

The Curse of the Goddess

by mayadidi

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First Contact

Chapter 1 of 10

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The Curse of the Goddess

Chapter 1: First Contact

Disclaimer: While I might wish I did, I do not own any of the Harry Potter characters or the Harry Potter Universe. They belong to J.K. Rowling and I will not be making any money from this.... I'm just taking some of my favourites out to play...

A/N: I want to profusely thank my betas Saffron Angello and Brandy Schippers.

This story would be incomprehensible without them!

Hermione glanced at her computer screen when she heard the familiar 'ding' indicating that she had received an email. It was halfway through her summer hols after her fifth year, and she had started spending more and more time online out of sheer boredom. She had finished her summer homework not three weeks after term had ended, and she had not yet heard from Dumbledore about when she and Harry would join Ron at the Burrow. She idly wondered what would happen with number twelve Grimmauld Place now that Sirius was... She pushed that thought away before it was complete and opened her inbox to see who had sent her an email.

She had a few online Muggle friends she tried to keep in touch with during her breaks from Hogwarts. (They had all been informed that she was going to a boarding school in Switzerland.) She assumed it was one of them sending her a greeting.

She was sorely mistaken.

Hermione's eyebrows shot up to her hairline, and she let out a surprised gasp when she saw the subject of the email: CONSTANT VIGILANCE.

'Constant vigilance' brought her back to her fourth year when the impostor Moody was teaching DADA. The subject line indicated that the sender was a wizard and probably one from Hogwarts, but she didn't know any wizards who were internet savvy. She looked at the email address to try and determine what this could mean; she felt a bit apprehensive about receiving such an unexpected email. The sender's name was listed as PPGreenwoman. Well, that doesn't really give me any clue, Hermione thought in exasperation. Questions raced through her mind as she opened the body of the email, reminding herself that hexes could not be sent over the internet and that there was no magical equivalent of a computer virus.

To: HWwitchgurl

From: PPgreenwoman

Subject: CONSTANT VIGILANCE

You have no reason to trust me, but you must. I am what you are and learn what you do. Need help. I am not of DE. Please meet me. I will be Waiting at the Room close to where the learning starts. Come in time to put a stopper in death.

Serpente verde.

Hermione was shocked. This was not what she had expected, and frankly, she had no idea what she should do. The message was a code of sorts that much was obvious. As in everything else she did, Hermione was systematic and logical when she worked on puzzles or codes and most of this was pretty easy to figure out. She first thought about what she could make sense of at the outset of reading the message. The fact that she had received the email at all implied that the sender was half-blood or Muggle-born; *'greenwoman'* and *'serpente verde'* could only be a reference to a Slytherin and since no Muggle-born would be admitted into that House, that left a half-blood witch.

The passage *'Not of DE'* was plain as well. DE would be an acronym for Death Eater.

However, the rest was more confusing. She recognized the last phrase; *'put a stopper in death'* was from Professor Snape's first year preamble, a speech she doubted she would ever forget. As if she was eleven years old again she clearly remembered sitting in the dungeon, wholly entranced by his silken voice, soft and menacing. So that part of the message could be an allusion to Potions, or it could be another Slytherin reference as Snape was their Head of House. Hermione made a mental note to come back to that.

'Waiting at the Room close to where the learning starts.' What could that signify? Hermione pondered on the sender's meaning for 'learning.' Magic was the obvious answer, but there must be more. Her brow furrowed in contemplation. Hogwarts is where they learned, but where did it start? Racking her brain, she recalled her first year when she first began at Hogwarts. She had met Harry and Ron on the Hogwarts Express... A smile crossed her face as she thought back to that day. She had been helping Neville find Trevor when she had met the boys. Later they had teased her that she had been lecturing them in her bossy voice right from the start.

Hermione's eyes widened as the realization hit her. The train. King's Cross Station, platform nine and three quarters. Perhaps that was what her mysterious correspondence had meant by *'where the learning starts'*? Hermione's breathing became shallow with excitement as she quickly searched online for shops within 20 kilometres of King's Cross.

