golden exceptions to the rule. They both sought out her company whenever they could, but she understood they were both busy...Harry with his final submissions as well as his teaching and McGonagall with both Hogwarts and Order obligations. Hermione felt appreciative whenever they came over to chat with her, and it helped her self-confidence considerably that they seemed to actually enjoy her company. Harry had obviously allowed time in his busy schedule, and he met with her daily after class; it was a time Hermione looked forward to. He even wanted her to read through one of his drafts, which she happily did. She saw McGonagall a lot less, but when they did meet, the professor always asked her careful questions about the content of the current curriculum and seemed to listen attentively to her comments.

Hermione had only seen Snape once since returning to Hogwarts. They passed each other in the corridor on her second day back, but he didn't alter his quick pace and only curtly nodded at her...without meeting her eyes. Over the following few days, she had expected some form of contact, but as the days wore on, the witch realized sadly that he had no intentions of getting in touch with her. Hermione lectured herself strongly that Snape had merely done what McGonagall had asked him to do, and now that he had met his obligations, he wanted no more to do with her. However, she slowly started to feel resentment towards Snape. He knew the urgency needed in decoding her visions and the high level of trust she had placed in him. So for him not to contact to her, even if it was just to talk about the visions and nothing else, was truly bad form.

Other than that one incident, Hermione never saw him anywhere...not even in the staff room. She did, however, hear a lot about Snape. He seemed to be the subject of a lot of hushed conversations everywhere. Hermione was shocked by the palpable hatred and fear directed at him...it had certainly gone up a dozen notches since she was a student. She was sure it was only the iron hand of McGonagall that kept it all in check. Virtually everyone at Hogwarts still believed Snape had killed Dumbledore for Voldemort and that he should have had the Kiss. But it was the younger professors led by Harry, especially, that were the most vocal and bloodthirsty. The older professors kept strangely silent whenever it was being discussed.

Actually, to say Hermione had no contact with Snape was incorrect. Each morning, a sweating house-elf delivered a basket of food to her. Hermione was positive with all the muttering the elf was doing that it was swearing at her because it had to physically climb the stairs rather than just pop in and out by magic. The moment she saw the type of food in the basket, she knew it was Snape who had prepared it. Cheeses, pickles, unleavened bread, dried figs, apples, preserved meat and bottles of untainted water, enough for three meals and everything meticulously presented. The quality of the food also confirmed what she already knew from eating the fish he'd cooked in the shed. The combined knowledge of potions and cooking had produced a talented chef in Snape. Luckily, Hermione wasn't required to sit at the teachers' table for meals and was able to savor the food in her small room.

Hermione felt her head starting to thump, so she adjusted the black pointed hat more securely. The clothes Snape had provided were perfect for the chilly Hogwarts

environment and obviously worked at keeping its oppressive heaviness at bay, even if they didn't allow her to project any femininity. She really did feel like a mini Snape when she walked down the corridors with her cloak flapping and people moving sharply out of her way. The young witch avoided looking at herself in the mirror as well because when she did catch glances at herself, she was horrified at how pale and thin she had become. Her injuries really had taken a toll on her body.

Hermione startled when Harry came bounding into the room, looking resplendent in his maroon dress robes.

'Are you ready, Hermione?' But when he saw the look on her face, he added with mock ferocity, 'You're not getting out of it, so don't even attempt it.'

Hermione groaned. She'd really hoped nobody would notice that she wasn't there. Tonight was the annual Halloween Ball, and for the entire week, Hogwarts had been abuzz with excitement about it. Now, normally, Hermione would usually have been up for any type of festivity, but the combination of the head splitting pressure from the magic and the feeling of complete social isolation meant she was rather disinclined to stand around watching everybody else having fun.

'I don't have anything to wear,' Hermione feebly protested as Harry pulled her up by her arm and dragged her out the door.

'Sorry, that doesn't cut it as an excuse. Everybody has to be there...that's what McGonagall stipulated, so that means you too.' He gave her the once over and smirked. 'You look fine if a bit masculine. Now come on...otherwise we're going to be late.'

When they entered the Great Hall, Hermione's jaw dropped at how breathtakingly spectacular it looked. 'Wow, it looks wonderful.'

'Yeah, Professor Flitwick improves every year in his decorating.' Harry kept a firm grip on her arm and marched her through the students nervously milling about in their finery, up to the teachers' table and sat her down. 'I'll get us a drink, and don't you move.'

Hermione politely nodded her hellos to Professor Sinistra on one side of her and sighed when the woman nervously edged her chair away from her and avoided meeting her eye. That's a great start to the evening, the young woman thought despondently. It was such a stark contrast to how she was normally treated when she went to festivals in the South. Oh, well, Hermione mentally shrugged; Harry wanted her to be here, which made her feel nice. Looking at all the beautiful dress robes, she quietly assured herself that at least there was a certain formality about her clothes that made up for their lack of finery and femininity. They were what someone would call a classical style, and at least with her hat, she didn't have to worry about the tangled knots also known as her hair. There were still certain movements that caused her chest wound to hurt, and unfortunately brushing her hair was one of them. She glanced along the teachers' table and saw McGonagall talking animatedly to Flitwick and then spotted Snape sitting by himself at the other end of the table. Hermione felt a flash of anger at him. While she knew he was busy with teaching, it didn't mean he had to have no contact with her at all. The band started up, and Hermione smiled when she saw the excitement it caused the students. What it would be like to be back again as a student, she wondered.

'Here you are.' Harry handed her a mug of butterbeer and sat down next to her. 'Can you feel the amped up vibes of all these hormonal teenagers?'

'I sure can. It makes me feel so old.' Hermione smiled, shaking her head as they watched a group of beautiful, young witches giggling and casting coy glances over at a cluster of young wizards nearby. 'Were we ever that young?'

'It's hard to believe, isn't it?' Harry said and then smiled at a young witch waving to him.

'Where's Ginny? Is she coming tonight?' Hermione asked after taking a sip of butterbeer, frowning at the metallic taste.

'She's having to work late, but hopefully she'll pop in a bit later.'

The band started a catchy tune, and the students flooded the dance floor. Hermione was hot under all her layers, but knew that under no circumstances could she even push up the sleeves of her robes. She didn't want to empty the Great Hall in minutes...although that was one way to get Snape to notice her, she sniggered to herself.

'Come on.' Harry leaped up, pulling her up by her hand. 'We can't sit and be boring...we're not that old yet.'

Laughing, she allowed herself to be dragged onto the dance floor, feeling the teachers' and students' eyes on them. Too bad, Hermione thought; she liked dancing, and besides, she and Harry always danced well together. Feeling the beat, she looked up at Harry, and they smiled happily at each other when their bodies automatically moved so beautifully with each other. When the song drew to the end, she said breathlessly, 'That was the most fun I've had in ages.'

'See, I was right making you come here.' Harry grinned in return. They were walking back to their seats when a beautiful, dark student witch interrupted them hesitantly and asked if Harry would like to dance with her. Hermione smiled at the blush on the girl's cheeks and saw the girl's friends giggling from a distance. Harry grinned and shrugged his shoulders. 'You don't mind, do you, Hermione?'

'No, of course not, Harry. Go for it,' encouraged Hermione, feeling sweaty under her copious black layers.

Harry turned and smiled brilliantly at the young witch. 'Shall we?' he said and led her back onto the dance floor. Hermione swore the dark haired witch almost swooned with delight.

Hermione sat back down again and sipped her butterbeer, trying to cool down. Professor Sinistra quickly moved away from her and struck up a conversation with Professor Hooch further down the table.

'Hello, Hermione, I'm so pleased you could make it,' said Professor McGonagall, walking quickly up to her with a glass in her hand. 'I saw you dancing with Harry. You both made a fine sight.'

'Thank you, Headmistress. It was fun dancing with Harry again,' replied Hermione warmly. 'The Hall looks so beautiful, and I love seeing the students dressed up so elegantly.'

The Professor looked over the Great Hall proprietarily. 'Yes, it is a beautiful sight.' Then something caught her attention. 'Now, if you could excuse me, I need to have a word with Professor Sprout about the alcoholic content of that punch.'

Hermione resumed sipping her butterbeer and looking idly out at the Great Hall. She felt her face become pinched with disapproval at the decadence of using magic to float pumpkins above the dance floor. What an overindulgence to use magic like that. No wonder their society was out of balance. Her eyes ran down the familiar, huge house banners that hung majestically down the sides of the hall. It was funny, she thought; she had never seen them before as Southern symbolism, but they most definitely were. Gryffindor was fire; Ravenclaw was air; Hufflepuff was earth, and Slytherin was water. It was so blindingly obvious now that she'd made the connection, and the witch admired how each house symbol was so masterfully done. The founders of Hogwarts must have been conversant in Southern magic for them to adopt such strong symbols, and perhaps it had happened when things were more harmonious between the two communities all those centuries ago.

The music stopped, so Hermione looked over and saw that another young witch had asked Harry to dance the next song with her. He really was popular, she thought, but then again, she wasn't surprised. After watching him for a week, he really did have an almost pop star charisma about him, which he was cutely unconscious of. Finishing off her butterbeer and without anything else to do or anyone to chat to, she decided to slowly wander over and get herself another drink. As she worked her way across the crowded room to the drink table, Hermione found that the people quickly parted for her, and she was given many sharp sideways glances. Frowning, Hermione poured herself another glass of butterbeer and quickly smoothed her forehead; a surly look would hardly help matters. She glanced about and saw Snape standing alone, strict and imposing, near the teachers' table.

Without anyone else to talk to, Hermione started walking over to him and was mortified when he started moving away from her. He must have seen her; he was the most observant man she had ever met. Why didn't he want to be seen with her?, thought Hermione angrily, and she charged right over and caught up to him.

'Good evening, Professor Snape,' she greeted, looking up at him angrily.

Snape looked coolly down at her and nodded his head. 'Miss Granger,' he acknowledged.

Hermione couldn't believe it when he went to move again. Outraged, Hermione grabbed his arm and asked, 'Have I done something, sir, to upset you? Why don't you want to talk to me?'

Snape paused, and his eyes flicked about to make sure nobody was observing them before looking down at her with an odd expression. 'It is for the best, Miss Granger.'

'What?' Hermione frowned...she hadn't expected a reply like that.

'Believe me, Miss Granger...you will thank me for it,' Snape added more softly.

Hermione felt truly hurt...as odd as it was, she had missed Snape's presence this last week. 'But why?' she asked miserably; she didn't want to be shunned by anyone else.

Snape looked down at her steadily for a moment, then sighed. 'Come, Miss Granger. Let us walk.'

He guided her out of the Great Hall and into the gardens. The beat of the music drifted about in the still night air along with squeals of delight and peels of laughter. Hermione liked the cold air on her face after the heat of the Great Hall. They passed several amorous couples who quickly parted and disappeared when they saw Snape coming. Hermione looked up and saw the almost full moon hanging huge in the cold sky. It cast a silvery light over the hedges and the gardens. Snape guided her to a garden bench near the fountain and sat down next to her. There was a gentle sound of trickling water coming from the fountain.

'So, why, sir?' Hermione asked softly again, looking down at her hands.

Snape sighed heavily again and ran his fingers through his hair, pulling it back from his face. 'I thought, my lady, it would be best for your integration into Hogwarts if I kept my distance from you. You may need to be here for some time,' he replied in the ancient tongue.

Hermione was pleased that he was talking to her in the ancient tongue but was horrified at what he was saying. 'For your information, my teacher, it probably hasn't made a blind bit of difference. I'm hardly what you call a social success here either. If it wasn't for Harry and McGonagall, I doubt I would have spoken or been spoken to this entire time.' The witch felt her temper rising. 'I absolutely hate it here. I hate how everyone avoids me. I hate how they can't even look at me without a disgusted look on their faces. I hate that they can't do a single thing without resorting to magic. I hate how nobody wants to even talk to me...including you, my teacher.' Then her anger vanished instantly, and she was left with only a deep sadness.

Snape shifted uneasily next to her, and Hermione looked up at his silhouetted profile...he really did have a large, hooked nose. 'Any association you have with me will only further isolate you. I know by experience that it has a potential to become a lot more hostile for you. You could possibly lose your friendship with Mr. Potter by openly associating with me,' he explained softly in his deep voice.

Hermione paused, fully understanding now that Snape, by keeping his distance, was putting her welfare first. Then her ire rose again. 'I do appreciate it...I really do...and I understand now why you stayed away from me, my teacher, but I don't agree with it. I don't...it isn't right. I don't care what they think nor what they do.'

She heard him chuckle softly. 'Always a Gryffindor...more loyalty and bravery than brains.'

Hermione carried on indignantly, ignoring that snide comment. 'But it's wrong, my teacher, completely wrong. What right have they got to tell me who can and can't be my friends? Who are they to judge? And you are my friend, so they will just have to wear it.'

Snape turned and looked quizzically down at her; he was completely still for a moment.

'It's true, my teacher.' She then stopped for a bit and added reflectively, 'And I do consider you my friend, so it's right for me to call you that...if it is agreeable to you.'

Changing titles meant that their entire syntax would change from formal to familiar. It was a shift that was never done lightly.

Hermione felt Snape's warm hands encircle hers. 'I would be most agreeable, my lady.'

Hermione smiled at him, trying out the new title. 'Good. I am pleased as well, my friend.' A soft breeze picked up, and Hermione sat back on the bench and felt a wave of homesickness flow through her. 'How I want to go home. Everybody will be busy preparing for the feasts now...it's always so much fun.'

Snape looked up at the almost full moon. 'I would be honoured, my lady, if you could celebrate it with me. It would be a serious breach for me not to honour you and yours on this most holy night.' He then glanced wryly at her. 'And I would also like your company as a friend. I have not celebrated the Nine Nights for a very long time.'

'I and mine accept the invitation for the feast of the Nine Night.' Hermione then added with a grin, 'My friend.'

'Good.' Snape sighed, releasing her hands, and sat back comfortably on the bench, their shoulders touching, and he looked over the moonlit paths. 'I've been thinking about your visions, my lady.'

Hermione was instantly alert. She had yet to make any sense of them, and they continued nag at her, but so far to no avail.

Snape continued in his deep voice. 'I do believe they are, as you surmised, about the Dark Lord. Then I thought about what you said about him seeing things primarily as elements. I applied that to your visions, and the common element in both your visions is water. The Dark Lord is represented by water.'

'Wow,' Hermione said with awe. It always seemed so obvious once something was worked out.

'It also makes sense from what I know as well. He is completely correct to represent the Dark Lord as water...it really is his element.'

Hermione noted it was the first time Snape even mentioned his association with Voldemort.

'There is something about how the water and Mr. Potter interact that might tell us more, but I am still not clear on it,' Snape mused out loud.

'The first dream was about a very young Harry at the beach. He didn't like the water, so I picked him up and held him. He then said the water took his mother away.'

'I suppose if we concentrate on Mr. Potter, we might come up with something. How do you think he felt?'

'Harry was petrified of the water; he was trembling in my arms.'

'But why?'

'Because the water took his mother away.'

'That could be it. Mr. Potter is petrified of the Dark Lord because the Dark Lord killed his mother.'

'That makes sense. Harry saw Voldemort kill his mother, and even if he can't remember it now, part of him saw and understood what happened that day. It's bound to have a traumatic affect on him.' She then added, 'And Harry was unable to move away from the water or do anything. I had to pick him up.'

'He was so fearful that he was unable to move. This makes sense if we apply it. Because of his deep-seated fear of the Dark Lord, Mr. Potter is unable to move or act

against him.'

'And it was just gentle lapping waves...nothing awful at all in comparison to the other vision. So I suppose you could interpret that as meaning the fear in Harry's head is worse than Voldemort himself.... That's a crazy thought.'

'But Mr. Potter is a powerful wizard,' said Snape honestly. 'It could be true that he is destined to battle with the Dark Lord after all. And if Mr. Potter could overcome his fear, there is every chance that he'll succeed.'

They both sat there in stunned silence at their revelations.

'It was you who picked him up, my lady. What did he do after you lifted him up?' Snape asked quietly.

'He relaxed straight away.'

'I would say that you have a role to play in what is to unfold, my lady. It was you who took his fears away.'

'But how?' questioned Hermione, tucking a stray lock under her hat.

'I don't know, my lady,' admitted Snape, shrugging his shoulders.

'What do you think about the other vision?'

'I think we have worked out a pattern here. So from what you told me, and from what I can remember, all of your second vision was in Hogwarts.'

'Yes, that's right. The whole of Hogwarts was flooded. I thought it was the plumbing.'

'What does Hogwarts mean to you, my lady?' Snape turned and gazed down at her.

Hermione sighed and rubbed her eyes warily. 'I'm not sure. I used to love it when I was a student, but now I don't know. I can now see that there are certain inherent problems in the place that I never saw when I was a student. These problems, I suppose, are the same in the wider wizarding community.'

'Could we say that Hogwarts is a symbol of the wizarding community to you?' he conjectured.

Slowly Hermione nodded her head. 'That sounds right. For a long time, Hogwarts was all I knew of wizarding society. It was how I was introduced to it after all. So Hogwarts represents wizarding society...yes, that's right.'

Snape drummed his long fingers on his knee in thought. 'But the way the Dark Lord was represented in this vision is so different from the gentle waves.'

'That's it!' exclaimed Hermione. 'How can water destroy? By flooding and rotting. Voldemort is destroying the wizarding society by overwhelming it with his strength...he is flooding it.'

Snape added quietly, 'The Dark Lord is purposely keeping Mr. Potter weak by rotting him so that he is ineffectual and his strength isn't recognized.'

'His rotten hand...yes. Because if Harry's power is recognized, he would be able to destroy Voldemort easily...and Voldemort knows it,' finished Hermione.

They both sat there in stunned silence, processing their conclusions. Pulsing music and raucous laughter wafted through the trees towards them; it sounded like the ball was at its zenith. Then Snape stretched his legs and rolled his shoulders to ease the tension in them. 'We now have to work out how to allay Mr. Potter's fears of the Dark Lord...that is the next logical step before we can think how to strengthen him. This will require some thought.'

Hermione tried holding back a snort of amusement at the thought of Snape having to consider Harry's fears.

Snape must have known what she was thinking, however, as he dryly pointed out, 'I do see the irony of this situation, my lady.'

She glanced up at him and was surprised to see a smile playing on his lips. He was able to mock himself...wonders never cease, she thought.

'I am so pleased I was able to discuss this with you, my friend. You are as strong as any circle. Why were you not searched out? It seems very strange to me...you have such natural power, and you would be sorely needed. It's like I have discovered gold, finding you here.'

'It wasn't meant to be, my lady,' muttered Snape quietly, and he dropped his eyes from her.

'I didn't mean to pry. I wasn't questioning you, but rather I was complimenting you. I do believe I was fated to meet you and your hidden talent,' she quickly assured, knowing she'd unexpectedly hit a sore point.

Snape nodded in acknowledgement of her clarification and compliment. 'I am pleased I was where I was so we could meet. I am also pleased that I am able to help you and yours.' And then he added in far softer tones, 'However, I will continue to have nothing to do with you while you are at Hogwarts. You do not want to have any known associations with me. It would make life difficult for you.'

Hermione nodded, recognizing the truth in what he was saying. 'I understand, even if I don't agree. But I am happier knowing the reason why we will not meet. My imagination was getting away on me. I thought I had offended you somehow or that you were like everybody else and found me repulsive too.'

Snape abruptly turned to her. 'That was never the case, my lady. You could never be repulsive to me.' He straightened quickly...almost pulling himself into check. 'I should be returning to the ball...otherwise the Headmistress might notice my absence. I need to be there for my Slytherins. I will escort you back.'

Hermione nodded, standing up. Snape held out an arm, and she slipped her arm through his.

## Fifteen

*Chapter 16 of 22*

Seven years after the death of Dumbledore, Hermione finally returns to Hogwarts. What will she find?

Many thanks to my beta, Soul Bound.

A cluster of Ravenclaw students surged around Hermione, anxious to get to the Great Hall to have their dinner; their unconscious laughter and chatter filling the dark corridor with warmth and life. As Hermione carefully watched the sea of faces flow past her, she felt a sense of satisfaction at knowing her conclusions were correct. After associating Hogwarts houses with the principles of ancient Southern magic at Halloween, the young witch had used her isolation over the last few days to closely observe, in the manner of an initiate, the students and professors.

She now knew for certain that the Sorting Hat was steeped in Southern magic and sorted the students into the houses that best matched their primary elemental make ups. Hermione tried to recall the Sorting Hat, but all she could remember after this length of time was it being dirty, tatty and very old. It was perhaps as old as Hogwarts, which would explain what it was able to do. So when her eyes started to tire from the amount of reading she was doing, Hermione wandered around the corridors, quietly observing everyone. Inevitably, students with primarily a water make up were in Slytherin; students with mostly fire were in Gryffindor; students with earth were in Hufflepuff, and students with air were in Ravenclaw. It got so that Hermione could look at the students and know which house they were in without needing to look at their robes or ties for confirmation.

She also spent time in the staff room watching the professors from under her broad-brimmed witch's hat. This was even more spectacular. Somehow, despite the fact that the witches and wizards had no idea they were following deep magical principles, the heads of each house positively exuded their element in the strongest conceivable way. It made Hermione wonder how Hogwarts chose its heads of house and whether the Sorting Hat was still somehow involved in the process. Of course, she knew from the attack in the lane that Snape was powerfully water, but she quickly discovered that Professor Flitwick was a fresh, cool breeze that had purity and logic and that Professor Sprout was dark, richly fertile soil that nourished and reproduced. And when McGonagall had stopped by yesterday to have a chat, Hermione had trouble concentrating on what she was saying. It was difficult observing somebody in this manner while still trying to maintain a coherent conversation. McGonagall must have picked up on her dreaminess, as the professor reminded her kindly not to wear herself out. But what Hermione was seeing in the older witch was a crackling fire with a lot of warmth and energy. She knew McGonagall was now only nominally head of Gryffindor and that Harry had really stepped into the role, even if it was in an unofficial capacity. So when Harry came into the staff room to pick up some papers he'd forgotten to take to class, Hermione watched him carefully and was blown away by the inferno of heat that blasted out from him. He was no ordinary fire...he was an out of control forest fire with flames leaping hundreds of feet into the air. The young woman found the intensity of Harry's element disturbing.

Hermione followed the chatting students for a bit, then turned off to go down the corridor that led to the dungeons and to the Potions classroom. The corridor soon became dark, occasionally lit by carefully placed flames, and her footsteps echoed loudly. Tonight was the full moon and the feast of the Nine Nights, and this morning Snape had included a note in her food basket saying for her to meet him in the Potions classroom at dinnertime.

Hermione felt strange walking down the empty corridors to the dungeons again. It wasn't the sort of place she had felt inclined to wander around, so she hadn't been down here since she was a student. She remembered the many years of traipsing down here for Potions with Harry and Ron. They were the most brutal but most memorable classes she had taken at Hogwarts, and Snape had been the hardest, most exacting taskmaster. The Potions classroom door was firmly shut when she got to it, and Hermione hesitated before knocking. Seven years of student instincts told her to run while she still could, but she firmly squashed them down and was lifting her hand to knock when the door swung open.

'Hello?' Hermione peered inside and saw Snape sitting at his desk, his quill moving furiously across a parchment. The classroom looked exactly like it had when she was a student, dimly lit with odd things in glass jars. How strange, thought Hermione, glancing about. All the things that had happened to her, all the changes she had been through, and yet his classroom was still the same. The young witch was taken right back to her first Potion's class and how Snape came striding in, saying, 'There will be no foolish wand waving in my class...' It all made much more sense now.

'Miss Granger,' Snape acknowledged neutrally, putting down his quill and standing up. 'If you can follow me.'

He swept down from his desk smoothly and moved past her with a flick of his robe and out into the corridor. Hermione rapidly turned, half-jogging to keep up with Snape who was charging full flight down the corridor, his robes billowing out behind him. By the time they had turned and twisted along many dark, damp smelling corridors, Hermione was completely lost. She did not recognize anything about these corridors, but knew she was deep within the bowels of Hogwarts. Abruptly Snape stopped. It was only Hermione's fast reflexes that prevented her from slamming into him. It was strange to stop in the middle of a corridor, and it was only after staring right at it for a bit that she could even make out the door right in front of her. Snape simply pushed it open and walked in. Hermione hesitated, but resolutely followed him, and Snape firmly shut the door behind her. The room was cold, miserable and dusty with an empty fireplace and a battered, hole-ridden armchair in front of it. It smelt stale and unused. Hermione's heart sunk.

'Follow me,' repeated Snape as he strode across the room to another door.

Startled, Hermione followed silently and averted her eyes politely as Snape unwarded the next door, thinking it was strange that this door was warded and not the first. She understood in an instant once the door swung open and she had followed Snape through it. It was like walking into a wondrously warm room after being in bone chilling cold or like cuddling a hot water bottle on a cold night. As soon as the door was shut firmly behind her, Hermione knew that the intense pressure of Hogwarts magic had lifted. She felt dizzy with relief.

'Welcome, my lady, to my home on this auspicious night.' Snape leaned forward to press foreheads in the traditional greeting of friends, but somehow they both misjudged and bumped heads instead.

'May his presence bring your home peace and joy.' Hermione said the expected reply, smiling up at him.

Snape inclined his head and gestured her to come further in. Hermione glanced about Snape's spacious room and was interested to see he had set it out in the clear Southern mountain style. As with all of Hogwarts rooms a large fireplace filled one wall, but instead of the customary two armchairs on either side, Snape had deep red rugs meant for sitting on and a low table for working on and eating from. The lack of furniture gave the room a feeling of space, and although it was uncluttered, it wasn't unlivable. There were cushions scattered around, a neatly folded rug, an overflowing bookcase and a book opened on the low table. The air smelt clean and clear. Hermione out of habit took off her boots before walking onto the thick rug next to the fireplace.

'Let me take your robes and your hat, my lady. This is the one place in Hogwarts where you do not need them.'

'Thank you, I can feel that. It's such a relief.' Hermione unbuttoned her robes slowly with her bandaged hand and handed them to him. Her shirt and trousers were the right weight for the warmth of the room.

'And your hat, my lady?' Snape said, carefully folding her robes over his arm.

Oh, dear, her hair, remembered Hermione. She hadn't thought about her hair in days. Everyday, she promised herself she would do more than run a cursory sweep of the hairbrush over it and really deal with the knots. But every day she happily saw her hat and plonked it on her head instead. Reluctantly, Hermione handed over her hat. She could hardly sit here in her shirt and trousers and still keep her hat on.

'Have a seat, my lady. I will just put these away.' Snape turned and went through another door shutting it behind him. He must have also shed his robes, as he returned with his shirtsleeves rolled up and his hair pulled back. So this is Snape relaxing, thought Hermione, sitting down easily on the thick rug in front of the fire, running her fingers hastily through her hair, trying to get it to lay flat.

'Now, my lady, first off, would you like a drink?' Snape offered politely.

'That would be nice.' Hermione felt relaxed for the first time at Hogwarts and nestled deeper into the soft rug. The fire was throwing out a lot of heat, and also because she was able to, she rolled up her sleeves.

Snape moved through another door, but this time left it open, letting Hermione see the kitchen.

Hermione smelt a beautiful aroma...surely not? 'Is that coffee, my friend?' she asked excitedly.

'Yes, my lady, it is.'

'How did you manage to get that? I thought you said it was impossible to get hold of here?' Hermione stood up enthusiastically and moved over to the kitchen. It was compact but highly organized, and Snape moved easily in it.

'I thought tonight was worth the effort.' He glance over at her.

'Wonderful. It's an incredible place you have here. I find it hard to believe that I am still in Hogwarts,' she said, leaning against the door jam.

'It has done me well over the years. I am most at ease here.' He placed the coffeepot and two small, Southern-style coffee cups on a tray. 'Shall we?'

Hermione followed him back and sat down, amazed at how easily her body moved and how clear her thinking was. 'I can't believe I am the same person who stepped through that door.'

Snape sat down cross-legged effortlessly and poured the coffee. Hermione almost drooled at the smell.

'The weight of the magic can get oppressive. I have found its intensity creeps up the longer I am in it, despite the clothes.' He passed her a cup and smiled bemusedly at the look on her face.

Hermione felt compelled to defend her enthusiasm. 'I am bound to be eager, my friend, when my entire liquid intake since I have been here has been the water you sent up, a daily cup of grossly over-sugared tea and one butterbeer. My last sip of coffee seems a lifetime ago.' She looked up at him, remembering the attack. 'And it nearly was.' Hermione took a sip and allowed it to sit in her mouth so that she could truly savor the taste before swallowing. 'Good,' she said with great satisfaction, appreciating the effort and thought Snape had put into this evening.

Hermione looked up again at Snape, who gave a small smile in return. 'I feel embarrassed, my friend; I shamefully neglected to thank you the other evening for the delicious food that you send to me. The pickles especially are superb. I've never tasted anything like it.'

Snape shrugged his shoulders and fiddled with the small coffee cup in front of him, his tattoo dark against his translucently white skin. 'I have always enjoyed preparing food. I find it relaxing. But as with most people, it is hard to keep inspired when cooking for only myself for all this time' He took a sip of coffee and looked at her sideways with a glint to his eyes. 'I heard about Mr. Potter.'

Startled, Hermione put down her cup. 'How do you know?'

Snape merely raised his eyebrows at her.

Of course he would know, thought Hermione. He had been a bloody spy for decades. He would know everything that happened in Hogwarts. 'Yeah, well, you were right, my friend. Harry wasn't pleased when he saw us leave the Ball together and thought he was within his rights to bail me up about it.' Snape continued to look steadily at her, so Hermione hotly continued. 'Nobody talks to me like that. Even my parents never did. So I basically told him to butt out of my business, that under no circumstances do I go around dictating to him who he should and should not associate with, and that he should at least afford the same respect to me.' Hermione sighed and tried running her hand through her hair, but only got a couple of inches before it snagged on a knot. 'I didn't like it. We patched it up again and got around it by not talking about you when we had tea again today,' she said, finally untangling her fingers from her hair. 'He absolutely hates you.'

'I have noticed,' Snape replied dryly before taking another sip.

'No, I mean it's different from when I was at school with him. He's grown fanatical with it, and it's hard to relate it back to the reality of who you are.'

'What do you mean?' asked Snape carefully, his brow furrowed.

Oops, thought Hermione, mentally kicking herself. Twisting the warm, deep pile rug through her fingers nervously, she explained, 'It's like if I didn't know you, my friend, how I know you now and only thought about the Professor Snape I knew at school...' Hermione looked guiltily up at Snape, who was still listening intently '...who wasn't very nice and perhaps from certain angles acted in morally ambiguous ways, you still shouldn't warrant the intensity of hate Harry is projecting at you. It doesn't make a lot of sense.'

'Mr. Potter has not made my life easy here,' the wizard said neutrally.

'Harry is a master at manipulating other people's emotions...to such an extent even powerful witches and wizards are unaware of it. He spends a great deal of time and energy whipping them up into a frenzy of hate towards you.'

Snape looked at her closely and spoke in even tones. 'While I would like to believe it is nothing more than a personality clash, I do think you could be right. It is the Headmistress's strength that prevents Mr. Potter from hounding me from Hogwarts, and he refuses to believe Professor Dumbledore's testament despite the fact that the Ministry verified it.' He stopped and became utterly still, then added quietly, 'I have often wondered whether Mr. Potter has transferred his animosity and frustration from the Dark Lord onto me.'

Hermione was surprised at the neutrality of Snape's words and at how accurate and objective Snape's observations were. She finished her coffee, feeling the caffeine course through her body. Unable to keep still, she rubbed her hands into the soft, warm carpet under the table. 'That sounds completely right to me, my friend. Hey, this rug is warm.'

Snape blinked at the sudden non segue and then snorted in amusement, leaning back comfortably on a cushion. 'I have underground heating. It helps when one carries on the tradition of sitting on the floor when one is at the bottom of an ancient castle in the middle of Scotland.'

'Wow.'

'It was quite simple to set up. Hogwarts sits over an ancient spring, so there is always ample water.'

'It's nice, rather like getting into a bed with an electric blanket.' Feeling guilty that she had been so scattered and had interrupted the topic of conversation, Hermione said, 'Oh, and another thing about Harry. Over the last couple of days, I've been watching him, my friend. You know... really watching.' Hermione saw the blank look on Snape's face and tried to clarify what she meant. 'You know, how an initiate sees people.'

'Really?' Snape sat up, startled. 'Do you think that was wise?'

'Probably not,' admitted Hermione with a shrug. 'But there is only a certain number of hours in a day I can read effectively, and anyway, whenever I am by myself, I like watching people, and it really is just an extension of that.'

'Hmmm,' replied Snape unsurely, and he leaned across to pour her another coffee.

'I'm going to be up all night if I drink this,' Hermione protested feebly before grinning and picking it up to take a sip. 'Do you know that the Sorting Hat is associated with Southern magic?'

Snape shook his head, his eyes full of curiosity.



'It sorts students into the house that best matches their primary elemental make up.'

'Is that in the same way you and yours saw the Death Eaters in the lane?'

'Yes, exactly. So all your precious Slytherins are made up primarily of water, Gryffindor is fire, Ravenclaw is air and Hufflepuff is earth. And what else is interesting is that the professors who are chosen to be heads of each house are the ones who project their element most strongly. You, my friend, emanate water the most in Hogwarts, so it's no surprise at all that you are Slytherin's head of house. Now because Harry is for all intents and purposes the head of Gryffindor, I also looked at him.'

Snape nodded in agreement to that statement.

'He was the most shocking. He is an inferno of heat, like an out of control forest fire. But it was wrong in its intensity.'

'Why?'

'I couldn't work it out straight away, but I now think it's because everyone is made up primarily of one element, but of course there are other elements as well. Like you are spring water. You are strongly water, but there is an earth element in you. In the same way spring water comes up through the ground and they interact with each other. That's natural and normal. But with Harry, I couldn't detect any other element, which is just bizarre. He is burning too hot and too intensely...it's wrong.'

Snape drummed his fingers on the table. 'That is interesting because I heard when Mr. Potter went up to be sorted in his first year, the Sorting Hat wanted to put him in Slytherin.'

Hermione nodded, no longer surprised Snape knew about that. 'I heard about that too. So there must have been a strong water element in him for the Sorting Hat to want him to go in Slytherin. And yet I cannot detect anything other than fire in him. It's very strange.'

They both sat there in silence, mulling everything over, Hermione fiddling with a frayed bit of bandage on her hand.

Snape looked up at her sharply. 'Can people change their elemental make up, my lady?'

That was an interesting question, thought Hermione, and she shook her head. 'No, not as far as I know. It can alter, but it's always there in essence. That is what is so strange about Harry; I cannot detect any other element.'

'Can it be suppressed?' he pressed her.

Hermione had not thought about applying these principles to Harry. 'Yes, it's really a consummate way of altering one's elemental make up...but it is extremely rare.'

'What circumstances need to occur in order for a person to suppress part of his or her elemental make up?' Snape added deferentially. 'These are areas I do not know about, my lady. I pray I am not being too bold asking about them.'

Hermione waved her hand dismissively. 'Don't worry, my friend. I'm interested in your thoughts and am happy to answer your questions. These are areas most people don't know about, even the very learned.'

Snape dipped his head in acknowledgement of the trust she was placing in him.

Hermione thought carefully about how to explain the principles clearly to Snape for moment. 'A person can't alter or suppress his or her elemental make up easily. To do so goes against one's very life force, which is constantly striving for balance. Of course there are variations within each case, but generally altering or suppressing an element occurs when something severe takes place in the person's life...but that in itself is not enough.' The witch looked at Snape, who was resting his elbows on the table, his chin in his white hands, absorbing every word she said with rapt attention. 'And it is always a tragedy...or what that person perceives as a tragedy...and somehow the person associates part of his or her elemental make up with that event. However, the body's a wonderful thing and always tries to seek balance within itself, and the person's elemental make up regains its symmetry. Then there's a trigger, which for the vast majority of people never even happens, but it can occur at any time. It's a time of high stress, and it's somehow linked with the first tragedy. The strength of the trigger often determines to what extent a person will alter their make up. This is all done unconsciously by the person, but usually their behavior becomes extreme. Whenever there's some change to a person's make up, the person's potential power is usually less than half of what it should be, and it can be damaging to them. But as I say, this is all highly unusual.' Hermione stopped and looked at Snape who, was stroking his chin contemplatively.

'I do believe this could all relate back to your first vision, my lady. How ingenious.'

'What do you mean?' asked Hermione, not understanding the wizard's chain of thought.

'In your first vision, Mr. Potter was petrified of the water, and he told you it took his mother from him.'

'Yes, that's right.' Then Hermione nodded, impressed with the perception of the wizard sitting opposite her. 'I see where you are going now, my friend. The tragic circumstance was Lord Voldemort killing Harry's mother. Harry associated his mother's death with the water element of Voldemort, which he had in abundance in himself. Yes, the circumstances in Harry's life have been extreme in anybody's books. If anyone could be a candidate, it would be Harry. I just never thought of Harry along these lines. And the trigger?'

'Dumbledore's death,' Snape said firmly.

'That sounds right to me. It could also explain the difference in him. Of course I've been furiously telling myself it's because we are now grown up and no longer are children. But I can now see there is a more fundamental change.' Hermione frowned. 'But for me not to sense any other element in him...but then Harry is one of the most powerful wizards I know, so no doubt he is able to suppress it with great strength.'

'You do realize, my lady, you said a person who suppresses part of their elemental make up works on less than half their potential power.'

'Dear mother of God!' exclaimed Hermione, thinking of the power that Harry emanated as it was.

'A full strength Mr. Potter. Yes, a disturbing thought indeed,' commented Snape.

Hermione nodded. The implications of this were huge.

'Now, my lady, I have something for you,' Snape said after draining his coffee cup. He picked up a brown parcel and handed it to her graciously. It was customary for an initiate to be given something when she visited a home for the ritual on the Nine Nights.

It was only afterwards that Hermione worked out what happened next. When she reached for the parcel, her rune tattoo must have brushed Snape's Dark Mark, and she was violently shoved forward. Hermione shrieked at the shock and found herself tipping over the edge of a wind swept cliff. The young witch flung her arms backwards, trying desperately to regain her balance. There was a huge body of metallic, grey water far below her, which stretched out to a hazy horizon. But Hermione's forward momentum was too much, and she tumbled forward so that she lost all contact with the crumbly earth. She couldn't work out what was going on, and all her senses were confounded with the wind roaring in her ears, her hair thrashing like sharp whips and the surreal feeling of moving through air. Hermione slammed into something hard, and air was hit brutally from her lungs. Dark water buried her. She was plunging downwards, forever downwards, her body screaming for air.

Hermione kicked out violently, praying she was going in the right direction. Suddenly, she burst through the surface, gasping for air, tasting the sweet, fresh water streaming down her face. She treaded water, panting with exhaustion. Darkness encompassed her, and the witch heard water sloshing rhythmically against something and

echoing back. Slowly, huge, shadowy walls emerged as her eyes adjusted to the dimness, and she realized she was in an underground cavern. The water felt warm and silky on her skin as she gently moved her arms and legs to keep afloat.

The movement of the water quickened. Hermione bobbed up and down in the small swells, listening to the lapping waves pick up a staccato beat against the towering walls. She felt a swirling, sucking movement, and before she could even register it, the water enclosed over her face as she was pulled under. Hermione gulped in the water; it was foul, bitter and poisonous, not at all like the fresh water she had just tasted. Her mind drifted away.

Sucking, dragging, pulling. The murky water grabbed at her with tremendous strength, and Hermione was being tumbled over and over at a horrifying speed towards a towering wall of thick bedrock. As she got closer, she made out a black cave that she was being sucked towards; it stood out like violent gash on the wall. Around the cave's opening, there was a craggy outcrop, as if the earth itself was trying to close the wound up.

'You are mine now, circle lover.' An alien hiss penetrated her mind, and Hermione knew horror. It was Voldemort.

Hermione lunged desperately at the outcrop of rocks as they came within reach, ripping her fingernails painfully as she tried clawing the rough surface in an attempt to stop herself from being sucked into the cave.

There was a touch of his smell moments before she heard his rich sound. 'Reach for me.' Hermione brought her legs up, scraping them against the sharp rocks, and used them to lunge herself against the current. Her hands grabbed at his fur, but the current dragged her away. The water twisted up and around her, ensnaring her in its grip, pulling her towards the gaping hole again. The witch looked up and registered with a gasp that the cave wasn't a cave but was in a shape of a skull...a death mark skull...and it wasn't water that was pulling her in, but a tangle of snakes entwined tightly around her.

A sound came slowly, building in intensity until it was a deafening roar that permeated every level and penetrated every cell. A sharp, stabbing pain caused Hermione to look down. His huge tiger-mouth was clamped over her arm, and he was physically dragging her away from Voldemort. But the snakes held her firmly, suffocating her in their deathlike grip. Screaming pain ripped through her shoulder...she was being ripped apart. His teeth were sinking still deeper into her forearm when suddenly the snakes released her, catapulting her towards him. She swung her free arm over his broad shoulders, holding him close, feeling his wet fur on her cheek, exhausted. After a few powerful surges away from the gaping hole, he gently released his grip on her arm, and she felt his rough tongue licking the puncture wounds.

'I am here,' he reassured.

Her arms were encircled around his thick neck, and her legs gripped him tightly around his broad back. Hermione would never be dragged from him again. His body surged powerfully under her, taking them away from the poison, and the water became cleaner the further they moved away. He pulled her tighter so that they were one once more. He had a suppressed fury about him that she had never experienced before.

'Where are we?' Hermione questioned once she was able to form a conscious thought.

She felt his awareness move outwards, taking her with him, and they touched something familiar. It shrunk skittishly from their touch; they felt its anxiety rise and felt it try to erect pathetic barriers from them. Shh, they purred reassuringly. They would never go where they were not invited. They sent out pulses of tenderness and felt it gradually relax into them. They knew its power pulsated upwards from a deep, primordial source, which was clean and strong in its flavour. They moved with its rhythm and felt it embrace them. The familiarity of it overwhelmed the part that was Hermione...she couldn't work out why. But as they moved amongst it, they felt a taint of wrongness; a foreign awfulness that contrasted with its crisp, clear flavours. Something was draining its essence and replacing it with poison. Hermione could feel a persistency about him as they moved and swirled, tracing back to the source of the poison. The source was like a bubbling sewer that sucked its power and spewed out poison. They felt the source become aware of them, so they flowed away, disguising themselves in its cool, clear flavors, but sucking in any tendrils of poison they came across to ensure no more harm was done to it. They cared for it.

He pulled her closer, tighter, until all Hermione felt was his pulsating rhythm, and they were seamlessly one. There was the softest of shifts, and she smelt fragrant tropical air and heard a rustling of leaves below her. She opened her eyes and looked out over his dark, ancient jungle; the full moon hung huge in the sky, casting a silvery light. Hermione glanced behind her, but instead of him laying languidly in repose, he was standing, towering above her, alert, his tail swishing agitatedly. He was a truly awesome sight. His huge tiger-eyes were glinting with fury, but quickly softened as he took in her face.

'My cherished,' came his sound.

He lowered his head and rubbed it soothingly across her cheek, and Hermione breathed in his earthy smell, bringing her hands up to gently rub his velvety ears. How she longed to stay here forever with him.

'Poison Water must be taught his rightful position. This time he has gone too far. Water into fire and fire into water,' came his sound, deep with anger.

Hermione did not know the way back. How was she to return? Where had she been? Nothing had ever dared to try and take her before and risk his anger. 'How, my loved one?'

His tail swished furiously, and his muscles under his coat rippled in agitation. He did not answer right away. Hermione shifted to a cross-legged position and looked out over the silvery trees. A night bird called. Then he flopped down beside her, his huge paws around her possessively, and she felt his warm breath on her back.

'Poison Water is playing a dangerous game. He thought by taking you, he would either have you as his or you would shift into the other realm. But there is an older magic he does not know about. Go into Spring Water, and he will guide you to his earth. I cannot be with you, my love, but I will be standing guard. Water into fire and fire into water.'

He shifted abruptly away. Images came into Hermione's mind that made no sense. She was sitting on the floor, her arms around someone, and that person felt nice. There was a wet sensation on her lower left forearm, which was pleasing and sent hot bolts of pleasure throughout her body. But she tried to suppress those pleasures as if they were inappropriate. Hermione looked down at the slender figure in her lap with her disheveled, tangled hair. Very tenderly, she moved a lock of curly, brown hair to see a pale face. The woman had her eyes closed, as if she was asleep, but was moving her mouth sensually against her forearm. The woman's face was familiar to her, and Hermione tried to remember why. Anxiety for the woman flowed through her, and again Hermione didn't know why; it was like trying to recall something from years ago. Then she saw the recent, red scarring on the woman's forehead and the bandaged wand hand.

Everything rapidly shifted around her. Her body was curled up, and she was moving her tongue gently over salty skin, feeling the rough texture of the skin surrounding the Mark and the unhealthy smoothness of the Dark Mark itself. She was diluting the poison that was emanating from it. Hermione heard the fire crackle and the beating of a man's heart. Her head was leaning up against something soft, and she could feel someone gently move her hair from her face and softly touch her cheek. Hermione knew she was with Snape.

Everything shifted violently again. Panic gripped as she was set adrift in the myriad of currents, tangles of possibilities, and she started to pour slowly through other realms of existence and open-ended potentialities.

He was around her, in her, beside her, changing her direction and pushing her back where she belonged.

The touch of Snape's hand caught her and anchored her in. She felt warmth on her cheek; she was curled up in Snape's lap and had a chink in her neck. Hermione stopped licking the Dark Mark, trying to concentrate on where she was. The young witch felt soft touches all over her face and heard detachedly a sound that she should have been able to understand, but could not.