'Aha!' she exclaimed when she found it, clapping her hands together. The Waiting Room was a hotel and pub near King's Cross Station. She knew where to go now, but when? She read over the email again. The only part she hadn't figured out was that last bit: Snape's speech. Hermione mulled over what she had gathered. Snape, Potions... Slytherin and Gryffindor had Potions together. That could be the connection with Potions; perhaps this person had been in her Potions class last term...? She mentally sifted through her memories of last term's Potions classes, but nothing came to mind. She thought about the Slytherins in her class, but she, Harry, and Ron had always done their best to avoid them whenever possible. She remembered how irritating it was to deal with Malfoy and his gang right after lunch while waiting in the corridor of the dungeons. Right after lunch... one o'clock, could that be it? Her face shone with a radiant smile as she realized that she had figured it out. She had always loved that feeling of satisfaction when she solved a particularly tricky riddle.

Seconds later, however, her face fell when she thought about what this message meant. Was she actually thinking of meeting this person? Someone whom she knew nothing about, and who she didn't know if she could trust...someone from Slytherin? It would be foolish to go; it was probably a trap. After the fiasco at the Ministry, Voldemort had been revealed and was again at large and dangerous. And as Hermione was known to be a close friend of Harry Potter, it was most assuredly not a safe time to attend a clandestine meeting with a stranger whom she knew nothing about. She glanced at the email again, though she had already memorized the message.

'Need help.' There was no way to sense emotion from an email, but Hermione imagined that she could sense desperation in those two words. The whole tone of the message seemed to imply danger. This person could have written something like *'come in time to bewitch the mind and ensnare the senses'*, rather than the particular part of Snape's speech that they had chosen, *put a stopper in death.* Hermione couldn't help but feel a sense of foreboding as she re-read those words. Was someone's life in danger? Regardless of whom the email was from, could she ignore a plea for help?

As Hermione debated with herself, she could not help but picture her aforementioned professor sneering in disdain how such brainless nobility was so very Gryffindor.

Hermione didn't know how long she sat at her computer staring at the screen, pondering her options. She knew she couldn't ignore this email, but all the same, she wasn't foolish enough to walk blindly into a situation that could very well be a life-jeopardizing risk.

If it wasn't summertime, she could simply disillusion herself and stroll into the pub unseen to find out who this mystery person was before showing herself, but she couldn't use magic without running the risk of being caught by the Ministry of Magic. *Well*, she thought as her lips quirked up in a triumphant smile *perhaps I can't use magic, but I can use Muggle means of disguising myself.*

Hermione went to her closet and started rummaging around. Her hair was her most distinctive feature, so she would need to hide that. She found a baseball cap she had never worn (a cousin had bought it for her on a trip to America the previous summer). She hastily stuffed all of her hair up into the cap and found a pair of dark sunglasses. She changed into a non-descript pair of trousers and white tank top and considered her image in the mirror critically. The cap and sunglasses did well to hide her countenance, and if she stayed out of direct light, it would be difficult to discern who she was.

At the last minute she slipped on a light jacket and lightly taped her wand to her forearm. Restriction for Underage Wizardry or no, she would not go into this without her wand, and she wanted to be able to reach it easily. Going into this without a wand would be ludicrous, and the subject of the email reminded her of what Moody would say to her in a situation like this: Constant Vigilance.

AN: *Well, there it is, my first chapter of my first fic. What do you think? Please let me know!*

**The Waiting Room is a pub near Kings Cross in London. I have never been there, only looked it up online. Anyone familiar with it? I hope I didn't lead Hermione into a meeting at a dive bar in the bad side of London....*

A Meeting and a Plan

Chapter 2 of 10

Hermione meets her mystery e-mailer...

Chapter 2: Meetings and Plans

Disclaimer: I don't own any of these characters, except for maybe the waitress who is watching cricket, but sadly she won't make me any money. Neither will anything else, no money for me, all ownership belongs to JK.

AN: Thank you to my betas Saffron and Brandy! You girls are wonderful! Thanks Saffy for your wonderful suggestions and for finding the little holes in my plot!