Opening her eyes, Hermione saw the woman in her arms again, and tried to remember who she was. The woman looked like she was sleeping, but Hermione knew she was not. Why did she feel scared for her? She should have been doing something for the woman...but what? Fear, guilt and love engulfed her, and not knowing what else to do, she bent forward, feeling the soft skin on her lips as she kissed her. The woman was her.

Hermione drifted away again...how she longed to be with him. Why couldn't he just let her stay with him? She felt him press her firmly down.

Once more she was feeling soft touches all about her face, accompanied by a warm breath and a deep noise rumbling next to her ear. She was with Snape, being held by Snape. Hermione grabbed onto the wizard's shirt so that she couldn't be dragged away again. Then as if tuning into the right frequency, Hermione understood the deep noise was Snape's voice reciting like a mantra.

'My lady, we are here in Hogwarts. You are here beside me. I am here, my lady.'

Hermione was unable to answer, but moved her face in the direction of his voice. She opened her eyes and looked straight into the darkest, blackest eyes she had ever seen. Hermione watched as Snape lifted his long-fingered hand and stroked it gently down her cheek. On impulse, she turned her head and kissed the white fingers softly. She didn't want to fall away. The gentle rise and fall of Snape's chest stopped. Hermione looked up again into his black eyes and saw a curious light there before she felt his lips lightly touch hers. Hermione moved her lips in response and felt him press her more firmly. She nibbled at his soft lower lip and saw his eyes widen slightly before she felt his wet, warm tongue run over her lips, seeking entrance. Hermione moved deeper into the kiss, allowing Snape to move into her, enjoying the feeling of him and caressed his tongue with hers. She knew Snape...she had been inside Snape...and she no longer held any fear of him. As they kissed, Hermione could taste where she had been and could almost recreate the deep, primordial power that she had swum amongst. It fixed her to where she needed to be. Hermione felt him gently lessening their closeness, and slowly they parted. Hermione lifted her eyes upwards and saw him looking down at her, his hand gently on her hair.

'It was you... I was in you,' the witch said in barely more than a whisper.

Snape nodded and drew her upwards so that her head was resting softly on his shoulder, his arms wrapped reassuringly around her.

'Are you all right, my lady?' asked Snape, running his hand gently down her cheek.

'Your touch is keeping me here, but you must use older magic. I must go into you, and you must guide me to your earth.' Her voice drifted around her in a detached, hollow manner that seemed to have no connection to her. Hermione had no idea what she was saying; it was as if it was coming from a different part of her brain, but she prayed Snape understood. Her life depended on him.

'But the Dark Lord?' Snape looked at her steadily, his eyes dark in his face.

'I have mine to protect us. He cannot help you but he is guarding us.'

Snape moved over her, lying her carefully down on the rug, and Hermione felt his nose bump into hers before his lips were on hers again. She lifted her hand behind his head, bringing him closer, feeling his soft hair. This time there was more hunger as he ran his tongue around her lips, but when Hermione willingly opened her mouth to him, he continued to nibble her lips. That's right, remembered Hermione through her fogged brain, and she entered his mouth. As she felt his tongue caress hers, his fluid around her, she knew him once more. Much like a smell could trigger a whole host of memories, so to this feeling plunged Hermione back into Snape, and she felt the ancient earth that had encompassed his water for millennia. All her senses came back more fixedly. She became aware of Snape over her, his body warm on hers, their legs intertwined, his hands cupping her face, the tickle of an escaped lock of his hair on her neck, the feel of his hot tongue welcoming her, enjoying her being there. The wizard shifted his weight to lie beside her, but Hermione grew anxious. 'Don't let go of me, my friend.'

'I would never do that,' he gently chided, entwining their fingers together, but moving so he lay alongside her, their bodies warm.

Tenseness moved through him like a wave. 'I ask your forgiveness, my lady. I did not know the Dark Lord was going to use me this way. I gave you my oath that I would protect you and yours, but I unknowingly led you into danger.'

'I know that, and so does he...do not worry,' Hermione whispered, looking into Snape's black eyes and seeing the worry there.

'Thank Merlin.' Snape closed his eyes and let out a sigh. Hermione felt his body relax.

'No, he knows you and likes you.'

'I felt you both within me,' Snape stated simply after a while, his dark eyes looking down at her. Then added almost guiltily, 'It was good.'

'You felt good to us as well. You have such power, my teacher, such ancient, clear power, but Voldemort is draining it and poisoning you.'

Snape's face clouded. 'That is what happens when one tries to leave the Dark Lord's service. It will eventually kill me. I am sure the Dark Lord is surprised it has not yet happened,' he stated with clinical coldness.

Shocked, Hermione on impulse grabbed his left forearm and started sucking on the Dark Mark, drawing the poison from Snape and sending it to him, who, surprised, absorbed it effortlessly into his power, rendering it neutral. Snape anxiously pulled her away from the Mark.

'We will not let that happen, my teacher. We will not!' she angrily protested.

Her mind started pressing in on itself, and Hermione realized with foreboding that she shouldn't have done that. She had just seriously reduced her chance of being fixed to this reality. Everything around her shifted brutally, and worlds collided violently. She wanted to scream in fear, but nothing came out in her world of yellow. Hermione felt lips hard on hers, drawing her tongue inside him, plunging her back into the warm-watered cavern. Snape touched her silkily, smoothly, no longer skittish or unsure, and pulled her closer, opening himself to her. Hermione felt unsure and alone; she missed him not being here with her. Snape caressed her, acknowledging her sadness and longing until she relaxed and no longer held herself apart. They moved closer, and Hermione could not help feeling the humanness of Snape with all his complexities of emotions, and she realized that she must feel like that to him. They undulated languidly together in perfect rhythm through dark, watery tunnels deep within the earth. A sense of antiquity surrounded them, and they acknowledged they were but a bat of an eyelid to it. But the warmth and tenderness flowed through them as they moved closer to the earth's liquid mantle, and they felt it regarding them lovingly as precious beings. They were humbled under its awareness.

Soft, slippery sensations ran down Hermione's back as if warm mud was oozing down it, and she enjoyed the feeling. Her body opened itself up to the feeling, drawing the gentle, centering sensation into her core. The part that was Hermione couldn't help be curious to what the feeling was. Shh, Snape assured soothingly, with a touch of bemusement, and she somehow understood this was Snape's earth. Hermione drank it in hungrily as if it was the only nourishment she would ever need, and all the time, Snape was around her, taking delight in her pleasure.

Her body told her when she was sated as her awareness moved, and other senses heightened as others regressed. She felt his tongue caressing her, holding her gently. The rug was ticklish on her bare back, and Snape's slippery, warm body was over hers: skin on skin. Snape must have sensed the change as he released her tongue, but still kissed her a few more times slowly. Hermione opened her eyes and looked straight into his dark, warm eyes.

'You are back,' he stated huskily.

Hermione nodded. He felt good next to her, and she was relieved at how steady, firm and fixed everything was. The room was darkened...with only the softest glow coming from the embers in the fireplace...and Snape's face was in shadow. She moved her arms around him, feeling his sweaty back and pulling him closer, wanting his skin on hers. Snape moved forward, kissed both her cheeks and pressed his forehead on hers, his breath warm on her face. He eased his weight over so he lay alongside her and pulled her yet closer to him. Hermione felt him breathing in deeply and his body becoming still and relaxed alongside hers. She felt comfortable, warm and safe, and she moved into a deep, dreamless sleep.

# Sixteen

## Chapter 17 of 22

Seven years after the death of Dumbledore, Hermione finally returns to Hogwarts. What will she find?

Many thanks to my beta, Soul Bound.

Hermione looked up when a group of professors, clutching rolls of parchments to their chests, burst loudly into the staff room. The industrious silence that had enveloped Hogwarts had broken. There were shrieks of laughter from students pouring energetically out of their morning classes before the door swung shut. It must be lunchtime already, the tired witch thought resignedly; the same parchment she had been attempting to read all morning was still in front of her...McGonagall was not getting value for money from her today. The professors milled about, dumping marking and quills on nearby tables, chucking hats onto chairs as they stretched and yawned after a morning teaching. They only had a few minutes before they were due down at the Great Hall for lunch.

Hermione rubbed her face wearily under her hat, trying to fight the malaise she had had all morning, and was thinking about heading up to her room for some lunch when the staff room went deadly silent. Snape swept through the door. Tension and fear was instantly palpable in the room. The professors shifted nervously and eyed him uneasily. Should she acknowledge him? But Hermione needn't have wondered as the dark wizard moved smoothly over to her desk, his eyes taking in the occupants of the room with a flick of cool disdain.

'Miss Granger, if I may have a word.' He indicated for her to follow him.

Startled, Hermione scurried back the chair and moved around the desk; she hated all the eyes on her as she followed him out the door. Why was Snape doing this? She heard the volume go up as the door shut. The gossip would be running hot this afternoon.

'We can talk in my office,' he stated, looking down at her through his oily hair.

Hermione nodded, pulling her cloak firmly around her against the cold drafts in the corridor. Snape walked beside her, not charging ahead at his normal fast pace. No doubt he would be feeling weary today as well, Hermione realized.

Hermione still felt acutely embarrassed about last night. She winced at how she'd reacted when Snape told her he was being slowly killed with poison. Plunging herself back into known danger, requiring Snape to haul her back out again, was not the expected response of a highly trained initiate. Looking back though, it was dreamlike and strange. The witch vaguely remembered stirring, seeing low embers in the fireplace and Snape beside her, doing up the buttons on his shirt, his chest a ghostly white in the low light. The rug was warm under her, and somehow there was a heavy blanket over them.

Noticing she was awake, Snape had leaned across and gently stroked her cheek. 'My lady, you must return to your rooms. Dawn will be breaking soon.'

Hermione nodded, yawning and slowly stretching. Snape got up, buttoning his trousers as he moved across the dark room. The witch found and pulled on her shirt and trousers under the blanket; the air had a pre-dawn chill to it despite the low fire. Snape soon came back, fully dressed in his black robes and holding her hat and cloak. Hermione got unsteadily to her feet, shivering in the cold, and tugged on her boots. Snape stepped close to her, draping her cloak over her shoulders and deftly doing up her buttons. He always seemed taller and more slender close up. The wizard placed her hat on her head, looked at her for moment, and then leaned forward to tuck a loose coil of hair under it. Hermione smiled. Snape wordlessly held out his arm in a courtly manner, and Hermione tucked hers through it, feeling the coarse material of his cloak. He intertwined his warm fingers in hers as he escorted her silently to her rooms through dim, unrecognizable corridors. Hermione fell into bed exhausted the moment she got back.

The dungeons were empty with all students now at the Great Hall. Snape unwarded his office and gestured her through, shutting the door firmly behind her.

'Please have a seat.'

Hermione glanced about his dim office; it still had odd things in jars on shelves lining the walls, a workbench, and a small fire burning in the fireplace. She spotted his private store cupboard guiltily and looked up at Snape, who unfortunately met her eye and merely shook his head infinitesimally. The witch sat down hastily on the chair in front of his desk, keeping her eyes firmly in front of her. Snape, rather than sitting behind his desk, drew the other chair closer and sat down smoothly next to her. His eyes were watching her sharply.

'That bold move seemed more Gryffindor than Slytherin, my friend,' Hermione commented wryly in order to break the uncomfortable silence.

Snape snorted. 'Yes, it does appear that way, my lady. But a Slytherin is never what he seems...you know that.' His face became serious. 'The reason for my Gryffindor-like actions is I just received information confirming the Dark Lord has just made seven successful attacks on Order members and known supporters.'

Hermione gave a startled gasp...this was not what she'd been expecting.

'The Headmistress will be receiving the information shortly.'

'God, that's terrible!'

'It is. The Order was already in a seriously weakened position, so the implications of these attacks are dire,' Snape gravely pointed out.

'When did they happen?'

'Today.'

'None last night?'

Snape shook his head.

'Do you think it has anything to do with what happened last night?' Hermione asked, nervously rubbing her hands together.

'Yes, I am sure they are related. That is why I wanted to talk to you urgently.' The wizard stood fluidly and walked around his desk.

'I hadn't realized the Order was in such a precarious position.' Hermione's eyes watched him as he placed a food basket on the desk in front of her. How could Snape even consider eating at a time like this?

'The Headmistress has wisely chosen to underplay it, but I believe it is reaching a critical point. For a long time there has been an impasse, but that is now changing.'

Snape arranged the pickles, preserved meats, cheeses and unleavened bread on a communal platter between them.

'Please, my lady, eat with me. We were unable to celebrate the feast last night, so this hurried lunch will have to suffice. I have to teach this afternoon.'

Hermione nodded, her mouth watering. She hadn't realized how hungry she was, but then again, she hadn't eaten anything since yesterday lunchtime. The witch picked up the bread, broke it in half and handed a piece to Snape, who accepted it with a nod.

'Did the Order have any idea these attacks had been planned?' Hermione asked between bites. Hermione looked at Snape, who was concentrating on scooping the pickle up with the bread and popping it into his mouth. He did everything with such deft, fluid movements.

Snape shook his head. 'The Dark Lord purposely targeted Mr. Weasley...without him the Order is blind. The Dark Lord knows he is able to press forward his advantage now.'

Hermione clenched her good hand into a fist...it was all too soon, and she wasn't confident of the patterns. But if she didn't act, the situation could only get worse. Voldemort would kill more innocent people like Ron, and more lives would be filled with the grief of unfulfilled potentials. Anger, frustration and fear boiled inside her. Unsure what to do, but needing to do something, Hermione leapt to her feet and paced over to the fireplace, her cloak swirling about her ankles. She felt Snape's eyes follow her as she paced agitatedly to his worktable, absently noting wormwood ready to be added to the bubbling potion. Hermione hated being indecisive, but every thread she looked down ended in disaster.

'What is it, my lady?'

Hermione rubbed her face irritably and stalked back to sit down. 'By Voldemort attempting to capture me as he did, he sent out a ripple. What I need to do is alter that ripple so it moves in our favour. Harry's power needs to be actualized, but it seems I am limited in the ways it can be done.'

'The Order needs to play all its cards now if it is to succeed. That is why I informed you right away.' Snape's eyes were watching her closely.

Irritated by her hat, she pulled it off and chucked it down next to her. Digging in her pockets, she found a clip and quickly tied her hair into a messy bun. Now she could think through this plight. 'I and mine are now part of that ripple, but it is not yet a pattern. Voldemort has angered him.'

'I could also feel his anger at the Dark Lord last night. I also felt his fear and deep affection for you,' said Snape quietly, and he stopped eating.

It was strange hearing somebody else talk of him, and she found it oddly reassuring. Hermione looked down at the crusty bread in her hand. 'I long to be with him always, my friend.'

'I could sense that too, my lady, but I am pleased when he returns you to us.'

'Last night, Voldemort revealed more than he knew by his actions. He thought he would either have me as his or that I would die. Voldemort has mastered several areas of Southern magic, hmmm...'

Snape paused mid-bite, his eyes widening. 'You could have died? I had not realized. I understood there was danger, and I knew I must act, but I did not know the desperateness of the situation. The Dark Lord wanted you dead so that the Order could not use you,' Snape quickly worked out, his fingers drumming a furious beat against the plate.

'My way back was unknown to me...this is always my biggest danger...and Voldemort knew that. But Voldemort is unwise to up against mine. I must think this through. There are several dynamics...Voldemort being one of them...that cause huge difficulties and prevents a customary approach to returning Harry's power. But what is most important is that Voldemort must not know what we are doing...he must not know of Harry's return to power.'

Snape poured a glass of water and passed it to her. Hermione looked at its silvery, reflective light; she needed to think carefully. 'Last night Voldemort revealed to us what Southern magic he knows, but more importantly what Southern magic he does not know. This is what I must exploit. He has given me the answers...but where are they?'

Hermione, pondering, looked up at the dark wizard across from her, who was taking a sip of the silvery water, holding the glass elegantly. 'That's it! Water into Fire! Then Hermione realized with a thud what the practical applications of that type of magic meant.

'What?' Snape blinked in surprise.

'Oh, shit, shit, shit!' she swore furiously in English. How the hell was she supposed to do this? Hermione rubbed her face with her hands. This was not going to be easy.

Snape was looking at her puzzled, waiting for an explanation.

Hermione breathed in trying to find the words. 'Um... he did show me the way last night. I see it now. You remember how we were talking about Harry last night?'

'Yes, about how Harry had suppressed his water element. I take it this is all about trying to realign his elements so that he can reach his full power.' Snape nodded, his eyes fixed on her.

'Ah... yes... So what happens is Harry needs to be reintroduced to the water element again so he learns not to fear it...but Voldemort cannot know we are doing this.'

'That makes sense. How do you do that?'

Hermione's head started to thump. 'Through you.'

'Me? Do you want me to brew a potion?' Snape stared at her.

Hermione shook her head, then stopped. 'Well, actually, yes, but that's not all.'

'Go on.' Snape's face became impassive.

'You are the person who has the most powerful water element I know, besides Voldemort, so you have to be the one to reintroduce him to his water element, but there is only one way.'

'Go on,' he repeated in icy tones.

'It's the same ancient type of magic you used last night...Voldemort doesn't know this magic; that's why I survived...and only the most ancient of magic is available for us to use now.' Hermione looked up and saw Snape's posture tense. 'You are the only one who is able to achieve change in Harry. It is the reason he hates you so much, which will make this difficult. Unlike the other witches and wizards here, Harry is Muggle-raised and isn't reacting to our magic. It is the strength of your water element he hates. In a sense you were right when you said you thought Harry had transferred his hate of Voldemort onto you.'

Snape was still for a long moment. Hermione dropped her eyes and examined her ragged bandage, allowing him time, but half expecting an explosion of anger. Her heart was beating rapidly. Snape's office had a cacophony of smells and odors to it...but it didn't smell unpleasant...interesting, yes, but not repellent. She looked up again when she heard Snape standing and watched him walk behind his desk...away from her. He turned his back to her. The witch knew she was putting him in an awful position and hated being the one to ask this of him. She hesitantly got up and moved towards him. His cold eyes followed her with glacial disdain. He looked every inch the formidable Potions master, and Hermione gulped, unnerved by the transformation.

'I know I ask perhaps too much of you, my friend, but I don't know any other way. All other avenues are closed, and even then, this may not succeed.'

Snape looked down at her and sneered. 'No need to explain yourself to me. I am but your minion to do your bidding...as well you know. You are aware I have given my word to aid and abet you, and I have no choice or say in this matter. You are just joining the queue of masters who have discovered I am a well trained beast, able to do the most despicable tasks, and who feel it is their right to direct me to do all manner of 'essential' tasks for the greater 'good'. I am well used to this role. Now leave. Contact me when you need me, but other than that, I have nothing further to say.'

Hermione winced at the venom in his words. Could there possibly be any other way? The witch knew there was not. She quietly nodded and left.

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Harry was lifting the kettle of water onto the coal range when there was a soft tapping on the door. As he walked over, he rolled his shoulders trying to relieve the tension in them. He opened the door to a small figure in a black, pointed witch's hat.

'Hey, Hermione, come on in. You've actually just followed me in the door. The kettle's on. Sorry about the mess.'

Ginny had been working long hours for weeks now, and the hut was slowly reverting back to his normal quagmire of disarray. He moved a pile of books stacked precariously on one of the armchairs so Hermione could sit down.

'Like I would complain.' Hermione smiled, settling into the armchair and taking off her hat.

Her hair was still fabulously unruly and in no way tamed by being encased in a hat all day...it was one of the things that hadn't changed about her. Harry walked over to the fire and gave it a prod. He hardly lit fires and only did so because he knew Hermione was coming for their daily cup of tea. The kettle started to whistle, and Harry went over to the small kitchen to prepare the tea.

'Did you take that kettle from the hut?' Hermione laughed.

'Yeah, it was too good to be wasted out in the middle of nowhere. I swapped it for mine. I like the sound of this one.'

'It does sound homey. How was your day?'

'Bloody awful actually. Did you hear about the attacks?' Harry handed the small witch her tea and sat down.

'Thanks. Yeah, I did. God, isn't it awful? Everybody was talking about it in the staff room.'

Harry felt a wave of heat rush through him and quickly put down his tea to take off his teaching robes. Harry saw Hermione run her eyes over him and smiled to himself; he knew he cut a fine form that she appreciated. But the fire and the hot tea were making him sweaty, and he felt he was suffocating. He always wore the lightest of shirts, no matter what the season, but it didn't really work.

'One of my fourth-year girls' parents were killed in the attacks. I had to tell her this afternoon.' Harry felt tears threatening and forced them down, swallowing furiously. Why couldn't he be like other men and not have to feel everything so acutely? He felt his face redden and become flushed.

'Oh, the poor, poor thing. Where is she now?'

'Her aunt picked her up only about an hour ago. I don't know if you know, but the whole Order is in a mess. Ginny is right in the thick of it all...has been for weeks now...and McGonagall is basically trying to keep a sinking ship afloat.' His face became bitter. 'And what am I doing? Sitting on my tush, having cups of tea. Great bloody use I am. And what can I say to the girl without it being a lie? Don't worry. Everything is going to be all right...yeah, sure.'

Harry took off his glasses and cleaned them with the corner of his shirt. He looked up as Hermione leaned across and patted him sympathetically on his arm. Despite his blurred vision, he could see her clear brown eyes looking at him lovingly. It made him feel better.

'You have great power, Harry. I can sense it,' she said softly.

Harry put his glasses back on quickly. That was a highly out of character comment for Hermione to make...surely she didn't still believe that.

'That was all an elaborate ploy by Voldemort...don't you know that?'

'Yeah, I heard, but I don't actually believe it. You are definitely one of the most powerful wizards I know.'

Harry felt uncomfortable. Yet Hermione would never say anything to him that she didn't believe to be true.

'Well, if I am, fat lot of use it is to anyone,' he said disparagingly.

'Do you feel it?' asked Hermione softly, her intelligent eyes observing him carefully.

It was strange. Nobody had ever actually asked him that question before...such a simple, up front question. This was more typical of the Hermione he knew. She always did favour the direct approach. And the thing was, Harry felt it constantly.

'I do actually. It burns inside me...it's awful.'

'Do you still sense Voldemort through your scar?'

'That stopped after Dumbledore died. Remember how it tortured me when we were at school? It was such a relief when it stopped. I never did work out why, but I'm sure not complaining.'

'Oh, I remember all right. You used to be so grouchy in the mornings.' Hermione rolled her eyes and grinned.

'Hey, you would have been too.' He then snorted. 'But I suppose I was really.' The wizard looked at the witch curled up comfortably in the armchair, her long fingers wrapped around the tea mug. 'Anyway, why all the questions?'

Hermione gave a small shrug and sipped her tea. 'I suppose I can't help looking at you in the way a Southern witch would...since I am one now.'

It was the first time Hermione had made any voluntary reference to the South.

'I didn't think they had witches and wizards in the South or that they used magic.'

'They sure do. But it's done very differently from here.'

'Fancy that.' Harry loved finding out these snippets of information; it made him feel less parochial. 'Is that why you got so sick after the attack...what was it again? A reaction to magic.'

'Exactly. As I say, the magic from the South is completely different. It's also why I haven't made any friends here other than you, McGonagall and Snape.'

A flash of anger consumed Harry at Hermione counting Snape as one of her friends. Had she not been listening to a word he had said about that spineless traitor? But at the last moment, he bit down his angry retort. He didn't want to jeopardize his friendship with her again over Snape. Then the oddity of her comment sank in. 'What do you mean?'

Hermione sighed, and regret showed on her face as she tucked her long hair behind her ears. 'No one else at Hogwarts comes anywhere near me.'

'Really? But why?' This had to be the oddest comment she had ever made. He tried furiously to recall her talking with someone in the staff room but drew a blank.

'It's to do with the type of magic I practice...it repels people here.'

'Really? Why? I'm certainly not repelled by you.' There was nothing repellant at all about Hermione...except that she was wearing Snape's clothes...which was just plain weird. What was she going on about?

'No, that's because you are Muggle-raised and a powerful wizard to boot. It is the wizard-raised who react to it. It was why you were able to visit me in the hut when I was sick...nobody else could, and that was the reason why McGonagall was acting so strangely.' Hermione took a sip from her cup, but continued to look closely at him.

'Wow, I never realized.' Harry ran his hand through his hair, unconsciously trying to flatten it.

'Not many people do. But that's why I know you have the potential power to beat Voldemort.'

'But how?' Harry swallowed. Was Hermione really saying this?

'You have two primary elements in you...fire and water. Voldemort has purposely kept you unbalanced, and as a result, you have suppressed your water element, and your fire element is overcompensating. Because of that, you haven't reached your potential power.'

'You are serious, aren't you? You believe this is right, don't you, Hermione?' Harry looked carefully at Hermione, who somberly nodded. His mind was whirring furiously at all the potentials and the maybes. 'But how does Voldemort know this?'

'Someone has trained him in Southern magic, and he is using it against the Order. I can recognize it.'

'But how do I go about unsuppressing my water element? I mean if this works, I might be of use and actually be able to help the Order.' Hope started to rise for the first time in Harry's chest.

'There are several Southern rites you would have to participate in.'

'Yeah...no problem...I'll do it. I've got absolutely nothing to lose.'

'I must warn you, Harry, that you will probably find part of the rite... challenging,' Hermione pointed out gravely.

'I don't care...I can do it.'

'It involves Snape.'

'What? Why?!'

'Why do you think Snape was able to heal me as he did or why everybody here dislikes him?'

'Because he is a slimy, traitorous bastard, that's why.' Harry spat.

'No, because Snape was brought up in the South and is trained in its magic.'

'I'll do whatever I have to do with you, but no way with him. I'm not going anywhere near the man. I don't trust him.'

'I can't be the one, Harry. It's got to be him.'

'Why?' asked the young wizard desperately.

'Other than Voldemort, Snape has the strongest water element. It has to be him.'

'But what are you?'

'I used to be fire, but I'm now all four of them...it's complicated. But I can't be the one...I have to conduct the rite.'

'No way. I'm not doing it. Snape is the only person I refuse to have anything to do with. Sorry, Hermione, there is no way,' stated Harry firmly.

The witch sighed wearily.

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Professor McGonagall stepped out of the green flame and glanced about her darkened office as she dusted ash off her robes. She walked hastily through the dark to her desk and dumped the roll of parchments she was carrying before lighting the candelabras around the room with a flick of her wand. There was a sharp knock on her door, and the tall figure of Snape moved quietly into the room.

'Good evening, Headmistress. You wanted to see me?'

'Yes, Severus, please have a seat.'

The witch gestured towards the worktable in the center of her office and then dug about in the bottom drawer of her desk until she found what she was looking for. 'I could do with a drink after the day I had...would you care for one?' asked Professor McGonagall, holding up the bottle of firewhisky, and to her amazement the wizard nodded. She had only been asking out of courtesy's sake...Severus never ate or drank anything...it was little wonder he was so thin and surly.

'I heard one of your students lost someone in the attacks.' She clapped her hands, two tumbler glasses appeared before them, and she poured out the amber liquid.

'A first-year boy lost his sister. I told him the news this afternoon, and his other older sister collected him just before dinner.' Severus looked tired and drawn; his black eyes were fixed on the glass in front of him. He quickly took a gulp.

There was another light tapping on the door, and the professor noted how quickly Severus tensed as he looked sharply around.

Hermione's pale face under her pointed witch's hat appeared around the door. 'You wanted to see me, Headmistress?'

The young witch visibly started when she saw Severus, and an almost sorrowful expression passed across her face.

'Ah ... good evening, Professor Snape,' she greeted hesitantly.

'Come in, and have a seat, Hermione,' said Professor McGonagall, and to her great surprise, Severus stood up and deferentially pulled out a chair for Hermione to sit on.

'Good evening, Miss Granger.' His alert eyes followed her as she crossed the room.

Hermione calmly sat down next to him as if it was the most natural action for Hogwarts' formidable Potions master to do and smiled shyly at him in thanks.

The older witch took a sip of the sharp drink, taking in their unusual behavior. 'Would you like to join us for a drink?'

'That would be nice, thank you.' The young witch smiled as the professor clapped and a glass appeared before her.

'I know you are both wondering why I have asked you here tonight,' she began as she poured Hermione a drink. 'And yes, it is to do with the attacks today. The Order is now in an extremely vulnerable position...it is highly likely that the intensity of today's attacks will continue. There is little we can do to prevent them.' She paused and took in Hermione's troubled expression. 'I know I'm going out on limb by asking you both this, and I apologise in advance if I cause offense, but I felt your type of magic in the hut and know its formidable strength. Is there any way you could use your magic to help the Order? We have no more options left.'

The professor saw Hermione and Severus look at each other for a long moment with the oddest of expressions, and the dark wizard slightly inclined his head before he said, 'We will do all we can to help the Order, Headmistress...rest assured.'

The fireplace crackled and sparked; Kingsley's head appeared in the flame.

'Sorry to disturb you, Headmistress, but there has been a direct attack on the Order's headquarters.'

Professor McGonagall leapt to her feet, her heart pounding. It had started already. 'Any casualties?'

'Yes, four. They also have taken Ginny...I am afraid they will squeeze her for information.'

'Thank you, Kingsley. I am coming now.'

The older witch moved quickly to her desk where she gathered the necessary items.

'Sorry...I must go. Do you mind seeing yourselves out?'

'No, not at all,' they said together as she stepped into the fireplace and disappeared into a whoosh of flames.

## Seventeen

*Chapter 18 of 22*

Seven years after the death of Dumbledore, Hermione finally returns to Hogwarts. What will she find?

Many Thanks to my beta, Soul Bound.

Hermione watched McGonagall's anxious face disappear in a burst of green flames, and an unusual weight of failure descended on her. She was shocked at the feeling. She never failed. But she had, and now countless people would die. The witch looked up uneasily at the dark wizard sitting completely still beside her. Why did he give false platitudes of confidence to McGonagall as he did? He really was an enigma, and Hermione almost shook her head in bewilderment. Then again, she reasoned, he hadn't refused her request, but voiced his distaste to the rite in the strongest possible way.

Snape cleared his throat and adjusted the folds of his teaching robes as he looked down at her. 'Have you eaten, my lady?'

Hermione shook her head.

'Would you care to dine with me this evening?'

Hermione fought down a churlish impulse to refuse. It would be so simplistically easy to blame him for everything, but she knew it would do no good.

'Yes, my friend, that would be nice,' she said, trying to inject some warmth she didn't feel into the words.

They stood silently and exited McGonagall's office, Snape warding it behind them. As they moved soundlessly down corridor after darkened corridor, Hermione realized that she also had a part to play in the failure to initiate the rite. If she hadn't rushed in, desperate to solve the pattern in order to go home, if she had actually stopped to think what she was asking these men to do and thought more about how to approach the delicate situation, she may have met with success. But it mattered nothing now. For whatever reason, people would die because of what she was unable to achieve.

Snape stopped and pushed the door open, and Hermione followed him despondently into the grimy, little room, averting her eyes as he unwarded the door. Despite her heaviness, she couldn't help but be relieved when she entered his dark rooms, and the intense pressure lifted.

Snape dug in his pockets, found a box of matches and quickly lit a branch of candelabra on the bookcase, which cast a warm glow to the room. 'My lady, allow me to take your cloak and hat.'

Hermione nodded, undid her heavy cloak and handed it to him along with her hat. He disappeared into the other room while she unlaced her boots. There were some low embers in the fireplace, so she padded over and prodded them with a poker, throwing in some kindling to reignite the flame. She always found fiddling with fire eased her mind and sat down cross-legged to nurse it back. The witch gazed into the deep, orange flame, mesmerized by its movements, and felt him gently caress her with his presence. She felt eased.

'My lady, would you care for some wine?'

Hermione turned around and saw Snape standing in the doorway to the kitchen, hair tied back and shirt tucked into his black trousers. He's got very long legs, noted Hermione absently as she nodded. The brown-haired woman turned back to the fire, putting her mind into the flame again, wanting to feel his caress, but being reassured at the thought of him just being there.

'My lady?'



Hermione turned again to see Snape place two wineglasses on the low table and sit smoothly down. She got up and moved towards him.

'Thank you for lighting the fire.'

'It wasn't a problem.' Hermione sat down opposite; a glass of red wine was in front of her. 'Well, cheers, I suppose,' Hermione said, trying to drum up some enthusiasm. She lifted her glass in salute.

'Cheers,' replied Snape, copying the gesture, his black eyes fixed on her.

Hermione took a sip of wine, almost unaware of the taste, so great was the turmoil in her.

'I wonder how long I'll be here now,' she said out loud, articulating her greatest fear of being stuck in this icy castle infinitum. What if she never saw her boy again? Her lip started to tremble, so she bit down on it hard to stop it, preferring pain to emotion.

Snape frowned in puzzlement, putting down his wine. 'What do you mean?'

'I've failed. I am sure you have worked out that Harry refused to do the rite. I don't know what else I can do now. All I want is to go home and see my boy...but I doubt that will be possible.' Hermione chewed on her lip, concentrating on sealing up her emotions.

'I don't know about that.' Snape looked at her oddly.

'With the intensity of the attacks, I'm sure Professor McGonagall won't let me leave. I did it all wrong. I think you're right...once a Gryffindor, always a Gryffindor. I should have been more Slytherin. I'm sorry if I caused offence to you today by suggesting that type of rite with Harry. I guess my thinking was too Southern. I well and truly miscalculated.' Hermione had her elbows on the table and her chin gloomily in her hands.

'No, I don't mean that. I am not so sure the rite won't go ahead.' Snape took another sip, but did not take his black eyes off her.

Hermione jerked her head up in surprise. 'How? What do you mean?'

'What did you just say? 'Once a Gryffindor, always a Gryffindor'... That is particularly applicable to your friend Mr Potter. With Ms Weasley being captured as she has, he might find a new impetus to overcome his hatred of me.'

'Do you think?' A tiniest grain of hope awoke within Hermione.

'Yes. I am sure he will visit you first thing tomorrow morning once he has spent a night in the depths of fear and despair. After that, perhaps I will not seem a bad alternative.' Snape looked like he was fighting down a smirk, but not quite succeeding. 'Although does he have any idea what is involved in the rite?'

'Ah... no.' Despondency ran through Hermione again. 'Just suggesting to voluntarily be in a room with you was enough. I am sure his reaction to the rite will match yours when I explain it.'

Snape looked at her evenly...a long finger tapping the side of his glass. 'It would make for a successful rite in that case.'

'What?' Hermione had no idea what Snape was saying.

'Do not forget I was brought up in the South, and in addition I am a Slytherin.'

'But I thought I'd offended you by suggesting the rite.'

'Forget my reaction. I did not control my emotions enough...it is nothing new.'

What had caused Snape to react how he did if it wasn't the rite with Harry? Hermione thought furiously. 'Is it because.... What did you call me? Your master?'

Snape flinched and looked away.

'I could hardly call myself that!' exclaimed Hermione indignantly. That put her in the same league as Voldemort and Dumbledore.

Snape lifted his eyes again to hers. 'Again, I reacted with bad grace. Had I allowed a moment's thought to take place...how could I have compared you and him to my previous masters? The very structure of master and servant does not exist in your world, my lady. I have been honoured beyond measure to encounter you and him in me and the potent power that exist between you both. It is only through sensing what occurred last night that I can even begin to try and understand what you are attempting to do now. I have always known there is a fundamental imbalance in this wizarding society that allows entities such as the Dark Lord to exist. But the power of the South I respect. There is no doubt Mr Potter needs to be strengthened. If it be your will, my lady, I will do the rite.' Snape lowered his head.

Hermione nodded quietly, and relief washed through her.

'And now I must prepare dinner. Would you care for a bath?'

Hermione's eyebrows shot up in surprise at the sudden topic change. 'Ah, yeah, sure,' she said unsurely...what a strange suggestion.

'You are staying in the Gryffindor Tower, are you not?'

Hermione nodded and thought about the pathetic shower in her room.

'It is time you discover bathing as Slytherins know it. It will also be recognizable to you from your time in the Black Mountains.'

'Ooh, a mountain style bath? Here?' The Black Mountain style baths were famous throughout the South.

Snape nodded with a smile and led her to a door between his bedroom and the kitchen. 'There are towels on the shelf. Please take your time.'

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Snape looked up when she moved to the kitchen doorway. 'Good?'

'Wonderful.' Hermione sighed happily.

'Let us go into the living room.'

Snape walked by with two plates, and Hermione closely followed him, feeling the ease in which her muscles moved. She hadn't realized how much tension she had from all her injuries until she was able to soak in the healing waters. The table was already laid complete with a bottle of wine and clean wineglasses.

'This looks amazing.' Her mouth watered as she looked down on the soft, orange salmon with a sprig of dill over it, creamy sweet potato and a fresh salad.

Snape sat down opposite. 'Please start, my lady.'

It tasted wonderful; she hadn't eaten anything as nice since... well... the dinner he had cooked her in the hut in the Forbidden Forest. Again Hermione was comfortable just eating. There wasn't any pressure to fill the silence, and she noticed Snape matched her enthusiasm...like he too was half starved. When the plates were empty, and Hermione's stomach full to bursting, Snape refilled her wineglass.

'Shall we sit closer to the fire?' he suggested.

The witch nodded, and Snape gathered up the plates, taking them into the kitchen while Hermione picked up the glasses, and moved to the fire where the rug was thicker. The wizard moved silently over to her, sitting down cross-legged next to her, and nodded thanks when she handed him his wine. Hermione sipped and swirled the red wine around her mouth, tasting its subtle notes.

'Have you thought what to say to Mr Potter when he comes knocking on your door tomorrow?' Snape asked, his dark eyes reflecting the dancing flames of the fire.

'I have no idea.' Hermione shook her head.

Snape drummed a long finger on his glass for a bit. 'He is a Gryffindor... hmm... This will require some thought, as they are often fixed about these matters. For some strange reason, it is tied up with their honour....' He rolled his eyes.

'He is also Muggleraised, and his aunt and uncle were conservative, so it is quite possible he has acquired some prejudices,' added Hermione. 'I don't actually know what his opinions are.'

Snape swirled the wine in his wineglass, and Hermione watched the moving shades of red. 'I would suggest an indirect approach when Mr Potter visits.'

'You mean a Slytherin approach,' observed Hermione, smirking.

'Quite.' Snape's lips twitched in amusement.

'Any other suggestions, oh-Head-of-Slytherin?' asked Hermione sarcastically.

'Tell him as little as possible, but assure him he will be safe and that his actions will benefit the entire wizarding society...appeal to his Gryffindor valor. Oh, and throw in the fact that he will most definitely become the hero he was destined to be...that will cinch the deal.' Snape sniggered.

Hermione winced for Harry at Snape's razor sharp assessment of him and the realistic truth in his comments. 'So, I tell him nothing about what he will do with you?'

'Say nothing except that I will be under oath not to reveal what takes place. Use the strength of the magic to draw him in.'

'Are you sure this is the right approach?'

'I know young men very well...trust me...it is the only way.'

It wasn't Hermione's normal way of approaching a situation, and the ethics of not telling Harry unsettled her. Yet if she did tell Harry, she knew he could still refuse. And then when Ginny was murdered after she had been tortured, Harry would be sent into a living hell. No, Snape was right...she would let the magic do its work, and there were strands she could thread through it that would make it easier for Harry. Hermione nodded in agreement.

'And what are the specifications for this type of rite?'

'Harry must take in your bodily fluids...your water...it must be done to trigger the change. But there is a certain amount of flexibility to how that is achieved,' Hermione answered vaguely.

'So there is my saliva and my...' Snape waved his hand in the general direction of his lower body.

Hermione nodded.

'Saliva it will probably be then.' Snape sighed somewhat dramatically. 'More is the pity. To actually receive pleasure from Mr Potter after all these years... Well, that would be truly wondrous.'

Hermione laughed at the expression on his face. 'Yes, well, I suppose...oh, well. But you will still find pleasure. I have no doubt about that.'

Now that there was a chance of the rite actually taking place, her initiate mind started working. 'How familiar are you with this rite?'

'Not very...only the main principles.'

'It will be powerful and quite different to what happened last night, but you are strong enough for your role...I know that. I'll be generating power to guide you through it.' Hermione sipped her wine. 'It should be done in a kund to augment the power, but that will be difficult, I would imagine. Hmm... I need to think.'

'A kund? I do not know that word.'

'It's a word that is most ancient and most maligned. But for now, it means an earthen pot and, for what we are to do, an underground chamber...where the rite takes place. They are scattered about the South, but I don't know about here.'

'Really? I did not know,' admitted Snape freely, stretching out on his stomach and propping his head in his hands.

'Not many talk of it...even in the South.'

'An underground chamber did you say?' Snape stroked his chin slowly. 'There are at least two underground chambers I know of in the Forbidden Forest. I never could work out their purpose, but they are most ancient.'

'In the Forbidden Forest? That's interesting...it makes sense, actually, now that I know what the houses are about. Are they big enough to do a rite in?'

'Yes, they both are quite spacious.'

'That's wonderful. My other concern is Harry's scar. When he suppressed his water element, he burnt his connection with Voldemort.'

'How do you know that?' asked Snape curiously.

'He told me it stopped hurting when Dumbledore died, which is about the time the suppression took place. However, my concern is when the water element is realigned, there is a possibility a reconnection will occur. If that happens, Voldemort will sense the change, and that cannot happen.'

'I am able to brew a potion to block the connection. It will essentially be the same as the one I take...except mine has added ingredients to counter the poison. When will the rite take place?'

'Tomorrow night, I hope.'

'I have enough brewed. Harry will have to take it hourly all day tomorrow to ensure enough is in his system.'

Hermione stared at Snape's long, relaxed body for a moment.

'Bugger! Bugger! Bugger!' she swore loudly in English.

'What?'

'Your Dark Mark.'

'Ah.' The wizard looked away uneasily.

'How aware is Voldemort of your thoughts and actions? I sensed a connection, but it seemed odd.'

'What I told you last night was correct...he is slowly poisoning me.'

Fear flowed involuntarily over Hermione.

'I and mine tasted it last night.' She looked down at her fingernails and felt a flush of embarrassment start to crawl up her neck. 'It was why I reacted as I did.'

There was silence and Hermione looked up to find Snape gazing gently at her. He blinked and continued in his deep voice, 'His poison ebbs and flows through me. I am able to create through the potion a type of blockage for the majority of the time, but when his poison is flowing strongly, it is more difficult. It is not a situation I find agreeable. It is much like trying to dam an incoming tide.'

Hermione nodded, remembering the craggy outcrop of rocks.

'Voldemort is in no way allowed to even remotely sense what is to occur...otherwise our element of surprise will be lost.'

Snape swirled the remaining wine in his glass swiftly so that it skimmed the rim of the glass. 'I could increase the potency of the potion, but there is a limit to its effectiveness, as the toxicity levels can quickly become fatal.'

'Are you able to block enough for tomorrow?'

'I am unsure. The poison fluctuates wildly. At present the poison should be flowing strongly now as a sign of his displeasure, but strangely it is not. But it could start flowing at any time. The only possible way around this is to take the highest potency potion over several days to ensure it will be effective enough to withstand it when it comes.'

'But we don't have days,' groaned Hermione. 'What is in the potion?'

'Wormwood is the active ingredient.'

'Really, I never knew that...then again, I doubt that type of potion would be considered common knowledge.'

'Actually, I teach it to first years, but it took a long time for me to realize its coded meaning.'

The witch was surprised, and then it dawned. 'The venom of sea dragons...how shrewd.' A look of admiration passed over Snape's face, and Hermione knew she had impressed him...it felt good.

'Is there any other way? You have to be the one to do the rite...'

Snape shook his head. 'There is no other way apart from the potion. I have explored all other options.'

Hermione drained her glass and stretched her legs out in front of her to relax her muscles. Snape got up easily and picked up the bottle from the table...then stilled.

'What you did last night must have reduced the poison in my system significantly. It is why I feel well now.'

'Really?' Hermione craned her neck to look up at the wizard. 'It made a difference?'

Snape nodded, sitting back down and leaning across to fill her glass before filling his own. 'Yes, with what has been going on, I had not realized the poison is not flowing through me as it should be...I feel well...ironic really.'

'If I did that again and you increased the wormwood potion to maximum strength, would that be enough to block the connection?'

'Yes...but we cannot. You will be putting yourself at extreme risk.'

'There is no other way. If we don't absorb your poison, you will not be able to do the rite,' countered Hermione firmly.

'Yes, but if you die, how will we do the rite?' Snape quickly pointed out. 'I do not want you in any danger. What happened last night could just happen again.'

'My rune closed the circuit both times, and as long as I keep my tattoo completely away from yours...better yet, not touching any part of you...it would prevent it from occurring again,' said Hermione slowly, working through the options out loud.

'But what of drawing you down again? Keeping you in this reality? I do not entirely understand it, but I know there are huge risks.'

'Yes, but if I don't fall into you and I resist going to him, I will be able to do it.'

'Pardon?'

'If our tattoos do not touch and I open a channel to him, but not go through it, I will be safe.'

'A channel?'

'Yes, to send the poison along so he can absorb it. He did that last night.'

'Are you able to do that?'

'It will take strength, and it is not usual, but it is possible.' Hermione looked down at her forearm encased in her black sleeve. 'But what about my rune?'

'Bind it with cloth?'

'Yes, that will work...especially if it is the same material as our clothes...and I have to remember not to bring it anywhere near your Dark Mark.'

'No. I have seen you twice now. I doubt you will be able to remember.'

'Tie my arm somehow so I can't move it?'

'I do not know about that...' Snape looked unsure.

'Bind my arm to my side...that'll work.'

'No, wear a larger shirt, and do not put that arm through the sleeve hole. That way you cannot lift your arm even if you want to.'

'Yes. We will do it now...there is no time.'

'I need to go to my office and drink the potion before we begin.' Snape got up quickly and went through his bedroom door, returning with strips of black material, one of his shirts and a canister of oil. 'Grounding oil for you to use,' he explained.