Hermione arrived at the pub thirty minutes before her mysterious meeting was supposed to take place. She walked towards the back and sat down at a table in the corner with a view of the doorway. Hermione just had time to order herself some tea before she saw a girl saunter in. Hermione blanched; she knew that saunter, and she knew that smug smile and that hard face, which belonged to none other than Pansy Parkinson. Pansy scanned the room quickly before finding Hermione and heading towards her table. Hermione slowly put her hands under the table and retrieved her wand from her sleeve. *Perhaps coming here wasn't such a good idea after all.*

'Granger,' Pansy said with a sneer as she approached Hermione's table. 'Glad you could make it... nice hat,' she said mockingly. 'I give you full credit for being cautious, but did you really think that stuffing your hair in a hat would be clever camouflage?'

'Parkinson, what are you doing here?' Hermione said, ignoring the taunts about her attempted disguise. As she spoke, she took off her sunglasses and hat, running her hands through her bushy hair. 'Why would you ever want to meet with me?'

Pansy's face became serious when she replied, 'I need your help. You were the only person I could think of to help me, and I think I'm in danger.'

'You think I would just help you blindly?' Hermione asked incredulously. 'Why would you want help from a Gryffindor and a *Mudblood*?' she asked scathingly.

'Granger, just hear me out, okay? Or would patience be asking too much from a Gryffindor?'

Hermione shook her head in confusion. 'I know your father is a Death Eater, aren't you supposed to follow in his footsteps? You can't be seen meeting with *Mudbloods*. How did you even know about email in the first place?'

Pansy sighed and signalled for the waiter. 'I guess I'm going to be here for a while, might as well get some tea,' she muttered.

After the waiter brought Pansy her tea, she looked up at Hermione as she nervously fiddled with her stir spoon. 'I will explain everything to you, but try not to interrupt. It will be easier if I can finish what I'm saying before answering questions.' Hermione nodded. She noticed that the usually collected Slytherin girl was acting nervous.

Pansy started, 'Well, to answer your question about email, I heard about internet cafes from Tracey Davis, a half-blood in Slytherin. She was helping one of the third years with a Muggle Studies project, and I happened be close enough to hear what she had to say. I went to Muggle London and one of the people working at the café helped me. She looked up your email address and helped me to create my own so I could send you that message.'

'Honestly, Granger,' she said when Hermione's eyebrows lifted in surprise, 'being a pureblood does not make me an idiot.' Hermione opened her mouth to reply to that but Pansy just held up her hand and continued. 'I need you to help me because I think my father has offered me up to serve the Dark Lord.'

Hermione gasped at Pansy's declaration and said in a near whisper, 'Offered you up? For what exactly?' Pansy shook her head, her mouth was down-turned and her brow was furrowed. 'I don't know. I overheard a conversation and don't have all the details, but I know I'm going to be involved somehow.'

'Does this mean that you don't support Voldemort?' Hermione asked in a cautious voice. This was an unusual conversation to be having with the daughter of a Death Eater. I thought you shared his views on Muggle-borns.'

Pansy sighed. 'You don't get it, Granger. It doesn't matter what I believe. I don't care about Muggle-borns versus purebloods and all that nonsense. I've seen enough Muggle-borns who are smarter' she nodded at Hermione 'or more powerful than purebloods to know that it doesn't matter much who your parents are. I care about being on the side that wins. More importantly, I will not be used.'

Hermione was astonished by what Pansy said; she had always assumed Pansy felt the same as Malfoy in regards to Muggle-borns and purebloods. Hermione took a sip of her tea before replying to the other girl.

'I don't trust you, Pansy,' Hermione said slowly, 'but why don't you tell me about this conversation you overheard.' She thought she saw relief flash across Pansy's face before her trademark sneer was back in place as she started her story.

'This happened a couple weeks ago. I was at home, and Draco's aunt, Bellatrix, came to see my father. I was walking down the hall to see if Draco came with her when I heard her say my name. She hadn't seen me yet, but my father brought her into his study and I couldn't hear anything else. So I ran to the elf hole to eavesdrop on their conversation...'

Hermione interrupted at this point. 'Elf hole?'

What's an elf hole?'

'There are small hallways and peepholes into all the rooms that the house-elves use to move around in. That way they can move around without being seen,' Pansy replied. 'My nanny told me about them when I was a kid, and my parents don't know that Ditty told me, so I can always use them to spy or listen in on conversations when I need to.'