Hermione nodded, taking them. 'I will go through the grounding rituals that need to be done. When you return, I will be ready.'

'What do I do?'

'Lay beside me and give me your Dark Mark.'

Snape paled, swallowed and nodded.

When Snape had left, his cloak swirling about his ankles, Hermione unbuttoned her shirt and took it off. Taking the strips of material, she thickly bandaged her rune. The witch went through the grounding rituals: rubbing the oil over her body, making symbols with ash from the fire, tugging Snape's large shirt over her head but not putting her rune arm through the sleeve, and sitting and reciting the ancient words to open the channel to him. The longing to be with him intensified until she was on edge. She must not let her wild bird free. She must not join him. She must not cast off.

There was a shift in her periphery senses, and her body was guided smoothly into a laying position; there was the texture of a cushion on her cheek...soft skin on her lips. Hermione was tipping towards him, but used her strength to regain her balance. Suck, suck, she must suck. She tasted the poison's foul bitterness and guided it into the channel and felt him absorb it readily. He was intentionally keeping his distance from her, purposely not calling her. She was thankful...she knew she would not have been able to resist him if he had. The poison flowed blackly through her into the channel, and Hermione was aware of nothing else but its hypnotic movements. Gradually, the flow slowed until it was no more than a trickle, and then that too eventually stopped, and he rapidly closed the channel behind her.

Like a switch, everything focussed sharply. She was back...back...not that she had been anywhere, but there was no haziness about her senses. It had worked. Hermione stopped licking, and his arm shifted slightly. She was on her side; her rune arm was pinned down by her weight, which was good thinking by Snape. The wizard was warmly pressed up behind her...his Dark Mark arm was thrown over her.

'Are you all right?' he asked, and his voice had an unusual huskiness to it. She felt him prop himself up on his elbow.

'Yes...but my arm has gone to sleep. How are you?' Hermione rolled onto her back and looked at Snape lying alongside her. His face looked relaxed and unguarded. It was quite unlike anything she had seen...all harshness was gone.

'So, this is what it is like to have no poison in my system at all. It has been many years since I have felt like this. There is a lightness I do not recognize.'

Hermione rolled her shoulders to get the blood moving through her arm. Snape's arm still lay warmly across her.

'It has worked...I am very pleased.' Hermione smiled. 'And not just because of the rite tomorrow.' She then witnessed the unthinkable: an easy smile from Snape...free from any undertones of malice.

'Thank you, my lady. Your presence has enriched my life more than I could think possible.'

'Well, I am going to tell you that you have no need to thank friends...it was my absolute pleasure.' Hermione stifled a yawn. 'I suppose I should go back to my rooms soon.' She knew she had better move now while she still had the energy. It was so relaxing lying here, warm, no magical pressure crushing her, a full belly and Snape stroking her hair.

'Stay...sleep here...it is comfortable. Return to your rooms tomorrow morning.' He continued stroking her hair slowly...it felt nice.

'But my rune arm. I can't sleep like this...it feels like a straightjacket.'

'Simple.' Snape sat up, took off his black shirt, and firmly bandaged his Dark Mark with it. 'All right?'

'Ah, yes.' Hermione looked admiringly for the first time at a shirtless Snape...he had the shoulders and chest that spoke of a childhood spent swimming.

Snape got up and moved away from the flickering light of the fire and returned with two pillows and the same heavy blanket from last night. Hermione sat up awkwardly and first tried to wriggle her arm up and out the sleeve, but found it had been tucked firmly into her pants. Then she tried to untuck the shirt and pull it over her head but found that somehow the top buttons had been done up, and she couldn't get her head through the neck hole. Meanwhile, Snape had put the pillows down and sat down close to her.

'Do you need any help?' Amusement was glinting in his eyes.

'No, thank you. I am quite all right.' Hermione's pride came to the fore...she hated asking people to do these sorts of things. But she found trying to undo the millions of buttons with one hand was nigh on impossible...it would take her all night. 'Your bloody tailor...did he need so many stupid buttons,' she muttered exasperatedly in English.

'Come...allow me.' Snape leaned in and started unbuttoning them. 'Did you know you always swear in English?'

'No, I hadn't. But I suppose it's my mother-tongue after all. Probably when I feel any strong emotions, I might want to switch...I don't know...I never really thought about it.'

'I keep forgetting English is your mother-tongue.'

'I never picked English wasn't your first language all those years you taught me,' Hermione pointed out, watching his dexterous fingers unbutton the shirt.'

'True enough,' admitted Snape freely.

Snape had unbuttoned half the buttons, and Hermione was starting to be able to move her arm.

'Wait.' And he quickly undid the rest of the button. 'That will make it easier.'

The shirt fell open, and Hermione put her rune arm through the sleeve. Snape lightly traced a finger slowly down the red scarring on her chest and under her left breast. It made Hermione's breath catch in her throat.

'It has healed well, and they were rather neat stitches if I do say so myself,' Snape said quietly.

'Yes, I have no pain at all from it, and the bath this evening helped my muscles around my back tremendously,' rambled Hermione distractedly.

'Soaking in water is good for that,' replied Snape dreamily. He blinked and abruptly started buttoning her shirt back up, even though they both knew Hermione was capable of doing it herself.

'Lie down, my lady...sleep,' he said simply, bringing the blanket over them.

Hermione lay down and turned her head to watch the low flames of the fire. Snape lay next to her, put his arm over her and pulled her closer.

'When Mr Potter is at full strength, my lady, then what?' he asked quietly.

'Tomorrow, a pattern will be set, which allows me to guide it. This I am more confident about. I do hope you are right and Harry will come to me tomorrow...'

'Shh, he will come...I am sure. The rite will be done, and the pattern will be set. But for now, my lady, sleep,' he whispered in her ear.

So she did.

## Eighteen

### Chapter 19 of 22

Seven years after the death of Dumbledore, Hermione finally returns to Hogwarts. What will she find?

Many thanks to my beta, Soul Bound.

Harry burped, tasting the acidic bitterness of the potion, and stared with utter hate at the empty goblet in front of him. Every hour...every bloody hour...he had downed a goblet of what tasted like vile poison, and his stomach was now screaming in protest. But this was the last one, thank goodness. Harry stood up, burping loudly again, grimacing at the taste, and paced around the hut in agitation. Hermione should be here soon, and he ran a worried hand through his hair.

He'd had the worst day ever; he hadn't slept all last night, so anxious was he about Ginny.... Ah, Ginny... his beloved Ginny.... He'd die if anything happened to her. He hastily brushed away the tears from under his glasses. Last night, he'd felt so utterly useless as he watched overworked Order members dash in and out of McGonagall's office that he'd lashed out at the only person who even remotely understood what he was going through. Harry had apologized to McGonagall this morning, and she'd accepted it graciously enough, though she had every reason not to. But then she told him there was no way she could organize a relief teacher with everything else going on. Harry had a suspicion it was more to do with keeping him occupied than anything else, but after last night's explosion, he'd gone along with her. And besides, after the night he'd had where he imagined every type of torture Ginny was going through, there was no way Harry could sit still, so he might as well be teaching.

It was in the middle of the night, after hours of tossing and turning, when Harry remembered what Hermione had suggested that afternoon. Maybe he could do the rite with Snape? He had no idea what he had to do...but most rites were pretty similar...and if it meant there was even the remotest chance of Ginny not dying a long and painful death, he could pretty much do anything. And really, that was also what he wanted so badly: to actually *do* something of consequence. It was a pity it had to include Snape.

Harry had been surprisingly nervous when he had plonked himself down next to a sleepy-looking Hermione in the staff room before class. She had looked at him so lovingly that it made his heart want to break, and when she had said that she was sorry to hear about Ginny, he'd had to blink so many times to keep back the tears. But when he had told Hermione that he was thinking about doing the rite, the witch had practically hugged him she was so pleased. Harry had felt all the curious glances they were getting from the other staff members, but he didn't care...this was Hermione.

Harry flopped down on his unmade bed with a huge sigh and rubbed his stomach gently, trying to ease it. Hermione had quickly arranged for bottles of this vile poison to be delivered to him on the hour every hour for the rest of the day. He knew Snape had brewed it, but Hermione insisted he had to take it; it was for balancing something in him, or was it blocking something in him? Whatever that meant. The day went quickly, and Harry found McGonagall was right...teaching made him keep his mind steady and stopped it from going down frightening tunnels. He didn't see Hermione for the rest of the day, but she left a note on his desk to say she'd come by at eight tonight and that she'd explain everything then.

Harry heaved himself up and poured himself a glass of water...he'd had a raging thirst all day too and was pretty sure it had to do with the potion he was taking. God, he hoped he wasn't being slowly poisoned by Snape. Harry quickly dismissed it from his mind...Hermione would never let anything like that happen to him even if she was friends with that bastard. There was a soft tapping on the door, and Harry quickly strode over and opened it.

'Hi, Harry.' A black-hooded Hermione smiled up at him.

'Come in.'

'No...we don't have time. Snape is waiting. We can talk while we walk.'

Harry's stomach plunged when he heard her mention Snape. God, he had to be in the same room with that git...the horrible reality of the situation was becoming crystal clear. It was going to be a serious exercise in restraint for them both.

'Just a moment. I'll grab my cloak.'

'Get your wand too...we've got to go into the Forbidden Forest.'

'Really?' He hadn't expected that.

Hermione simply nodded, her eyes dark in her face. Harry grabbed his cloak and slammed the door loudly behind him. He shrugged into the cloak and dug around in his pocket to check his wand was still there. The night breeze was cold on his face.

'Shall we?' Hermione lifted up a lantern and started walking towards the small track leading into the dark forest. The moon couldn't be seen yet, but the night was still and clear. They walked side by side for a bit.

'Where are we going?'

'Into the Forbidden Forest.'

'I *know* that,' Harry growled. 'But why?'

Hermione paused, the entrance into the pitch-black forest right in front of them. There was an eerie silence, and Harry shifted on his feet.

'There is a special place in there that complements my sort of magic.' Hermione placed a hand on his arm. 'It will be all right, Harry. Nothing will harm you tonight. You will be safe, and I will be there the entire time.'

'And Snape...what about him?'

'He is under oath. Anything that happens during the rite he is forbidden to talk about or use in any way.'

Harry was slightly reassured. It was good to know Hermione was there and that Snape would not in anyway be able to use what would take place as fodder for his tongue. 'But what do I have to do?'

'It will be different to what you've ever done before...it is quite unlike the magical rites you have learnt. But it will be all right...you are strong enough. This is the only way we can beat Voldemort or rather *you* can beat Voldemort.'

'And get Ginny back?' Harry asked.

'There is that as well. After tonight, you will be powerful once more.'

Harry swallowed nervously. Hermione would never say something she didn't believe was likely to happen. The small witch entered the track, and he followed closely behind. It was completely black, so Harry placed a hand on Hermione's slight shoulder; the light from the lantern was confusing him with its brightness and the odd shadows it was casting. They walked in silence for a while, and he smelt fragrant wood smoke before he saw a flickering light coming up from a hole in the ground. Hermione stopped.

'When we enter, you must not speak. No matter how much you might want to...you must not. But remember I will be there...I will keep you safe. Do what Snape tells you to do without question...his task is most difficult. Do what he says, and the rite will create a pattern. Now wait here. Snape will call you.'

Hermione disappeared down the narrow stone steps, leaving the lantern on the ground. Harry shifted uneasily as the dark trees above him swayed heavily. He didn't like the Forbidden Forest; there was something about it that was creepy...not that he'd admit it to anyone. He drew his cloak closer around him and scuffed the rough ground with his boot...the noise loud in the stillness. He breathed in the smoke that billowed up from the underground cave...it had to be thick down there. It smelt nice though, a combination of wood and some sort of earthy incense. Far nicer than the headache-inducing floral stuff Trelawney used. Not in the same league actually. Harry peered down the stairs to see what Hermione and Snape were doing, but couldn't see anything except shafts of shifting light in the dark smoke. There had to be a fire down there. His heart started beating quickly, and a sweat broke out. What had he got himself into? What if this was some sort of sacrificial rite? What if Hermione had joined Snape and become a Death Eater? Harry looked down the tunnel again. He could just walk away. He could do it right now. Nobody could stop him, and apart from Hermione and Snape, no one else would be the wiser.

'Mr. Potter...enter.'

A chill of fear went down Harry's spine at the sound of Snape's voice coming up from deep in the earth. He froze, unsure what to do. Every instinct told him he was putting himself in danger if he descended the steep stone steps, yet amongst the danger there was allure...a mystery. What was it about this rite that it had to be done in secret and away from Hogwarts? And why was straight-shooting Hermione suddenly so cagey? The very setting alone seemed powerfully primitive. Resolutely, he started descending the steps, leaving the lantern behind. As he walked deeper into the earth, his eyes smarted from the waves of smoke, and his nostrils filled with the deep scent of... sandalwood... no, a more earthy smell than that. Harry ran his hands down the narrow, cold, stone walls to steady himself; it was dark, and the stone slab steps were uneven. He couldn't help taking one last look back up at the dark, moving branches of the Forbidden Forest above him before descending the last steps quickly in case he lost his nerve. Harry peered into the dark chamber, but it was hard to make much out except there was a hazy fire in what could be the center of the chamber.

'From now until the end of the rite, Mr. Potter, there will be no talking.'

Harry, startling, spun around. He could make out through the swirling smoke Snape standing perfectly still beside him, and he bit down an angry retort.

'You must now change into appropriate attire for the rite.'

Harry peered at Snape...what on earth was he wearing? It was the first time he had seen the Potions master in anything but copious layers of black. His white chest stood out in the dim light, and his dressing was... curious.

'Take all your clothes off.'

Harry swallowed nervously.

'But I suppose you can leave on your undergarments if you require some type of security,' Snape snidely added.

Harry frowned and glanced about to see if he could see Hermione, but apart from the muted flames of the fire, he couldn't see further than an arm's length. This better bloody well be worth it, he grumbled to himself as he took off his clothes. Luckily, he had a good body...in fact, he knew women greatly admired it, and all men were envious of his six pack of abs. Even so, he resolutely left his boxers on...no way was he going to stand stark naked in front of Snape in the dark.

'I will need to assist you in draping the robe correctly.'

Snape shook out a long length of shimmery material that made the smoke swirl about, allowing Harry to see that Snape had his hair pulled straight back off his face. Apart from his voice and his honker of a nose, Harry would be hard pushed to recognize him as Hogwarts' Potions master. It was most disquieting.

'Lift your arms,' ordered Snape.

Harry froze in shock when Snape put his arms around his waist to wrap the material around him.

'Hold this here,' ordered Snape again, 'and whatever you do, do not let go.'

Harry held the silky, slippery material on his waist. Snape pulled the material so it was secure and tucked it quickly into the waistband of his boxers...much like wrapping a towel around his waist.

'Keep holding firmly.' Snape was frowning in concentration. 'And stand straight.'

The taller man stood in front of him and measured out the remaining material. Harry had no idea what he was doing, but it seemed he was being dressed in the same style as Snape: material around his waist that was pleated at the front and brought up over one shoulder. It reminded him of pictures he'd seen of the robes the Romans used to wear...but more complicated. And it seemed Snape too was finding it complex. As he was folding the material into pleats, he was muttering to himself and had to restart it again twice.

'Move, I need to stand next to you to do this,' said Snape abruptly, straightening when somehow something wasn't right the third time. His anger seemed to be directed more at himself than anything else. 'And keep holding.' He moved and stood right up next to Harry so that their skin touched. Harry had to stop himself from flinching away. Snape was a good few inches taller than him, but skinny. Snape was obviously preoccupied with the task at hand, and Harry heard him grumbling, 'Of all the things I have to do... never thought I would be dressing someone else in robes.'

This time Snape folded the pleats deftly so they fell in precise folds and tucked them securely into Harry's waistband. The taller wizard lifted the remaining material and draped it over one shoulder. He stood back and looked over Harry critically.

'You can let go now.'

Harry quickly let go of the material he was holding, and Snape leaned in and adjusted the material on his shoulder so it sat smoother.

'When you sit down, hold the first three pleats between your fingers.'

Harry nodded, feeling out of his depth. Of all the things he'd expected, being dressed by Snape was certainly not one of them, and the smoke was making his head buzz.

'Follow me.'

Harry scrambled after Snape before he disappeared into the smoke, wincing at the rough ground on his bare feet. The robe felt odd. It restricted his movements; it had to be what it was like for a woman wearing a tight dress, but at the same time was cool on his skin. The smoke was black and billowing, and Harry did not want to be left alone...it was too spooky even if it meant he was with Snape. He was doing this for Ginny, Harry reminded himself furiously. He stepped onto soft material...carpet or a thick rug maybe...and there was a fire on the ground in front of him. Snape sat smoothly down cross-legged, facing the fire, and Harry fumbled, remembering to hold the pleats, and sat awkwardly down next to him. Harry started when he saw through the flickering light of the fire Hermione sitting motionless on the other side with her eyes closed. He was shocked that he could see her breasts. Hermione was wearing a similar robe to his and Snape's, but the material fell between her breasts and not over her shoulder. There was not any attempt to cover them with the material. She didn't have an ounce of spare flesh, and her breasts were small...but nice, noted Harry without much conscious thought. He looked quickly up at Snape to see what his reaction was, but saw he was sitting completely still with his eyes shut. They both were like statues...unrecognizable statues.

At some wordless signal, Hermione hooked a leg over a drum Harry hadn't noticed and slowly started tapping on it...all with her eyes shut. Meanwhile, Snape had opened his eyes and pushed towards him one ornate plate filled with evenly-cut wood and one ornate bowl filled with... he wasn't sure what, but it had a long spoon in it.

'Copy me.'

Snape took a piece of wood from his plate, so Harry did the same. The wizard listened to the beat of the drum and in time with the rhythm placed it in the fire. Harry did the same. The fire crackled hungrily. Snape picked up the bowl, and again, listening to the drum spooned the sticky substance into the fire. Harry did the same. The fire burnt hot, and the oily mixture sent bursts of earthy smoke billowing out, making Harry's eyes sting. The tempo of the drum picked up, and Harry followed Snape, rapidly feeding the fire with wood and the oily mixture, then wood again, until it became a whirl. No conscious thought could enter Harry's head except feeding the fire, the boiling heat, the smoke, the beat of the drum. Harry's eyes were permanently fixed on the fire in front of him as it burned higher, brighter, hotter. The beat of the drum was loud in his ears, and everything else faded. Still Harry followed Snape's lead...still the fire burnt hotter and hotter yet. Sweat poured from him until he knew it was dripping off him. Slowly, the beat slowed, releasing him: he was too hot...he was being consumed by fire...panic gripped him; he was being burnt alive both from within and without.

'Stand.'

Snape's voice sounded far away. Harry was tugged upright, and he swayed unsteadily. The drumbeat had lost its furious pace and was now sending out an almost melancholic rhythm. Snape was shiny from the heat.

'Come.'

Snape held him firmly by the arm and led him away from the blazing fire where it was marginally cooler.

'Step in here.'

Snape guided Harry. The fire burnt angrily inside him, and yet strangely at the same time, he could feel a cool, stone floor beneath his feet. A wave of dizziness came over him. Where was the heat coming from? Snape kept a firm grip on his arm, and Harry was reassured by his touch. He looked bleakly about and made out a cauldron beside them.

'Water...it will cool you.'

Harry smelt the moistness of the water and heard it being swirled about. Snape released his arm and lifted a ladle. Harry was woozy. Snape started reciting an incantation in a deep voice...it wasn't in a language he recognized, but it sounded pleasant. A cold, wet finger rapidly touched Harry's nostrils, his ears, his chin, his elbows, his navel, his knees and his feet. It was like he was being anointed. The beat of the drum quickened, and Snape repeated it again and again. Coolness spread through him, soothing the blazing inferno somewhat, and Harry became more conscious of his body and his surroundings. His robe was wet on his body...it was good. Again, Snape anointed him with the water, his face perfectly composed in relaxed concentration. The tall man ladled water out from the cauldron again, but this time poured it over one of Harry's shoulders and then the other. The water cascaded down him, and his robes became heavy with wetness, but he didn't care; it was bliss. After the searing heat, anything cool was wonderful. He closed his eyes momentarily to savor it and was shocked by the kaleidoscope of colours moving about.

'Try not to close your eyes, Mr. Potter.'

He reopened them and saw Snape watching him carefully.

'Follow me.'

Snape placed his arm back on Harry's and guided him back to the fire. The robes restricted his legs, but Harry was pleased he wasn't wearing his normal clothes in this heat. This time Snape sat down next to Hermione and guided Harry to sit close on his other side, their legs touching. The witch's eyes were still closed, and she was still beating a slow, gentle rhythm on the drum. The fire was leaping, spitting, crackling, and reveling in its wildness. The heat was pulsating out in waves, and when Harry breathed in, it burnt his lungs. The fragrant smoke made his eyes water, and he knew it was affecting his thinking, but he didn't care. He stared at the hypnotic movements of the flames, seeing its very life force, and suddenly he was enjoying the intense heat, savoring the feel of sweat trickling down his forehead and spine. The drumbeat stopped, and Hermione unhooked her leg from over the drum and rolled it away from the fire. Snape shifted slightly, and she moved and sat cross-legged directly in front of Snape, the fire to the side. Harry watched as Hermione opened her eyes and looked directly at Snape as if oblivious of Harry's existence. She said something in another language quietly, but had a smile playing on her lips. Snape started suddenly, then snorted in amusement, and Harry saw respect burning in Snape's eyes for her. Then they both composed themselves as if remembering what they had to do. Snape moved closer still to the witch so that their knees were touching. Hermione leaned over to the fire, swiftly smeared white cooler ash on her hand and traced something on Snape's chest and down his arms while chanting. The witch smeared more ash from the fire on her hand, and Snape lowered his head so Hermione could trace ash along the bridge of his nose, over his forehead to his widow's peak. All the time Snape's eyes were fixed intently on Hermione's. The wizard moved away from Hermione.

'Face me.'

Harry startled, moved quickly in front of Snape, and the wizard proceeded to smear ash on him in the exact same way as Hermione did to him. The ash was gritty on his chest, and Harry once more felt he was burning alive...as if the ash had reignited the fire inside him. The temperature in the room soared until Harry almost couldn't bear it... Maybe it wasn't the room, Harry bleakly thought.... Maybe the fire was inside him. He could hear the fire crackling from within.

'Lean forward.'

Harry did and could feel Snape tracing the ash up his nose and over his forehead. His head was burning in a white-hot heat wave.

'Keep your eyes open...look at me.'

Harry quickly opened them...he hadn't even realized they had dropped shut. Snape's face was inches from his, and he could vaguely feel his knees touching his. It took a surprising amount of effort for Harry just to focus on Snape's pitch-black eyes...they were so black he couldn't differentiate his pupils from his irises. Strangely, his balance came back, and Snape's eyes flicked quickly about his face, nodding his satisfaction about something.

Hermione had continued a low chant, and in front of her were three goblets. Snape took two and passed one on to Harry.

'Drink all of it when I do.'

Snape stilled, and Harry could tell he was listening to the words of the chant for his cue. Then the dark wizard fixed his eyes back on Harry and nodded, lifting his goblet. Harry swigged back the contents in four gulps. It was alcohol of some sort...that much was certain...and it was nice. It was chilled and tasted lightly of peach skin for some strange reason. Harry lowered the goblet and handed it back to Snape. Hermione poured out only two goblets this time from a pitcher. Her flowing movements, her skin glowing in the firelight, her lips moving with the chant, mesmerized Harry. This time, she lifted the goblet to Snape's lips; Harry saw Hermione meet Snape's eyes, and a softness moved across her face. Snape drank it down, his eyes burning into hers, and a trickle went down his chin and neck, and Harry's eyes followed it hungrily. Snape bowed his head to Hermione, picked up the second goblet and turned to him. Harry wanted to hate knowing that Snape was going to hold the goblet while he drank, but he couldn't drum up the emotion.

'Drink it all.'

Harry leaned forward, Snape holding the goblet to his lips, and Harry drank it down thirstily, loving the exquisite, chilled taste. All the time Snape had his eyes fixed on his, but his gaze didn't disturb Harry. He was conscious of the waves of heat pouring out of the fire, the warm dampness of his robes on his skin, Hermione's hypnotic chanting, the burning inside him, the hot inferno raging through every cell in his body.

'Open your eyes.'

Snape's voice filtered through to him, and with huge effort, he forced his reluctant eyelids to open.

'Open your mouth.'

Harry felt Snape's fingers touch his lips as he placed something in his mouth. It was salty. He chewed...it was meat, and its richness tasted good. Harry forced himself to look at Snape, who was holding another cube of meat delicately in his long fingers, waiting for him to swallow. Harry tried to look for Hermione, but she felt too far away...the fire also felt like it had moved a huge distance away from him. Harry felt the burning inside him, the wetness of sweat on his skin, the chanting washing over him and Snape in front of him. The wizard fed him another cube of meat but this time ran his cool finger softly around his lips. It felt nice. Harry focussed on Snape as he chewed. The wizard was looking intently at him...Harry knew Snape was reading him, but he didn't mind. Harry swallowed and looked expectantly at Snape's hands for more, but was disappointed that there wasn't any more.

'Open your mouth.'

The tall man leaned in. Harry felt Snape's lips on his briefly, and a cool, wet tongue pushed another cube of meat into his mouth. Harry knew that on some level something was wrong, but the meat tasted wonderful. He chewed; it tasted better than the previous two, and Harry was spiraling away down interesting channels.

'Open your eyes.'

Harry put all his effort into opening his eyes, and when he did, the only thing he could focus on were Snape's lips; they looked nice to him, gleaming in the firelight. Maybe he would be fed some more from them...maybe they would touch him some more. Harry couldn't stand it. If Snape wasn't going to move, well, he would. There was a cool hand on his chest.

'Wait,' said Snape with a chuckle.

Harry was fascinated when Snape lifted a goblet and drank deeply from it...it was more beautiful than anything he had ever seen.

'Come closer.'

Harry loved seeing Snape's lips move when he talked and felt Snape cup the back of his head, thankfully guiding him across the distance. His lips felt better than they looked...as if his lips and Snape's belonged together. Harry was being eased down to the floor, and Snape was over him, his body all angles and hardness in a way a woman's never was. Harry opened his mouth, needing to drink him in. Snape's tongue swirled into him, bringing with it the taste of fresh, icy-cold water. A thirst Harry had never known sprung to life; he was no longer burning with heat, but was being enraged by an all-consuming, driving thirst, and Harry tasted the solution. So he sucked, gulped, swallowing into him the cool, cool water, but the more he drank, the more he needed, making the relentless thirst even worse.

Yet somewhere in Harry's fogged brain, he remembered it was Snape he was drinking from...what if he was drinking too much from him? What if Snape couldn't sustain it? With all the effort he could muster, Harry stopped drinking down the heavenly, most exquisite nectar he'd ever tasted. It was coming from deep within Snape...what if he drained Snape completely and left him with too little. Harry fought down the urge to give in and drink until he was sated: he needed to be sure. Snape's tongue retreated slowly...Harry desperately wanted to trap it forever in his mouth, but he couldn't, so he nibbled on Snape's lips instead. The thirst was raging in him, but Harry forced his eyes open. Snape stilled, and his eyes opened quickly. Surprise mixed with worry mixed with... was it pleasure?... shone from them.

'Is everything all right, Mr. Potter?' Snape huskily asked.

His body was wondrously cool over his, and Harry put his arms around him, feeling his slippery back. He didn't want the wizard to move. Snape's eyes widened slightly in surprise, but moved even closer into him so that every part of Harry's body was in some way touching his cool body. Harry tried to find the words, but there were none...it was as if his mouth had forgotten all its other functions other than to drink.

'Mr. Potter?'

Worry flashed across Snape's face, and a luxuriously chilled hand moved down Harry's cheek.

'Can I?' stumbled out of Harry while he furiously thought, please, say yes...he would die of heat and thirst if Snape denied him.

Relief shone from Snape's eyes as he snorted in amusement, and a gentle smile played on his beautiful lips.

'Ah, ever the Gryffindor,' he said, but with softness. 'All that is from me is for you...drink until you are sated.'

That was the only thing Harry needed to hear; he lunged at Snape hungrily, seeking out and devouring his mouth. Snape's sensuous tongue moved into him. With it poured a river of icy cold water, and Harry drank as only a man dying of thirst could, savoring every last drop, knowing his very existence relied on him getting the fluid into him. Every molecule in Harry's entire body clambered to be touched by the flowing water, wanting to be relieved of the heavy burden of heat they were carrying. And still Harry drank, and still the blissful water flowed strongly into him, wanting to be absorbed by him. Snape's water was what Harry had always been seeking, but could never find up until now. Harry knew as he drank it down greedily that what Snape was readily pouring into him was himself. It tasted good.

Stillness washed over his body. It wasn't shocking. It wasn't startling. It wasn't overwhelming or disturbing. But Harry knew deeply that his power had returned. He no longer had his unquenchable thirst; he no longer needed to drink Snape's water...his own flowed soothingly through his body. But Harry did not want to let go of Snape. He needed someone to be close to him and didn't want to be alone quite yet. The stillness and steadiness had come to him through Snape. If the wizard moved away, it too might go and leave him, and he would be plunged back into the fire again.



Snape moved his lips away from Harry's fractionally...he must have sensed the change in him. But Harry leaned upwards, not wanting any distance between them. Snape looked at him curiously.

'You are powerful once more, Mr. Potter. You no longer need to drink,' he whispered softly as if telling him something he might not have realized.

A tidal wave of exhaustion rushed over Harry. He wanted to sleep, yet he ran his hand over Snape's back, not wanting to let go of him. The stillness was deafening and so precious to him that he was anxious it might leave him.

'Stay...it might go,' he stumbled out.

Snape ran a finger down his cheek.

'The power is yours now, Mr. Potter. It will not leave you again.'

Harry nodded, realizing how foolish his logic was, but he couldn't unwrap his arms from around Snape.

'Sleep now. Let your body adjust to your power naturally.'

'Stay?'

'But of course, Mr. Potter, but of course.'

Snape rolled over to Harry's side and pulled him close. Harry laid his head on his shoulder, feeling the fabric of Snape's robe on his cheek...his cool, firm body holding him...and slept.

## Nineteen

### *Chapter 20 of 22*

Seven years after the death of Dumbledore, Hermione finally returns to Hogwarts. What will she find?

Many thanks to my beta, Soul Bound.

Hermione gazed across the grey, restless lake to the bank of dark clouds until her eyes watered from the chill wind. Blinking away the tears, she looked down at her dirty fingernails and with a twig scraped out the ash from under them. The witch had been so certain... so confident that once Harry's power was restored, a pattern would be established, and she would be able to bring about a swift resolution. But instead death enclosed her. The witch shifted her cross-legged position on the boulder she was sitting on so that it didn't dig so sharply into her ankles and pulled her hood firmly over her ears to keep them warm.

'Miss Granger.'

Hermione spun around...she hadn't heard Snape walking up behind her in the howling wind. He looked drawn and had deep shadows under his eyes. But really, the wizard should look like that...he had given his all to Harry last night. Despite having had prolonged poisoning and constant exposure to heavy Northern magic, he had still been able to bring Harry into his strength. Snape was a remarkably powerful wizard, and Hermione couldn't help but think what his life would have been like if he had stayed in the South where he would have been appreciated.

The tall wizard stepped off the track, moving over the uneven ground with ease towards her.

'Professor,' Hermione acknowledged with a smile. 'Why aren't you at the Quidditch match?'

'Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw...pah,' he replied dismissively. 'I had potions to brew.'

'For Harry?' Hermione wiped her dripping nose discreetly with her sleeve.

'Yes. Mr. Potter has an adequate supply now.'

Another bitter blast of wind hit them...it tasted of snow. Snape huddled deeper into his heavy cloak and leaned up against the rock next to her, looking at her sharply.

'And you, Miss Granger? Is there a reason why you are out in this bone-chilling wind with only your light robe on under your cloak? Is it frostbite or hypothermia you are courting?'

'I needed to think, and I can't seem to do that in Hogwarts, sir.' Hermione dropped her eyes and shook her head.

'My lady? Is everything all right? Is it Mr. Potter?' Snape must have sensed something in her voice.

Hermione looked into his black, black eyes and remembered her boy. She sighed and shook her head. 'Harry's fine, my friend. He's sleeping, which is what he should be doing. His power has returned.'

'Is that not good, my lady?' Snape questioned, looking at her quizzically.

'It is.... It is...' answered Hermione, her voice trailing off.

'But?' Snape filled in for her, frowning.

Hermione looked at the dark wizard steadily; by articulating what he was questioning, even to him, she would be committing to a course of action.

Snape's face was pinched with cold, but he hoisted himself up onto the boulder effortlessly and sat close to her, their shoulders touching.

'But?' He prodded her again.

'It's the pattern,' said Hermione finally, 'but it isn't a pattern. It's a single, frayed thread that connects them. And if that single thread snaps, it will unravel all the patterns, and

everyone...you, Harry, McGonagall, all the children here, everyone... everyone... all the Northern witches and wizards...will plunge to their deaths. We must pass across the thread without breaking it so that we can move into the next pattern. If we don't, Voldemort will win, and if that happens, he will destroy everything, himself included...that I am certain of.'

Snape's eyes widened.

Hermione wiped away her tears with the back of her hand. 'You did ask.'

Snape stilled and then did what Hermione didn't expect, but appreciated: he put his arm around her and pulled her close into him. He was warm and smelt of wormwood.

'The only way across is complicated. He told me the route the other night...fire into water...but it's complex and perilous. It needs to be done lightly...swiftly...so as not to put the thread under any strain.' Hermione looked the wizard straight in the eye, but couldn't hold his gaze as she explained, 'It involves you, Harry and me. The chances of success are minute. In all likelihood, we are looking at our deaths. We must kill Voldemort. If we succeed in killing him, but die in the process, we will have connected one type of pattern, and this wizarding community will survive.'

Snape pulled her in closer so that his chin rested on the top of her head. He deftly unbuttoned the lower buttons of his cloak and flicked part of his cloak over her shoulder so that she could share its warmth. 'You must understand my position, my lady. I have had a death sentence placed on me for many years, so what you present to me is my only chance of survival. I will go into it willingly, as I did last night. But it will be much harder for you and Mr. Potter. You both are young and have options.'

Hermione turned and looked up into his face. He was gazing out at the lake. His hair was moving in the uneasy wind. 'But I don't have an option, my friend. This is what he has shown me.'

The wizard looked down at her quickly, his eyes soft. He lifted his hand and ran it down her cheek. 'We must succeed then.'

'Yes, we must.'

A roar from the crowd floated towards them, signaling the end of the game. Snape turned and looked behind. 'It seems Ravenclaw has won.' He flicked his cloak from her shoulders and leapt lightly down from the boulder. 'Come, my lady. Come with me out of the cold. We can talk more in my rooms.'

'And your Saturday Slytherin duties?' Hermione took his hand, and he helped her down. She felt stiff and cold.

'Delegated out.'

They walked back to the track, slowly heading towards Hogwarts up the steep path. Hermione's mind was a whirl of ideas, anxieties and fear.

'My friend?'

'Yes, my lady'

'How interested is Voldemort in me, do you think?'

'Very. He covets what you know and who you are. You are like a highly-prized diamond to him.'

'Good.'

Snape looked down at her curiously.

'My friend?'

'Yes, my lady.'

'How aware would Voldemort be if you let him have full access to you?'

'Very. I use the potions primarily, but I also have other techniques I have developed over time to block him from knowing my thoughts.'

'So if you allowed Voldemort in, he could gain information via you?'

Snape darted his eyes at her, his face tense. 'But that has never happened. I have never allowed the Dark Lord in. You are quite safe.'

'I know. But if I *wanted* Voldemort to sense me...could you let him?'

'Yes...but why?'

'I want to use Voldemort's greed to pull us across. Are you able to unblock your barriers?'

Snape looked uneasy, but nodded. 'There is a potion I can take that counters the effects of the wormwood potion. The Dark Lord does not become aware of thoughts as such, but becomes aware of the feelings and emotions of the Dark Mark bearer. And from that, he can reap a lot of information.'

'Good.'

They walked silently, the wind at their backs making it easier.

'You intend to be the bait,' Snape stated simply after a while.

'This is the only way,' Hermione nodded.

'You will be in extreme risk of capture. The Dark Lord is powerful.' Snape flicked his cloak agitatedly around him.

'I know. I know,' acknowledged Hermione wearily, breathing deeply from walking up the steep path.

'Is there anyway of reinforcing you? A binding ritual perhaps?'

Hermione looked up admiringly at the tall wizard beside her. 'What a brilliant idea. I never thought of that... Yes, that would work. A binding ritual is perfect for what we are to do.'

'Then that is what we will do. And we will make it with strength so that it can withstand the power of the Dark Lord.'

Hermione smiled up at Snape gratefully.

'When do you intend to do the rite, my lady?'

'We can't hesitate.... If possible, tonight. But I need to see Harry first...I must let him know. I'll go to my rooms and change, then go to see him.'

Snape slowed his pace and looked evenly down at her. 'Have you slept at all?'

'No.'

'Eaten?'

'Err... no.'

Snape continued looking at her steadily. 'Go and see Mr. Potter, but come down to my office afterwards. Since you do not have the support of a circle to help you, I will have to operate as one. You must have your needs met before tonight. It is in the best interests of everyone that you are functioning at your best.'

Hermione nodded in agreement. Snape really was her circle.

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Hermione hesitated, but chided herself angrily for still acting like an immature student with all that was happening, and knocked firmly on Snape's office door. It swung open.

'Enter.'

Snape was chopping at his worktable, a bubbling cauldron beside him. The room smelt of lemon balm. He glanced up, nodding his acknowledgement of her.

'I will be with you shortly...have a seat.'

Hermione walked across his office and wearily sat down on one of the chairs in front of his desk. She adjusted her witch's hat and tucked a stray lock of hair back under it.

'How is Mr. Potter?'

Hermione turned and saw Snape looking up briefly from his stirring.

'His power is back. It's steady and strong,' replied Hermione. 'He slept most of the morning, but is awake now.'

Snape paused for a moment, his steaming ladle poised above the cauldron. 'And how did Mr. Potter take it?'

'Surprisingly well. Harry's quite different...a good different, though. He seemed to grasp what must be done. I explained the risks, and he understood them. And by doing the rite tonight, there is also the chance we may be able to save Ginny. I said I would pick him up at eight.'

'Good...tonight it is then.' Snape looked satisfied with the potion he was brewing and ladled it carefully into a vial. He busied himself with tidying the workbench up.

'Is that the potion for tonight?'

'Yes. Once I take it, the effect will be immediate. The Dark Lord will sense you through my feelings and emotions.'

'You'll have to make them pronounced...if you can. We must lure Voldemort in.'

'That should *not* be a problem,' he said in a quiet undertone that Hermione only just heard.

Hermione looked up, but Snape had quickly turned his back to her and was doing something with the cauldron above the fireplace.

Despite the heat of two fires in his office, it was still cold. Hermione was sure it would snow tonight; it would be the first snowfall for the winter season if it did. The witch hadn't realized how practical frock coats were in the winter. In fact, all of Snape's clothes were far better designed for the cold than anything she had ever worn before. And the number of pockets in everything was simply a godsend.

'Here, my lady.'

Hermione smelt the coffee before she saw the coffeepot on the tray along with crusty bread and dips in small saucers. 'Ooh, coffee,' she exclaimed. 'Thank you.'

Snape simply smiled as he placed the tray down on his desk and took the chair next to hers. He poured out the coffee, and Hermione sipped it, loving the taste.

'Please eat, my lady.' Snape offered her the bread, which she readily took and dipped into the condiments. She hadn't realized how hungry she had been until she started eating.

A feeling of melancholy washed over Hermione as she chewed on the last piece of bread, her stomach finally sated. She looked up and found Snape looking at her, obviously reading her expression.

'We do what we can in every given situation, my lady. We cannot do more than that,' he said quietly with feeling, refilling her cup with coffee.

Hermione recognized the truth in his words. 'Yes. I understand. But it's strange. For seven years, all I wanted... all I dreamed about was to be with him. So I should be approaching tonight fearlessly, yet I sit here right now with great sadness. The ties to this realm hold me far tighter than I had realized.'

'It is hard to let anything go...it is what makes us human.' Snape looked at her sadly, his eyes dark in his face.

'It's my boy who holds me the most. I know he is loved where he is, but...' Hermione dropped her eyes and took a sip of coffee.

'It is as it should be, my lady. It would be unusual for you not to feel this way. How old is he?'

Hermione put down her cup and looked at Snape's soft expression. 'Six...he is a serious one. I always try to lighten him up. He has black eyes like you.'

'Does he?' For a moment, Snape looked self-conscious...almost flustered...but quickly recovered. 'I too was a solemn child...not much has changed, I suppose.'

'Oh, I don't know about that. But to live as you have for so many years...,' the witch shook her head in respect and amazement, '...that takes more strength than most people have.'

'Again, I had little choice in the way circumstances presented themselves to me. However, I am appreciative of the last few weeks.'

'Why?' Hermione frowned, not understanding him.

'Because I have found an agreeableness to them I had quite forgotten.'

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Harry lay on his bed, staring up at the ceiling. A sense of tranquility flowed through him, and even though it had never so much as wavered once during the day, he wanted to appreciate it constantly in case it left him. Everything seemed clearer, as if somebody had adjusted a lens on a camera, pulling everything into sharp focus and allowing

him to see a depth of colour he hadn't been able to see before. It reminded him of when he had walked out of the optometrist's for the first time with his new glasses. But it also made him realize how out of balance and blinkered he had been previously.

Harry heaved himself off the bed, walked over to the table and poured himself a goblet of foul potion. He downed it in four gulps, swearing at its disgustingly repulsive taste. The wizard slowly started clearing the weeks of clutter from the table.

Who stood out today was Hermione when she had visited this afternoon. He must have been too dazed to notice anything in the morning, but he hadn't been able to keep his eyes off her when she had returned. The witch had a mesmerizing power that he had never noticed before. While she had talked to him about tonight, Harry had watched as the ancient power moved sinuously around her, softly, as if it were caressing her languidly. It loved her, Harry realized intuitively, then understood that he saw it as sentient. Yet what he saw and what he sensed were totally different. The Hermione who had sat at this table looked dreadful. Even though she had explained everything calmly, the timbre of her voice had told the wizard of her deep sadness, and the wringing of her hands had told of her fear. When Harry had said that he would naturally do the rite tonight with her and Snape, she'd blinked rapidly and turned away from him. So Harry had pretended he hadn't seen her tears...he knew she hated showing emotion. Of course, he feared this evening...how could he not? But overriding all emotion was that tonight would give him an opportunity to do what he had always aimed to do: kill Voldemort. Harry prayed he could do it in time for Ginny.

After Hermione had left, looking most relieved, Harry had wandered around Hogwarts for what he knew could be his last time. It had been his home for longer than anywhere else. Ravenclaw was celebrating their win over Hufflepuff by walking around in groups, cheering and reveling in their skill. Harry laughed at the wit of some of their more raucous tunes...even though they were at Hufflepuff's expense. *The next match should be interesting with Ravenclaw up against Slytherin*, Harry thought absently, *with both their Seekers evenly matched.*

As he had walked the corridors, the wizard had heard something he had never noticed before: a deep, ancient, pulsing beat. Harry had understood somehow that this beat was the fundamental strength of Hogwarts and that it underpinned everything about the castle. All the magic he had associated with Hogwarts...the moving stairs, the talking portraits, the magical ceiling in the Great Hall, even the magic being taught...sounded discordant and weak in comparison.

Harry had visited McGonagall in her office, pretending to be dropping by to return a book. He'd needed to see her. She was the person who'd stood by him through everything...mopping up his messes, backing him, and reining him in...caring for him in a way nobody else ever had. The professor had looked up abruptly from behind the piles of parchments on her desk as he had come in the door. He'd seen clearly that the old witch was giving her all to keep chaos at bay, fighting strongly despite the overwhelming odds. And though heavily disguised, it was McGonagall's love that drove her as it did.

The professor must have thought Harry had come to find out about Ginny as she walked out from behind her desk. 'Sorry, Harry. I ha...'

On impulse, Harry had put his arms around her...she'd felt frail and bird-like.

'I know. I know,' he had softly reassured. 'You do so much for me, Headmistress. I understand that now. I never really saw it before.'

'Goodness, Harry!' McGonagall had reddened with surprise and emotion but had quickly recovered, although she had not moved away from his embrace. 'Does that mean to say the unthinkable has happened and that you have finally grown up? Good lord, miracles do happen!' She had chuckled, her eyes twinkling.

'Yeah, maybe, you never know,' Harry had said with a laugh, giving her another affectionate squeeze.

Harry sighed contently as he took in the clear table...he'd quite forgotten how large it actually was when it had nothing on it. He did one last wipe over the table and successfully tossed the dishcloth into the sink. There was light tapping on the door; Harry grabbed his cloak and opened it.

'All ready, Harry?' Hermione had her heavy, black robe on; her brow was furrowed with anxiety.

'Yes.'

Harry slammed the door behind him; Hermione picked up the lantern, and they walked towards the Forbidden Forest. He had absolutely no idea what he was expected to do tonight, and nervousness started seeping into him. After seeing Snape and Hermione last night, he realized the level of skills they possessed far surpassed his own. But rather than his nervousness turning into a blaze of anxiety, as it would have done before, a soothing, calming feeling came through him. Harry understood he would know what to do.

'Tonight we all will have defined roles. The potion you have been taking blocks Voldemort's awareness of you. This will enable you to move beneath his guard. I will present you with a chance to attack and kill Voldemort,' explained Hermione, her breath smoking in the chilly air.

'And Snape?' Harry wasn't confident at all about seeing Snape. He would never be able to look at that wizard the same again.