'You had a house-elf for a nanny?' Hermione asked in surprise.

'Almost all pureblood families have a house-elf for a nanny, Granger, and before you say anything else, can we avoid hearing about *Puke* or *Hurl* or whatever it is?' Hermione wanted to correct her about S.P.E.W., but she could tell that Pansy was running out of patience, so she stayed quiet.

'Anyways,' Pansy said once she had ascertained that Hermione was not going to say anything further, 'I went to the elf hole to listen in on their conversation...'

'How could you object?' Bellatrix was saying when Pansy started listening. 'It is an honour that the Dark Lord has asked that your daughter assist him. If I had a child, I would be proud to have them serve the Dark Lord. Besides, you know that Pansy is the only female of the right age to do this. She should be proud to be able to provide this service to her Lord!'

Conrad Parkinson was pacing the length of the study. 'I know it is an honour, and Pansy will be happy to fulfil her duty however, I worry about the reduction of her magic. Will it be a large percentage do you think?'

Bellatrix shook her head. 'Nonsense. She will be fine. Our Lord promises that it will be an insignificant amount of magic; she probably won't even notice the difference. You must stop worrying; there are more important things to consider. Now, we need to complete the research on Morgaine's Blessing before the Hogwarts school year begins, that's what I came to tell you. Snape' (her lip curled in disdain as she mentioned the Potions master) 'will need all the information so that he can help Pansy in her task. Our Lord said it would take Snape most of the first term to prepare at the very least, though how our Lord can trust Snape I don't know.'

When she said this Conrad held up his hands. 'You must not doubt the Dark Lord's judgment, Bella,' he admonished. 'He knows best, and if he trusts Snape, so must we.'

Macnair and Goyle have already started the research and should have everything ready in time. I will tell Pansy a fortnight prior to the start of term.' Bellatrix nodded in satisfaction and made ready to leave. *'Just make sure everything is ready, Conrad,' Bella said with just a hint of warning in her voice. 'This project is very important to our Lord's victory.'*

Hermione blanched after hearing Pansy's story. If all of this was true, then Pansy's dad was expecting his daughter to work for Lord Voldemort during school next term. Pansy would be helping to end the free wizarding world. Hermione called up the image she had built up in her head, based on Harry's description. Her imagined Voldemort was complete with his red eyes, scaly skin, and slits for nostrils instead of a nose, and Hermione felt her chest tighten with fear.

Pansy took a deep breath and met Hermione's eyes. A serious look on her face in place of the arrogant sneer that Hermione was used to seeing on the other girl's face. 'You're one of the smartest witches I know, Granger, that's why I contacted you. I can't trust anyone from my own House. I wouldn't be sure of where their loyalties lay. Besides that, from what I have heard I think I need another female to help me. They seemed specific about this being a task for a girl of my age.'

Hermione was quiet as she thought over all that Pansy had said. She didn't know what to think about all this. On one hand, Pansy could very well be lying and trying to trick Hermione. Maybe trying to get her to give out information about the Order. As one of Harry's best friends, Hermione knew she was privy to more information than most students. On the other hand, if Pansy was telling the truth, she was in very real danger and could use Hermione's help. Hermione thought over the implications of what Pansy had heard. *A project of Voldemort's that was important to his victory, one that directly involved Pansy. If I helped Pansy, would I have a chance to hinder Voldemort?*

'What do you expect me to do?' Hermione asked the other girl in exasperation. 'How could I help you? We don't even know the full dangers yet. That conversation you overheard was pretty vague.'

'Except that we know my magic could be reduced,' Pansy retorted vehemently. 'I told you what my father said. He is afraid of the reduction to my magic. I'm not doing anything that could make me less powerful!'

Hermione knew what Pansy meant. Magic becomes such a part of you that losing any small bit of it seemed horrible. But, she still had some misgivings about all of this. Why should she trust Pansy?

'I didn't know it was possible for a witch to lose her power,' Hermione murmured thoughtfully.

'Oh, well, it's not that common or anything,' Pansy said in a casual voice. 'You hear of it happening every once in a while after a great tragedy, sadness, or shock. It can also be a risk when you mis-use your powers.'

'Mis-use, like if you use the Dark Arts?' Hermione asked.

'No, not just using the Dark Arts.' Pansy rolled her eyes at Hermione's naïvete. 'I mean, lots of wizards use the Dark Arts and don't risk losing their magic every time. I don't really know a lot about it. I heard that all magic has a kind of echo that goes back into the witch or wizard who performed that magic. Like a counter reaction to the magical energy. If you can't handle the force of that echo, it can damage your powers or something like that. I think it has a lot to do with the individual witch or wizard and how much power and control they have.'

Pansy's explanation stunned the other girl. In all her reading and study of the magical world, Hermione had never heard of this. She knew that she missed a lot by not having grown up as part of the magical world. It occurred to her now that she could actually learn a lot by talking to a pureblood like Pansy. There was so much that you couldn't learn at Hogwarts.

'Okay, you want to prevent your magic from being reduced. I still don't know how I can help. We don't even know what this project is. How can we fight it?'

Pansy ducked her head for a moment, thinking over what Hermione had said.

'I don't know exactly,' she said slowly, 'but you can help me. You're smart and you know how to fight for one thing; I know you were part of that club last year, and I read about you being at the Ministry fighting Death Eaters.'

Hermione felt a wave of sadness wash over her at the mention of the fight in the Department of Mysteries. She didn't like to think of that night. It must have shown on her face because Pansy mumbled, 'Sorry.'

'It's okay,' Hermione said softly as she shook her head. She took a deep breath before continuing. 'Well, I do know how to fight, and we learned loads of spells and hexes last year... I can teach you all of that, but I don't know if that will help. We can't use defensive spells to prevent a loss of your magic.' Hermione thought about the conversation between Bellatrix Lestrange and Pansy's father. 'I think that we will need to research this 'Morgaine's Blessing' that Bellatrix talked about. For some reason that name seems familiar to me. Once we know what Voldemort's plan is, the easier we can fight it or prevent you from being used in it.'

'You'll help me then?' Pansy asked cautiously. 'You'll help me research this and think of a way to keep me out of it?' Hermione noticed that Pansy said this without a trace of the usual arrogance.

'I don't know if I trust you yet, Parkinson,' Hermione warned. 'I will help you research this summer, but I won't commit myself to anything yet. Once we are back in school, we will have to decide.'

Pansy nodded her head once and grimaced. 'I understand, Granger. It's not like I want to trust you either. Believe me, I'm not imagining slumber parties and makeovers.'

'What about telling a professor once we are back in school?' Hermione asked.

'No!' Pansy said quickly. 'There is no way ... I don't trust any of the professors. It could get back to Snape.' Hermione raised her eyebrows at this. The Slytherins had always been loyal to their Head of House. 'Granger, you may not have realized it, but Snape is a Death Eater. He may have fooled the headmaster and everyone else at Hogwarts, but I know for a fact that he is working with the Dark Lord. I told you what Bellatrix said; the Dark Lord plans on having Snape assist me on this. We will need to be careful around him.'

Hermione was quiet at this. She knew that Snape was working for Dumbledore as a spy, but she couldn't tell Pansy about that. There was no way she would ever trust the Slytherin girl that much.

'Well, okay, not Snape, but what about the headmaster or Professor McGonagall?' Hermione offered.

Pansy was already shaking her head before Hermione had finished. 'No professors, Granger.' She was quiet for a minute, and then she looked right into Hermione's eyes. 'Granger, I need you to promise me you won't tell anyone about this. No professors and not your little boyfriends either.'

Hermione pondered on Pansy's demand. She honestly hadn't given Harry or Ron a second thought, for knew it wouldn't be a good idea telling them. They were so prejudiced against anyone in Slytherin that she knew they would never be convinced to help with this. Hermione looked at Pansy and nodded.

'I promise not to tell anyone else, Pansy.'

Pansy was still looking Hermione directly in the eyes, and Hermione felt *something...* push in her mind. Hermione gasped and quickly closed her eyes, remembering what Harry had told her about his Occlumency lessons with Snape, that eye contact was necessary for most Legilimens.

'Did you just use Legilimency on me!?' she exclaimed in surprise.