'It's his strength that will ensure our survival...he's the one who will bring us back. Both our lives will depend on what he is capable of.'

'And you?'

'Well... um...'

'You are the power and the skill behind both Snape and me,' said Harry, answering his own question.

'Yeah, maybe...' Hermione answered uncertainly. 'I will take you to Voldemort.'

They now entered the Forbidden Forest, and Harry concentrated on negotiating the uneven path in the shifting light of the lantern. The night was bitterly cold, and the wind made the trees creak and groan. Harry smelt the smoke before he saw the light from the underground chamber. But tonight the incense had a deeper smell to it.

Hermione placed the lantern at the top of the stairs, and Harry took in one last breath of icy-cold air.

'Are you ready?' Hermione asked softly.

Harry nodded, and oddly, even though he knew he should be fearful, he wasn't.

'Let your power lead you, and you will know what to do. Come, follow me.'

Hermione disappeared down the stone steps, and the wizard quickly followed, his eyes smarting from the thick smoke. The chamber was as dark as last night, but Harry also felt a deep power being held within its stone walls.

Hermione softly touched him on his arm. 'You'll need to wear the robe again.'

'Yeah, sure.' Harry didn't mind, remembering the intense heat of last night. The wizard quickly undressed down to his boxers. The witch shook out the material and deftly tied it around him in an efficient manner, which told him she had dressed many people in robes whereas Snape had not. He wondered briefly who Hermione had dressed.

Hermione gently guided him to the fire in the center of the chamber, Harry wincing over the rough ground. The smoke was thick, and the small fire could only cast a dim, hazy light. Harry couldn't see Snape anywhere. Hermione indicated for him to sit, and he remembered only just in time to hold the pleats. But the moment his eyes settled on the fire, a jolt of recognition went up his body. He knew the fire...he recognized it, understood it even. The fire was hungry. His hands found the plates as if by instinct, and he began nourishing the fire with wood and oil. Absently, he saw Hermione nod and disappear into the swirling smoke. The wizard didn't mind, as the fire had much to say to him about all its mysteries.

'Harry. Harry. Harry.'

The wizard dragged himself away from his communion with the flames. Hermione sat down next to him, dressed in her robes, her breasts right there in front of him. Harry swallowed and quickly looked at her face.

'We must bind ourselves together.'

Harry strangely understood and nodded. The witch placed a small, ornate canister on the ground between them. She unscrewed the lid, and in it was a mass of moving worms. They emanated a potential power.

'Choose a cord, Harry.'

The wizard put his finger in; they weren't worms but writhing cords, and he pulled one out. It coiled wetly around his hand. It was cold.

'Use your power to hold us together.'

Harry closed his eyes and went into himself while moving his fingertips up and down the silky thread, pouring his love for Hermione into it; the cord readily absorbed it like a sponge. He slowly opened his eyes and saw the cord had changed into a deep, burnished gold. Hermione's thread had also changed colour.

Hermione stood up and stepped closer to him. 'Tie your thread around my waist.'

Harry saw there was already a green thread there and wondered if it was Snape's. Hermione had a well-defined waist, and both threads stood out on her lightly-tanned skin. The wizard knotted the thread and knew it would be strong.

Harry stood up stiffly, and she too tied her thread around him while chanting an incantation, her long hair tickling his skin as she bent over to tie it. The witch straightened, and they both smiled at each other, pleased with their magical connection.

Hermione sat back down, and Harry sat close to her. 'We will begin now. You will be safe with me and mine...let your power guide you. Close your eyes. Fire into water.'

Harry nodded and smiled, trying to reassure Hermione when he saw her serious face.

Hermione started a low chanting that made Harry's spine tingle with recognition. The wizard felt her tracing her finger tips in patterns on his wrist, shoulders, and chin. There was a slight pause...he felt a cool touch on his lightning bolt scar. Suddenly he was drifting upwards, flowing through the many currents that were immediately obvious to him. Harry could still feel Hermione around him, but she was fading rapidly into the distance. Just as the wizard was starting to panic, he felt something guiding him, pulling him closer, and soon a deep, pulsating rhythm was around him, which was beyond antiquity...beyond any mere human understanding of oldness. It moved gently around him, and Harry knew it was comforting him. There was a feeling of movement...a shift somehow...and suddenly Harry's normal senses started working again. He felt a soft, warm breeze on his face and smelt a heady, exotic fragrance of flowers. There was a soft tickling on his back; the wizard knew he was naked and lying on his side. He opened his eyes to a night sky filled with stars.

'Shh, Sharp Light. Stay still...stay quiet. I do you no harm.'

Harry glanced behind him. His jaw dropped. The biggest tiger he had ever seen was lying beside him. The creature was so big that Harry felt dwarfed into insignificance beside it.

'Shhh. Do not move...do not speak until you are called. I will keep you safe,' it said soothingly.

There was nothing Harry could do but agree. He certainly wasn't going to take on a fully grown tiger in peak condition while naked and alone. Well, any tiger really. Besides, it bore absolutely no resemblance to the puny tigers he had seen at the zoo. And strangely, the gentle rise and fall of the warm body next to his lulled him. He did feel safe. Harry eased his head down to change the uncomfortable angle it was on. It took him a while to work out what he was seeing; it seemed all the wrong proportions. He was looking at a huge, striped tiger paw the size of a car tire, which meant he was laying his head on the tiger's forearm that was wider than a pillow. The wizard knew he should be scared.

'You are safe. Be still, Sharp Light,' came his sound. And he was.

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Hermione pulled herself sharply back from the overpowering temptation of following Harry to him. It was where she longed to be. But no. She mustn't go there...not this time. The witch sighed with regret when her senses came back in strongly again.

'My lady.'

She felt a touch on her shoulder before looking up at Snape sitting beside her, his robe flowing elegantly over one shoulder. *He does wear a robe well*, admired Hermione.

'Mr. Potter?'

'Yes, he is safe with mine and is being strengthened by him.'

'That is good.'

Hermione noticed a touch of envy in his voice. The witch shifted her sitting position so she faced Snape straight on.

'I must now strengthen your earth before we begin.'

Snape shifted so he was sitting directly opposite her. Hermione opened another jar, and in it was orange soil; she pulled from the folds of her robe a small bottle of oil and poured it into the soil. The witch could feel Snape's eyes avidly watching her every movement. Using her hands, she mixed the oil into the soil, making sticky clay.

'Sorry about this. It may feel a bit strange.'

'Or it could feel nice,' commented Snape blandly.

Hermione looked up sharply from her mixing, but he was busy adjusting the folds of his robes, his eyes cast down. She was strangely flustered. But the earth incantations quickly soothed her, and Snape's posture relaxed as well. The witch dabbed the clay in time with the beat of the chant over the wizard's bare chest, along his arms and on his face and forehead.

'Now, my friend, make a line of clay along the bridge of my nose up into my hairline.'

Snape blinked dazedly a few times, and Hermione was pleased at the power of the chant. She leaned forward and felt the cool, wet, sticky clay on her forehead and smelt its earthiness. The witch sat back and opened her eyes.

'It's time.'

Snape nodded, his eyes serious, and slowly unwrapped the black material covering his Dark Mark. The tattoo seemed more sinister in the dim light.

Hermione couldn't stop her anxiety rising. 'Remember to try and think of me with as much emotion as you can, and I know I shouldn't say this, but don't, whatever you do, think of Harry.' Instantly she felt stupid for saying that. It sounded wrong.

Snape turned and looked at her with an unusual expression on his face. 'It will not be difficult.'

The witch breathed in nervously, her stomach doing somersaults.

From within his robe, Snape pulled out a bottle and unstopped it.

'Come closer, my lady.'

Surprised, Hermione moved so she was sitting right up next to him, their thighs touching.

Snape lifted the bottle to his lips. 'Ready?' he asked, his eyes glinting.

'Ready.' Hermione looked up at him curiously.

Snape downed the contents in three mouthfuls, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and in one smooth movement put his arms around her, drawing her closer into a kiss. Bemused, Hermione leaned into the kiss; she hadn't had a normal, non-magical kiss in a long time, and it was pleasant. Snape tasted right to her. The wizard made a small sigh of regret and pulled back fractionally.

'That was good thinking,' Hermione breathed.

'Oh, yes.' Snape smirked but then quickly sobered.

Hermione knew it was time and looked deeply into his black eyes. Lifting her arm, she placed her rune on his Dark Mark.

Her breath was pushed out of her, and she was shoved violently from the back. The witch fell through the air, the huge cliff face whizzing past her, and black pain rang through her as she hit the hard surface of the water. She plunged down, forever downwards, her lungs screaming, and she kicked out aggressively. Hermione burst through the surface into the darkness of the underwater cavern. The witch gulped in the air, the warm water streaming down her face. It was soft on her skin as she moved her arms and legs to keep afloat. Perhaps because Hermione was expecting it, she became aware of the tugging of the current pulling her along, so she wasn't surprised when there was an abrupt downward pull.

The water sucked at her, pulling her, tumbling her towards the Death Mark entrance as if she were a twig in a raging sea. There were no longer any craggy outcrops of rocks.

'You are mine now, circle lover.'

Hermione started in fright, and even though she had been expecting to hear Voldemort's voice, it still filled her with horror. The gaping entrance was now only meters away, and panic gripped her. What if it didn't work? A tightening around her neck made the witch look down, and she saw his snakes coiling up around her, pinning her arms and legs tightly in their stranglehold grip.

Suddenly, Hermione was violently jerked backwards from the coils on her waist, and she painfully bit her tongue.

'Come! Come! Come now!' she bellowed with all her might.

A white-hot pain blasted from her arm, and Harry unraveled out from her rune through the Death Mark entrance...sharp as a surgeon's knife, as focussed as a lightning bolt. The light and the heat blinded her, and Hermione recoiled back from its intensity. Violent explosions pushed her into blackness.

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Sharp pain from around her waist. A movement backward. Stillness. Silence. A vicious blast hit her again. Hermione instinctively curled up into a ball, covering her head with her arms. The beat of her heart was loud. Blackness.

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Where was Harry? Where was Harry? Hermione heaved and strained with all her considerable power on the cord...but nothing. She had to get Harry back...she just had to. Pulses of light, discordant sounds, the crashing and swirling of agitated currents confused her and battered her senses. Still, the witch ran her awareness along the cord, seeking him. Nothing. Disembodied voices, violent screams, sad weeping threatened to shake her off the cord, but Hermione resolutely held tight and stretched even further outwards into the darkness, seeking him. A quiver. A slight movement. Hermione pounced and scooped Harry into her. He lay limp within. She pulled him closer to her so that he was safe. Hermione would protect him... but... but... there was no movement...nothing. Harry was dead inside her. NO! Hermione poured all her life force into him...no one... no one else would be taken away from her again...and slid into blackness.

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Hermione held him close...he was a single, spluttering, weak flame that could go out at any time. There was a movement she recognized.

Desperately, she called to him, 'Don't let Harry go to you!'

Hermione felt him pressing Harry back down. The flame strengthened, casting a stronger light. Hermione tasted Harry's longing to join him, and the witch reached out, touching the wizard softly: he wasn't to go to the primordial forest...it wasn't his time. Harry had to return to their realm, however hard. Slowly, his intensity of longing lessened, and the flame grew stronger. Hermione drew him closer yet, using herself as a buffer to ensure he stayed.

Snape flowed softly around them, encompassing them in his coolness, protecting them with his strength. He guided them silently away from the carnage, taking them deep into the hidden arteries of the earth, through the ancient waters, cleansing them, earthing them, soothing them after the heat and destruction. Hermione knew Harry was safe with Snape and allowed exhaustion to overtake her.

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A searing heat in her forearm forced Hermione to open her eyes. Harry was heavy in her arms. His hair wet with sweat, his face ashen, his eyes shut. He looked dead. But Hermione knew he wasn't. The weak movement of his chest against hers told Hermione otherwise. A hand moved a lock of hair from her eyes. Hermione shifted her head slightly and saw Snape holding her in his arms from behind. She smiled at him. They had made it back. Voldemort was dead.

# Twenty

## Chapter 21 of 22

Seven years after the death of Dumbledore, Hermione finally returns to Hogwarts. What will she find?

Many thanks to my beta, Soul Bound.

Hermione put her quill down with considerable relief and rolled up the final parchment with great satisfaction. She was pleased with her recommendations and comments on the Divination and Ancient Rune curricula. The witch had worked solidly for five days to complete it, but it hadn't been a chore; in fact, she had needed to be still and concentrated after the trauma of Saturday night, and she felt better for it. The staff room was deserted and, apart from her single lantern, dark. All Hogwarts' staff would be getting ready for tonight, Hermione remembered with a start. She quickly bundled up the parchments into her arms, awkwardly turned off the lantern without dropping any, and set off briskly for McGonagall's office.

The corridors were empty. Today had been designated Victory Day, and in light of that, the students had been released from school to celebrate it with their families. The Ministry of Magic had announced the holiday yesterday morning after the final cell of Death Eaters had been mopped up. The officials had then declared rather imperiously that the official Victory celebration would be held tonight at Hogwarts' Great Hall, which generated a great deal of indignant spluttering from McGonagall. It would be complete with politicians, high profile witches and wizards, Order members and staff.

Hermione didn't even know if McGonagall would be in her office, but she knocked, and after a bit, the professor opened the door, resplendent in deep red dress robes and a matching hat.

'Wow, Headmistress, you look amazing,' exclaimed Hermione. The older witch's face looked more rested than she had ever seen it.

'Why, thank you, Hermione. These robes had been in my wardrobe for such a time, looking all festive, and now, thank Merlin, I can wear them.' McGonagall smiled. 'Come in. Oh, you've got the final installment of parchments, I see. Thank you, I will read these with great interest.'

Hermione handed them to McGonagall, who put them on her desk.

'I am heading over to the Great Hall now if you want to come?' the professor asked as she picked up her large, fancy handbag.

'Yeah, sure.' Hermione tried to sound enthusiastic, but here she was, going to yet another ball encased completely in masculine, black clothes again. And while Harry had declared from the start her and Snape's involvement in killing Voldemort, there was still a lot of disbelief and skepticism from within the Order. It hadn't helped that when Harry, Hermione and Snape had staggered out from the underground chamber on Sunday morning, Snape had taken Harry directly to the hospital wing while Hermione had returned to her rooms, reeling, and had fallen onto her bed, exhausted. Everybody had instantly assumed that when Snape turned up with a dead looking Harry, the wizard had finally hexed Harry to death. The rumor mill started working overtime, and within thirty minutes, the news had spread so far and so fast that no amount of damage control by McGonagall or Harry could contain it. The harm had been done.

'Come, my dear...it won't be as bad as all that. You will enjoy yourself once you are there, I know.' McGonagall patted her affectionately on her arm.

'Yeah, I suppose.'

Hermione followed McGonagall out the door and waited while she warded it. They walked down the corridor side by side.

'Tomorrow our security restrictions on travel will be lifted,' commented the Headmistress quietly.

'Really? That's wonderful!' Happiness cascaded through her; then, realizing how she sounded, she hastily added, 'Not that being here...'

'...Now, now, you should know me well enough to know that I like truth over politeness any day,' the older witch cut in and then gently added, 'I know it hasn't been easy for you returning here, but you coming with your power and magic has altered the fates of everybody's lives here...whether they are aware of it or not. When you return to your people tomorrow, take with you my love and respect.'

Hermione's throat closed up and nodded. She finally replied after a time, 'I needed to come back in so many different ways, Professor.'

'And it is not as if I will not see you again, my dear. My workload seems finally to have lightened. Whatever you and Professor Snape did to Harry has directly benefited me. He has finally come into his strength. I would imagine there could be a fair few trips southwards in the future.'

'It will be Athena and Tonga's wish come true.' Hermione smiled.

They were nearing the entrance to the Great Hall, and throngs of sophisticated people dressed in formal dress robes milled about.

'Oh, God, look how everyone is dressed,' moaned Hermione, feeling completely underdressed for the occasion.

The professor tugged Hermione to a stop and gently adjusted Hermione's hat so it sat correctly on her head. Her eyes were soft and loving. 'You have a radiance that all those festooned people envy and which they try to recreate with fancy clothes and make up. You are mesmerizing, Hermione...remember that.'

'Oh,' said Hermione, surprised.

A beefy-looking wizard called out to McGonagall, and she excused herself and was quickly drawn away into a group of official looking people from the Ministry of Magic.

Hermione wriggled her way through the crowd and into the heat of the Great Hall. It had been completely transformed into a type of place she'd only ever seen in the movies, but with many magical touches. There was snow falling from the magical ceiling, which mimicked the Scottish skies of the last few days, and there was a silvery-blue light about the place that gave it a sophisticated air. And as big as she knew the Hall to be, it was bursting with more people than she had ever seen fit in it.

The witch scanned the crowd for Snape but couldn't see him anywhere. She hadn't seen him at all this last week, although he continued to send up food to her. Apparently, according to Harry, Snape was working with McGonagall and a couple of other inner circle Order members. It had taken a surprising amount of time for people to believe Voldemort was dead. But McGonagall, as soon as she'd heard the news from Snape, had used an elite group of Order members to press forward their advantage by attacking and eliminating the high ranking Death Eaters so they could not regroup. By the time the Ministry and the general wizarding community were finally convinced that Voldemort was dead, there were only the lower ranking Death Eaters to clean up.

'Oi, Hermione!' Harry bounded up to her out of the crowd, giving her a quick hug. 'Come over here...we have a coveted table reserved for us. Everybody wants one.' He rolled his eyes and added wryly, 'It must be because we are important or something.'

He linked arms with her, and as they weaved their way through the crowd, Hermione noticed envious glances at her from many a witch. Their small table was close to the podium, and because it was to the side, it afforded a good view of the crowd stretching down the hall. The other tables scattered about seemed occupied by sophisticated witches and wizards who Hermione was sure she was meant to know and be impressed by.

'Hey, what do you want to drink?'

'Um, butterbeer, thanks.'

'You sure? Remember you aren't a student, you know. The punch is delicious.' Harry winked.

'Oh, all right, a punch would be nice.' Hermione shrugged. It made no real difference to her, as she knew all the drinks would have the same metallic taste.

She watched Harry disappear into the crowd and quickly return, giving two awe-struck witches a cocky smile as he strutted by.

'How's Ginny?' Hermione took a sip...even she could taste the tons of alcohol through the metal taste and tried not to grimace.

'Getting there. Madame Pomfrey reckons she'll be in St. Mungo's for at least another two weeks or so.' Harry's twinkling eyes quickly sobered. 'The top curse specialist has taken her on, so she's in good hands, but it's difficult, you know.'

'Yeah, I know. She has a lot to deal with after what she's been through. It's so good she's got you and her family beside her.'

Harry took a swig of his punch. 'Bleck, too sweet for me,' he said, spluttering.

'Hey, do you know if Snape is coming?' Hermione asked while scanning the crowd below them.

'He bloody better be,' asserted Harry, but he quickly looked down and started fiddling with his red and orange robes.

There was an amplified clinking of a glass, and the crowd became quiet.

'Oh, God, it's speeches time again. Try not to fall asleep...especially during mine...okay?' muttered Harry quietly.

Harry was right...they were long, boring and unbelievably pompous. The amount of misinformation and plain untruths in them was staggering; the blatant self-promoting made Hermione shake her head in disbelief. A few times Harry caught her eye and looked skywards in despair.

But there was no way Hermione could not be impressed when Harry made his way to the front and started speaking. He blew all the previous speakers out of the water. The wizard looked the part, standing confidently in his red and orange, sparkly dress robes, and his rich voice made listening to him a true pleasure. Hermione couldn't help thinking that the king had returned, and when she looked at the awe on the people's faces, she knew she wasn't the only one. Harry told a more palatable, more believable version of how they had killed Voldemort, but in no way did he alter her and Snape's involvement in it. In fact, he conveyed his deepest respect and awe at the Southern magic practiced by her and Snape. Hermione had no idea Harry had been planning to even broach the quagmire of differing magic, but was amazed at how well he did it. The witch knew at least a few from this huge gathering would go away and scratch their head at the ideas Harry presented to them. And that was all it took for change to begin.

Harry was swamped with well wishers the moment he left the front; the lights dimmed, and the band struck up a fast beat tune...the true celebrations had begun. People's consciences had obviously been pricked, as Hermione soon found herself chatting to a number of different people. Professor Sprout and Professor Flitwick plied her with funny anecdotes and whisky, which she pretended to drink, before they got up to dance. She had a fascinating conversation with Professor Binns, who had done the unimaginable and had left his classroom for the first time in about seventy years. He asked her many intelligent questions regarding her magic and revealed that for many years he'd been actively discouraged from teaching this area of history, but the ghost assured her he would soon rectify that.

Harry tore himself away from a group of high society witches, declaring theatrically, 'Save me! You simply have to dance with me, Hermione!' He grabbed her by the arm, dragging her to the thronging dance floor, his robes flowing beautifully. Having been magically connected, they knew each other even better than they ever had, and their bodies melded together with the rhythm of the music. Harry smelt of a mixture of cologne, sweat and alcohol. Hermione was soon dripping under her heavy robes, but they danced two more songs until Hermione had to stop to catch her breath.

As they walked arm in arm back to their table, Harry perhaps swaying more than he should have, the wizard glanced down at her. 'I wish Ron were here celebrating with us...he so wanted Voldemort dead.'

'I wish he were too. I've been thinking of him all week actually.'

'Yeah, me too.' Harry looked steadily at her. 'I hear the travel restrictions are going to be lifted tomorrow.'

'McGonagall just told me.'

'I bet you're pleased.'

'I am actually. I mean, as much as I like it here, I just want to go home.'

'I can understand that.'

'And where are you going to dash off to after all these years?' asked Hermione curiously.

'You know what, and this is going to sound crazy, but I actually need to stay here. At least for a little while until things settle down.'

'Come on...really?' Hermione looked at him in disbelief.

'Yeah, really. There's still a heap to be done, and I can't leave McGonagall to do it all. That would be wrong. But it will be wonderful to be able to just duck out every now and then without having a whole posse of people following me. You could be the first person overseas I visit. The whole Southern thing has me fascinated now after what happened.'

'That would be just wonderful...I know you'll love it so much.'

Harry started suddenly beside her and instantly tensed up. Hermione looked to see why. Snape was standing upright and alone by their table, his formal black robes as out of keeping as hers in this brightly dressed crowd. The witch glanced up and saw Harry looking decidedly flushed, and she knew it wasn't from the heat or the whisky. Harry probably hadn't met Snape since the rites...*This should be interesting*, she thought.

'Good evening, Miss Granger, Mr Potter,' greeted Snape formally in his deep voice, looking down at them.

'Good evening, Professor Snape,' said Hermione with a smile...she was pleased to see him.

Silence. Hermione looked up at Harry, who had gone beetroot-red and was looking with considerable concentration at his red shoes, and realized this confident, great



orator, this leader of the wizarding world, was tongue-tied.

'Er. Hello. Professor. Snape,' stammered out Harry finally. The young wizard lifted his eyes, and they became huge when they rested on Snape's face. There was a long, uncomfortable silence while Harry just stared at him. Snape stayed perfectly still. Hermione wasn't sure what to do.