Pansy shrugged. 'I needed to make sure you were telling the truth, I didn't think you would notice.'

Hermione's mind was racing as she thought of a million questions she could ask Pansy about Legilimency.

'Pansy, if I help you with all of this, would you teach me Legilimency and Occlumency?' Pansy's mouth split into a wide, calculating smile in response to Hermione's proposition.

'Well, Granger,' Pansy said, 'I guess we could work out a trade here. You help me on this and I will teach you what I know about Legilimency and Occlumency. Bellatrix has been teaching Draco and me all summer. She says that Dumbledore is a great Legilimens and we need to guard against him. I'm not an expert or anything, but I'd wager I know a lot more than you do.'

Hermione considered what Pansy had said. She had wanted to learn Occlumency and Legilimency ever since Harry had told her about his lessons. Trusting Pansy Parkinson was still quite a risk. Pansy and her gang of Slytherin girls had teased and bullied Hermione since her first year. Could she just forgive and forget the last five years and start working with Pansy? And yet, Hermione didn't think she could resist the allure of what Pansy was promising to teach her.

After observing Pansy for another moment, Hermione nodded. 'It's a deal. I'll help you if you teach me.'

For the first time, Hermione saw a genuinely happy smile on Pansy's face. It softened Pansy's features and made her look pleasant and friendly. Hermione couldn't help but smile back as she held out her hand. Pansy grasped it and shook it firmly. For just a second, it looked to Hermione as if their hands glowed as they were clasped together. She felt a *frisson* of... something shiver up her spine. She dropped Pansy's hand quickly and looked up at her. Pansy had a startled look on her face and she was looking at her hand.

Hermione cleared her throat to cover up her confusion. 'I guess we need to figure out what we do first.'

Pansy seemed just as willing to ignore what may or may not have just happened and she nodded her head in agreement.

'I guess we should spend the summer researching this Morgaine's Blessing that Bellatrix mentioned,' Pansy suggested. 'We need to know what this project is by the time school starts.'

Hermione chewed on her bottom lip absently as she contemplated what needed to be done. 'How about I research Morgaine? I am sure I have heard that name before. Parki Pansy, you could research feminine magics. Bellatrix mentioned that this project could only be accomplished by a girl of our age. There must be something significant about that.'

'You're probably right. My father has a really big library and I can have the house-elves get me any books I need without him knowing about it. I'm sure he has some stuff about ancient feminine magics.'

Hermione let her mind revel for just a moment on what it would be like to have access to an old pureblood family's library before she responded. 'How will we get in touch with each other if we discover anything significant? We need to make sure we are both on the same page.'

'Well,' Pansy said, 'I guess we can send owls in an emergency, except they will need to be written in code. My family cannot see me receiving owls from a Mud...Muggle-born. They would be too suspicious.'

Hermione nodded as she inwardly smiled at Pansy's self-correction. 'We will have to work out a code for the owl letters, and we will need to get together as soon as school starts.'

'That's another problem,' Pansy said and sighed. 'It's not like we can be seen together at school. Nobody would believe it. Can you imagine how people would react?' she said with a smile.

Hermione laughed. She tried to envision what the rest of the school would do if Hermione and Pansy walked into the great hall together chatting like old friends. 'You're right; we will need to meet in secret.' The Gryffindor witch drummed her fingers on the table top as she thought about the ideal spot.

'Of course. We could meet at the Room of Requirement,' she said with a smile.

Pansy looked at her blankly.

'Remember where the Inquisitorial Squad found out about our meetings last year? You know, that club that we were all in.' Hermione said, referring to Dumbledore's Army.

Pansy smiled slyly in memory at this and nodded.

'The D.A. always met in the Room of Requirement. It's on the seventh floor across from the tapestry of Barnabus the Barmy. You walk in front of it three times and think about what you want and a door will appear. The room can be whatever you need it to be.'

'Brilliant!' Pansy said with a wicked grin that made Hermione wonder what Pansy would require out of the room if given a chance.

There was a brief pause before Pansy spoke again. 'I obviously can't meet you over the summer, Granger, so we will have to do your Legilimency lessons when school starts.'

Hermione nodded. 'I know. We can use the Room of Requirement for those as well. I haven't forgotten.'

'Before I waste too much of my time teaching you what you already know, why don't you tell me what you know about Legilimency and Occlumency?' Pansy asked.

Hermione told Pansy everything that Harry had told her about his lessons with Snape.

Pansy smirked. 'Well you have the basics down, you essentially just need to learn how to control your mind, and it just takes practice. You can start by clearing your mind of all thought and emotion every night before you go to bed.' Pansy's instructions reminded Hermione of Harry telling her and Ron that Snape had demanded the same thing during his lessons.

While Hermione had been thinking back to Harry's lessons last year, Pansy had gone quiet and seemed to be deep in thought. She slowly looked around the pub. The girls had been there for almost an hour now and seeing as it was almost 2:00, it was almost empty except for one other patron, the lunch hour rush being long over. The bartender and the waitress stood behind the bar watching a cricket match on the telly.

'Granger, we have been here for a while. I should probably be getting back soon. What else do we need to do?'

'Well, we each have our parts of the research, I will work on Morgaine's Blessing and you take feminine magics. We just need to work out a code of sorts in case we need to communicate with each other.'

Their heads bent towards each other as they talked about what they could use for code words. Twenty minutes later, Pansy stood up looking around the pub as she pushed her chair in. 'I need to get back. As it is I have been gone for a long time. My family thinks I'm in Diagon Alley with Millie Bulstrode, and I wasn't supposed to be out for too long.'

Hermione nodded. 'Okay. Well... er, be careful and let me know if you find anything.' Pansy nodded at this and smirked before turning to leave.

AN: Please review! Stay tuned for next chapter with a little Snape!

Chocolate and Sandalwood

Chapter 3 of 10

Hermione starts her research and runs into frustration, Professor Snape and a mysterious book.

Chapter 3: Chocolate and Sandalwood

Disclaimer: I don't own anything.

A/N: Many thanks to my betas. I appreciate all the hard work, girls! Cheers!

It had been two days since Hermione's meeting with Pansy, and she hadn't gotten anywhere in her research. Hermione sighed in frustration. She had been eager to begin her research right away, but had of course forgotten that she wouldn't have the Hogwarts library at her disposal. Hermione had put together a small library herself over the past five years since she had entered the Wizarding world, but she had soon realized that she hadn't accumulated anything to aid her in this particular research. She came to this conclusion while sitting on the floor of her bedroom, the contents of her small library strewn about her.

Deep in contemplation concerning what her next move might be if indeed there was one, Hermione did not hear her mother's knock upon her closed door. And so it was that Karen entered to find her daughter still on the floor surrounded by her books.

'My dear, what are you doing?' Karen Granger asked in surprise.

'I'm trying to do some research for school, but it's hopeless!' Hermione complained, her head tilting up to regard her mother from her place on the floor.

'I thought you already finished your summer coursework,' Karen said in response to Hermione's exclamation.

'I did,' said the young witch as she began to stack her books into neat piles. 'I'm working on an independent project with a... friend of mine from school. The problem is that I am used to having the library at Hogwarts to work with, but I just don't have the right books or the right information to get the research done.'

Karen Granger watched her daughter thoughtfully. Hermione had inherited Karen's thirst for knowledge, so she understood how frustrated her daughter was at present. Once either one of the Granger women became absorbed in something, they would pursue that line of thought single-mindedly. As a child, whenever Hermione had a question about something, her parents had encouraged her to find the answers on her own. As a result, much of her time growing up was spent 'researching' with her parents.

'Couldn't you order the books you need from that bookstore in Diagon Alley?' Karen asked.

'I'm sure I could, if I knew what I was looking for. All I have is a name to go on, so I have no idea which books I would need,' Hermione answered in a tired voice.

'A name? You're doing research based on a name?' Karen asked, feeling a spark of interest. 'Is it a wizard's name?'

'Well, actually, Mum, I'm not sure it's probably a wizard. The same friend I'm doing the project with overheard a conversation in which the name was mentioned, and we got curious.' Hermione answered, choosing her words carefully. She didn't want her mother to find out exactly what she may be getting involved with. She had, of course, told her parents about Voldemort and the current troubles in the magical world, but she didn't want them to worry about her more than she knew they already did. She had always tried to avoid telling them about how dangerous her relationship with Harry could be.