'Your lips,' the young wizard suddenly blurted out loudly, 'they look... um... It wasn't the magic.'

Hermione's jaw dropped, but Snape's lips only twitched slightly. Smoothly, in one fluid movement, the tall wizard lifted to his mouth one of Harry's fingers and gave it a wet suck before releasing it. 'It is not what they look like...but what they feel like that is most important.'

Harry froze. Then turned tail and disappeared into the crowd.

'Professor!' Hermione couldn't believe what she'd just witnessed.

'What?' asked Snape, all innocence. 'He will soon recover...I doubt that will have any adverse affect on his manliness.'

Hermione swore she saw his shoulders moving with suppressed laughter. 'I suppose... I had better go and see if he's all right,' she said, not able to keep the astonishment out of her voice.

'No,' Snape said rather emphatically and then added, 'I am sure there is a whole gaggle of beautiful witches who will rush to tend his wounds and shoo away any frightful thoughts I might have infected him with.'

'Am I not considered beautiful enough to tend his wounds?' asked Hermione with fake affront. She had a compulsion to make it awkward for Snape in order to get some pay back for Harry, but then realized Snape was as likely to answer with his normal acidity. The witch braced herself.

Snape's lips twitched again. Actually, now that Harry had pointed them out, his lips weren't half-bad.

'Ah, your beauty defies definition, and it certainly transcends belonging to any gaggle of witches found around here,' he answered smoothly, and then shrugging, he said, 'and besides, I am selfish.'

'Oh, you're good, sir, very good,' said Hermione, shaking her head with exaggerated admiration.

'Why, thank you, Miss Granger.' Snape bowed his head sarcastically.

'There you are, Severus. I am pleased you could make it, and hello again, Hermione,' greeted McGonagall, who walked briskly up to them. Hermione wondered if she had seen or heard what had just happened to Harry. 'If you could excuse us, I need to have a quick word with Severus. You'll have him back shortly, my dear.'

Hermione thought that was an odd comment to make, but smiled and shrugged. Snape and McGonagall turned away and started talking in quiet undertones. The witch gazed about the Great Hall and realized she wasn't sad to be leaving. As much as Hogwarts and the wizarding community was a huge part of her life, she could now see it clearly, which, while not quite disillusioning, meant Hermione could never be completely in amour with it ever again. The witch saw Harry near the dance floor with a drink in hand, looking completely recovered and talking to a pretty, blonde witch. She would miss Harry, but it wouldn't be a heart wrenching type of missing...she'd already been through that once. Hermione knew that they would always have a connection just as there would be one always between Harry and Snape, but Harry's life was firmly here. Hermione looked at the back of McGonagall's luxurious robes...yes, she would also miss her too, but she knew she was able to maintain a connection of sorts via her sister. Hermione flicked her eyes up the pale-faced, hook-nosed Potions master the Headmistress was talking to, and she had a strange sensation down her spine. Yes, she would most definitely miss Snape the most when she returned tomorrow. Hermione shook her head at the humor of it all.

Professor McGonagall turned abruptly, blinking her eyes rapidly behind her glasses. 'Thank you for being so patient, Hermione. He is all yours now. I had better be off and continue with the required rounds of mixing and mingling.' The older witch pressed Hermione warmly on the arm, holding her eye for a second, before moving off into the crowd, sniffing into her lacy handkerchief.

The witch looked over to Snape, who was looking down at something he was holding, and stepped closer. 'What's that, sir?'

'A present from the Headmistress. It seems it is a bottle of Scotland's finest whisky,' he said, turning the bottle over in his hand.

'That's kind of her.' Hermione couldn't keep the curiosity out of her voice.

'Yes, indeed. This is a present of gratitude. I now officially find myself a man mercifully without allegiance, without master and without occupation.'

'Wow, really?' Hermione kicked herself at her slowness. Of course everything would change for Snape now that Voldemort was dead. He'd been as much a prisoner at Hogwarts as Harry had, if not more.

'Yes. I am finally released from all my oaths and obligations.'

'What are you going to do?' Hermione couldn't help asking.

Snape looked at her, drumming his fingers speculatively on the bottle. 'Right now? Enjoy the moment.'

Hermione respected his circumspection on telling her his plans. 'Well, I hope you got more than a bottle of whisky for all you have done.'

'Ah, yes, the goblins at Gringotts will be kept busy for a while. I would hardly want anything officially announced, although it would add to the celebratory mood for everyone if it was, I suppose. But the added bonus is that this whisky seems to be Muggle-made.'

'That's even kinder of her...all's forgiven.' Hermione laughed.

'So, Miss Granger, since it appears our presence is required for a while longer and there appears little likelihood of a party of people making their way over for a social chit chat, would you care to partake in a drop of whisky?'

'I couldn't think of anything that I'd rather do, sir. I'll get some glasses.'

It was true, noted Hermione as she made her way to the nearby drinks table, no matter what was said by Harry and McGonagall tonight, not a single witch or wizard came within spitting distance of Snape. But when she walked back towards him, she understood to a certain extent their reluctance...he looked stern and remote standing there.

'Here you are.' Hermione placed the glasses on the table and sat opposite him.

Snape sat smoothly down and poured out a measure in each glass. 'Cheers, Miss Granger.' He lifted his glass.

'Yes, cheers, Professor Snape.' Hermione touched her glass to his and took a mouthful, gagging at the taste. 'Phew...I'd forgotten how strong it is.'

'Hmm, it is rather,' replied Snape thoughtfully after swirling a mouthful around and swallowing. 'But it is smooth.'

Hermione held the glass up to her nose and sniffed it. 'Goodness, I haven't smelt this in years. It reminds me so much of my dad. He used to have a small glass of whisky when he came home from work. Apart from that, he never drank, not even socially.'

'And your mother?'

'No, not really. Unfortunately for her, in their social circles, it was traditional for women to be offered white wine...which she absolutely detested. Mum actually liked beer...but that was considered an unladylike drink back then,' said Hermione, chuckling and shaking her head. Then a wash of melancholy came over her...how she wished with all her heart that they were alive now.

Snape then did a very unSnapeish thing: he leaned across the table and placed his long-fingered hand over hers. 'I know words are sometimes a clumsy means of communication and cannot possibly convey the nuances needed, but they are my only way to express my sympathy for the loss of your mother and father,' he said quietly, 'and for what befell you afterwards...it should never have happened.' His dark eyes locked onto hers.

Hermione started. Snape knew. She glanced away. But strangely she found she didn't mind him knowing. 'It was a grim time...but I'm not the only person to have suffered at Death Eaters' hands.'

Snape stayed silent. Hermione looked down at his white hand on top of hers. 'But I do miss my mum and dad even after all these years...not many people know that.'

'These sources of hidden pain never leave us.'

'And it changes you. My life would have been very different if they were alive now. But then I think, I would never have encountered him, nor been with my boy, nor lived in the South. Nothing happens for no reason, I suppose. I also think coming back here was meant to happen on so many levels.'

'Most definitely,' agreed Snape rather emphatically.

'Killing Voldemort was the most obvious reason and restoring Harry's power as well, but also...' Hermione's voice trailed off; she was unsure how to articulate the feelings she'd had over this last week.

'Becoming more fixed in this realm, my lady?' asked Snape quietly, switching to the ancient tongue.

Hermione stared at him...was she that easy to read? 'Yes... but... how did you know?'

'Do not forget I witnessed your sadness before the rite on Saturday and have some understanding of the trauma you went through seven years ago,' he answered softly. 'If I may ask, how has it changed?'

'My longing to be with him has eased somehow, my friend. Before, I had a constant yearning to be with him that never left me...it was why I had to train as hard as I did...but it is no longer driving me as it did before. It's hard to explain. There is a peacefulness to our connection now. Of course, we will always belong together, and that will never change, but it is as if I now have a space that I never had before. It's most unfamiliar.'

'This makes you truly powerful, my lady.' Snape lowered his head in respect.

Hermione gave a self-deprecating shrug. 'It was his will.'

'And your skill, my lady, that brought about the change. Yes, you were meant to come for many reasons.' Snape straightened his posture, and his eyes lifted, coolly taking in the joyful crowd. 'And now, Miss Granger, it would seem I have been here a socially acceptable amount of time, so I will take my leave.' The wizard stood up.

'Oh.' Hermione didn't want him to go. There wasn't anyone here she wanted to spend her last evening at Hogwarts with.

Snape looked down at her. 'Unless Miss Granger you would like to join me. I have a bottle of red wine that I think you will find more palatable than the whiskey you have been pretending to drink.'

'Are you sure? It's just that...' Hermione turned her face up at the chatty wizarding crowd.

'I am,' replied Snape decisively. 'Did I not tell you the other day we have been tainted?'

'In that case, I would love to spend my last evening here with you,' Hermione said, standing up and straightening her robes. 'And that's not because I'm tainted, by the way.'

Snape's lips twitched, and they worked their way easily through the heaving crowd, which readily parted for them. Not one witch or wizard looked at either her or Snape; it was as if by associating with Snape again, any efforts they had made earlier towards Hermione had been forgotten. The witch was looking forward to returning home and being treated like a normal human in a sane society. Just as they were nearing the doors, Hermione saw Harry abruptly break from a group of important looking witches and wizard and move quickly towards them.

'Professor Snape, wait!' Harry bounded up to them, coming to an abrupt halt, his robes swirling around his ankles.

Snape stilled by Hermione's side.

'Yes, Mr Potter?' The dark wizard answered, standing poised and tall despite the growing attention from the surrounding crowd.

Harry looked flushed, but Hermione recognized a steely determination in his green eyes.

'I just heard from McGonagall that you're leav...'

'...Yes, Mr Potter, you heard correctly,' Snape quickly cut in.

Harry gave the quickest wink to Hermione before stepping up to Snape and kissing him fully on the mouth. Snape froze, but Harry held him firmly until the tall wizard leaned into the kiss and moved his arms so they rested on Harry's shoulders. They very slowly separated, plainly oblivious to the stunned silence around them.

Harry lifted his hand and ran it gently down Snape's cheek. 'You are right...how they feel is more important. And just for the record, it wasn't just the magic working before, either.'

Snape snorted and gave the shorter wizard's shoulder a squeeze. Harry turned quickly and moved off into the crowd, grinning wildly. Snape turned abruptly to Hermione and held out his arm as if the whole incident had never happened and a shocked, dazed audience didn't surround them.

'Shall we, Miss Granger?'

The witch had to suppress her laughter as she looped her arm through his and walked out the Great Hall with him for the final time.

The weather was icy outside, and Hermione quickly did up the buttons on her cloak.

'Well, that was interesting,' commented Hermione mildly as they walked carefully across a frozen courtyard arm in arm. The flag stones were slippery underfoot.

'Hmm, indeed. Mr Potter's power has truly been restored...it bodes well for this community's future.'

'My goodness! Can I believe it? A compliment about Harry has just passed the professor's lips,' exclaimed Hermione as they entered Hogwarts' darkened corridors.

'I have never opposed his role...it is his personality I react to, Miss Granger,' he pointed out a little testily.

'By sucking his finger, sir?' mocked Hermione, laughing, their footsteps ringing out in the dark passages.

Snape gave an eloquent shrug of his shoulder. 'But am I not correct in what I said to him, Miss Granger?' he asked, raising an eyebrow.

'About what lips feel like? Yes, I would agree with you,' Hermione replied, smirking.

'And since I heard Mr Potter's verdict, I am now curious about what your assessment is, Miss Granger.'

'Are you trying to corner me, Professor?' Hermione now knew Snape was flirting with her.

'Not at all, Miss Granger...I am asking a simple, direct question.' He pushed open the door, and they walked through the dusty, dull room.

'I would have to agree with Harry on what they look like,' she answered while he unwarded his door. The witch walked into his rooms with considerable relief.

'And?' he prompted as he lit the candles.

'It's just I can't quite remember what they feel like...there was a lot going on every time,' she confessed sheepishly, handing him her coat and hat. Snape disappeared momentarily into his room, and she walked across to the low embers in the fireplace, which she prodded with the nearby poker.

'That's strange...I remember well, but then I probably did not have as much to do as you,' Snape said when he reappeared again, handing her a glass of red wine.

'And your assessment?' Hermione sat down, rolling her shoulders in considerable relief at being away from the heavy magic but not daring to look at him.

'Perfect on both accounts,' he commented quietly. 'I wonder if it is appropriate to offer an opportunity for you to refresh your memory.'

Hermione looked up and saw his lips twitching in amusement, but his eyes were looking at her deeply.

'You mean free from magic and rites?'

Snape nodded.

'That would be an unusual experience for me, my friend.'

'And that is why I ask if it is appropriate...it is not something my grandmother instructed me on, nor is it the sort of etiquette a boy learns. I understand it may be considered improper, but tonight I act for the first time as a man free from agenda or masters.'

'But you understand I am bound to him and that will never change?' Hermione pointed out carefully. She understood he was asking more than the obvious offer, and her body tensed.

'Of course...how could I not? I have had you and him inside me.'

'And that doesn't bother you?' Hermione needed to check.

'As long as it does not bother you or him.'

'I honestly don't know.' Hermione sat still for a moment, looking at her wine. Part of her wanted to get up and run away, but she forced herself to lift her eyes and look steadily at him. Another wave of fear came over her, but she forced herself to witness the emotion objectively. Could she without him? ... Without magic? The witch knew Snape would not hurt her...their connection told her that. He was also the only person on earth to have experienced her and him within him, and so he would have an understanding that far surpassed any shallow verbal explaining she could do. Hermione looked at his straight shoulders and long legs...he had an agreeable body under those clothes. But could she? Was she ready?

Snape dropped his eyes. 'My lady, please forgive my forwardness...I do not want to offend.'

'Oh, no, no. It's not that,' the witch hastily assured. 'It's just... It's just...'

'Forget I ever said anything,' Snape cut in and quickly got up to fetch the bottle on the table to refill her glass. 'Let us just enjoy our last night here.'

'No...I mean...I actually don't know what I mean, but I'm pleased you said something.' Hermione looked down at her wine. 'It's just... It's just... It's just it's not really about etiquette or even him,' she blurted out, looking up at him.

Snape stilled. His eyes widened. 'My sincerest apologies...my lack of sensitivity is appalling. My intention was never to hurt you or cause you any pain. Yet again I speak without thinking.'

'It was along time ago... and you haven't... but I do... but I haven't... Oh, bloody hell!' swore Hermione, switching to English and burying her face in her hands. 'I'm completely stuffing this up... It's just that without magic... and without him... Oh, shit, I'm a prime bloody candidate for that stupid Marvin Gaye song,' she groaned to herself quietly.

'Perhaps that *is* what you need,' commented Snape softly.

How the hell did he know *that* song? Hermione looked slowly up at him in astonishment.

'It is also perhaps why you are sensing a space between you and him. He is allowing room for healing to take place.'

Hermione stilled, knowing the truth in the wizard's words and slowly nodding. 'Another reason why I returned maybe?'

'Quite possibly, but it has to be right for you...I am merely piecing what I know together.'

'No, you're right. In the end, I didn't want to join him. I wanted to stay and be alive and all the painful things being alive entails.' Hermione picked at her fingers. 'But it's hard, you know.'

'I know.'

'I mean to even think about it without magic and without him.'

'I would imagine.'

'But I know you, and I know you will not do me harm or hurt me in any way.'

'On that I give you my word.'

'And here you started off only angling for a mere kiss,' said Hermione with a smile. She couldn't stand the heavy conversation any longer.

'Anything with you could never be considered 'mere',' he quickly pointed out. 'And yet...'

Hermione looked at his lips moving as he talked, not listening, and on impulse...before she could do any more intellectualizing...she leaned over, put her hand behind his neck, drawing him down, and kissed him. Snape hesitated only for a second before kissing her gently back. He tasted right to her, and strangely, as their wet tongues entwined, Hermione remembered the kiss on Saturday night that she had completely forgotten about.

Drawing apart, Snape ran a hand down her cheek. 'What is it with you Gryffindors tonight?' he breathed, pulling her closer. 'And back to the question?'

'I agree with Harry...it is more important, but anyway, they are perfect on both counts, and it wasn't just the magic, either,' she said before kissing him all over his face, enjoying the feel of his skin on her lips. Snape stayed motionless, watching her through half-lidded eyes, obviously lapping up the attention. He then drew her in for another warm kiss, running his hands through her hair, unclasping it from its messy bun. The wizard wrapped his arms around her tightly, and instantly Hermione tensed...she was trapped and couldn't breathe. Snape released his arms from around her, resting them lightly on her shoulders, and Hermione relaxed, her surroundings becoming more real.

'Better?' He breathed inches from her face.

'Thank you.' Hermione knew she was right in trusting Snape.

'Any time you want me to stop, just let me know. Tonight is about you knowing there is pleasure as well as pain in being alive and human.' Again Snape kissed her, hungrily this time, but his arms stayed lightly on her shoulders. Hermione's bones melted.

'More?' he asked huskily.

Hermione nodded...her senses were reeling from all the colliding perceptions. She knew Snape, had been inside him and had touched him. The wizard had healed her, drawn her down, comforted her, had taken her into the earth through his water twice. And yet the differences she was experiencing now were a fusion of all that knowledge. It was like she was learning to hear through her eyes or see through her ears. She *really* loved learning, she decided.

'The bedroom is more comfortable.'

Hermione nodded, not quite up to talking. They got up, and Snape led her by the hand through the door into his bedroom. His bed was the usual Hogwarts four-poster, but actually the witch didn't notice much more than that as they tumbled onto it, arms entwined. It was soft. But they came to a grounding halt when they came to undressing.

'Bloody hell,' groaned Hermione. 'Buttons...bloody buttons again. I hate your tailor.' She worked her way down the top buttons of his shirt until eventually Snape could pull it over his head.

'Nice body...who would have known under all those layers,' complimented Hermione, and she couldn't help running her hands over his warm body, feeling his smooth skin.

'Thank you,' said the wizard. He laid her down and started methodically undoing her buttons until eventually her shirt opened. She wasn't wearing a bra.

'Nice body.'

'Thank you.'

'Neat stitches.'

'Thank you.'

There was a wet coolness as Snape's tongue started licking her breasts, swirling over her nipples. A raw hunger rose up inside Hermione. She pulled Snape over her, kissing him to let him know what she was feeling, running her hands up and down his hard back. The witch wanted him, and he responded by nipping, sucking and biting her voraciously, making her moan with pleasure. All thoughts disappeared into a cloud of heat, taste, touch and pleasure. She absently felt him pull her trousers down and pull away to wriggle out of his own, but soon his body was back, his long, lean limbs twining around her, encircling her with intensity and his musky odor. Snape stilled fractionally, and Hermione knew what he was asking.

'Yes,' she said between pressing light kisses on his sweat-sheened neck.

'Sure?' He looked down at her, his black eyes filled with arousal.

'Yes.' Hermione swallowed nervously, but at the same time was utterly assured by the solidness of his body around hers.

Snape rubbed himself against her, and every nerve in her body awoke, screaming to be fulfilled.

The wizard leaned down to kiss her, their lips and tongues gliding together, and moved into her.

Hermione stilled...this was so different without magic, more real somehow, more human. Looking up, she saw Snape's eyes filled with heat, hunger and concern as he remained motionless inside. She relaxed herself around him, and he began kissing her neck. He began moving gently; Hermione felt a buzz of sensuality touching the corners of her brain and wrapped her legs around him, arching her hips up into him. Snape responded, letting her set the pace, and soon all motion, feelings, and passions merged, and Hermione succumbed to the sensation of being alive.

## Epilogue

*Chapter 22 of 22*

Seven years after the death of Dumbledore, Hermione finally returns to Hogwarts. What will she find?

Many thanks to my beta, Soul bound.

Also, thank you to the admins at The Petulant Poetess who helped me to post this story.

Hermione breathed in the uniquely beautiful mix of sea and sulphur and knew she was home. Many hands helped her across the wobbly gangplank onto the pier, and she was enfolded into warm kisses, hugs and greetings. Flower after small, fragrant flower was tucked into her hair as the witch slowly made her way through the large crowd until the intoxicating perfume filled her lungs with every breath.

Hermione glanced quickly behind and saw the tall wizard give a bemused snort as the ancient woman of the island murmured something obviously risqué to him. He bent lower so the old woman with a wry look on her face could run ash over his forehead. The wizard must have felt Hermione's eyes on him, as he quickly looked up, his lips twitching with amusement while he adjusted his robes so they didn't fall off his sun-burnt shoulders.

No amount of skin potions was enough to stop the fierce sun pounding his alabaster skin throughout the day, and now his pale, sallowness was sun and heat touched. He'd assured her that he would rapidly tan over the next couple of days until he became the same nutmeg brown he had been when he was younger.

Hermione smiled as another older woman accosted him to smear orange clay on his cheeks and say something suitably shocking. The tall man laughed openly in response to the remark. He lowered his head so the woman could reach his forehead more easily, and Hermione could tell by the look on his face that he said something of equal worth back; the grey haired woman chortled, giving him a playful slap on the arm.

The young witch lowered her head again so the island's men folk could continue tucking flowers into her hair and robes, returning warm greetings and kisses. Hermione's spine tingled, and she lifted her head to see her teacher walking slowly towards her along the pier. Out of the corner of the witch's eye, she saw the dark wizard also straighten and move closer to her. He had felt it too.

'My teacher,' greeted Hermione excitedly. She embraced the older woman, breathing in the leafy smell of the flax that her teacher had been weaving. The young woman started the required student to teacher greeting, but her teacher stopped her.

'No, no, my learner. We have time for that later, especially when there is an intriguing young man standing beside you and I'm bursting with curiosity.'

'Of course.' Hermione smiled, looking into the older woman's twinkling eyes. 'This is my friend, Severus Snape. My friend, this is my teacher.'

They both did the respectful greeting movements flawlessly. The old woman smiled warmly at the wizard but snorted in disbelief at Hermione.

'My friend' indeed, my learner. Goodness me, your connections are much tighter than that. I do believe you have found your circle, my learner, and a commanding one at that. We will prepare for the rites and the transition in time for the next full moon. What a wonderful thing to look forward to.'

The black-robed woman linked arms with the tall wizard. 'Come—let us move out of the sun. We have much to talk about. Snape, Snape... I do not recognize the name, but you have the handsome features of the mountain region if I am not mistaken.'

'You are right, madam. My maternal family is from that area, but I left many years ago.'

The woman made a clucking noise of sympathy. 'Such a powerful one to have left—what a pity—but you are back now, which is good...'

The younger man and the older woman with arms still linked wandered along the pier towards the mats laid out under the shade of the great trees. Hermione followed slowly behind, anxiously looking about. Suddenly a child as sleek and silent as a stalking panther leaped out from behind a leafy bush into her arms.

'Surprise! It's me!'

'Goodness—I thought you were a wild animal attacking me,' she said in mock fright.

Hermione closed her eyes, felt the small, lithe body clinging to her and wrapped her arms around him, breathing in the hot sun-warmed hair. 'Ah, my cherished.'

The End.