'Mum, have you ever heard the name Morgaine?' Hermione asked, desperate at this point for any information. 'Only, I thought it sounded familiar when I heard it.'

'Morgaine?' Karen asked in surprise. 'As in the Sorceress in the legend of King Arthur?'

Hermione's mouth dropped open in surprise.

'Of course!' She cried. 'I knew it sounded familiar!' She had read the story of Camelot in primary school, so of course the name had registered, but she hadn't been able to place it.

'Wait,' Karen said holding up one of her hands. 'So then -- they are real? I thought it was just a story!' she exclaimed. She had been fascinated with this world that Hermione had entered from the beginning and enjoyed learning as much as she could about such things.

Hermione was slowly shaking her head in thought. 'I don't know how much is truth,' she said, 'but I do know that Merlin was a real wizard, one of the most powerful in history, actually.' Suddenly filled with determination, Hermione stood and said, 'Mum, I need to go to the library and research the Muggle version of the legend; it will give me somewhere to start in my research.'

'Hermione,' Karen said in a teasing voice, 'have you forgotten about the existence of the internet?' She gestured to the forlorn laptop sitting on Hermione's desk, looking rather small and forgotten.

'Of course!' she said, hitting herself softly on the forehead. 'I'm so used to using books and libraries during school that I forgot all about using the internet for research.' While speaking, she had opened her computer and logged on to the internet server. Karen smiled as her daughter started muttering to herself, already deep into 'research mode.'

'I'll leave you to it, dear. And, try to remember to take a break for dinner later on tonight.' Karen said jokingly she left her daughter's room.

Hermione looked up from her computer three hours later with a slight twinge in her neck. She felt like she knew almost everything she could know about Morgaine from a Muggle's perspective. In the stories of King Arthur, Morgaine was an evil Sorceress, sister to Arthur, who eventually helped to destroy the Kingdom of Camelot. Perhaps Morgaine had invented some Dark magic that Voldemort was planning to make Pansy do? Hermione had learned that when it came to the Muggle legends about wizards, it was hit or miss. Some legends were surprisingly accurate, but some were simply ridiculous the Wicked Witch in 'The Wizard of Oz' being an ideal example of the latter in Hermione's mind.

The stories about Morgaine matched a lot of the information that Hermione knew to be true about Merlin and his account of the events, but she was still skeptical. She knew that if they were true, if Morgaine was truly an evil Sorceress, then Voldemort had some powerful Dark magic to draw from. The accounts Hermione had read painted Morgaine in a terrible light. Almost from childhood the witch had manipulated the people around her, including her brother, the future king. Morgaine had been trained in the Order of Avalon, and her teacher had been the *'Lady of the Lake,'* who, the legend told, created Excalibur for Arthur. The Order of Avalon was an order for witches who worshipped the Goddess Mother, creator of the earth. Witches from the Order were said to be very powerful. Morgaine was said to have fought Merlin himself. The legend said that Morgaine eventually turned against the teachings of Avalon and used her powers to seduce Arthur and later raise their son to take down Arthur's Kingdom.

Hermione did find a few websites that told the legend from the opposite perspective and put Morgaine in a good light, as someone who had simply been caught up in the events around her. Hermione found herself doubting the truth of these websites. It wouldn't be logical for Voldemort to be researching a witch who was on the side of the Light. He would be looking for Dark magic to bring about his victory. Nevertheless, Hermione printed out both sets of information. She hoped that she would be able to find some books on the subject when she was next in Diagon Alley.

The same day that Hermione had met with Pansy in London, an owl had arrived from the Burrow, inviting her to come in one week's time and stay at the Burrow for the remainder of the summer--Harry as well. So it was a week later that Hermione stood outside the Leaky Cauldron, saying goodbye to her parents and promising to write at least once a week. Hermione had asked her parents to drop her at the Leaky Cauldron early that morning so that she could look for some more books before Flooing to the Burrow at noon.

After greeting Tom and asking him to stow her trunk and a very disgruntled Crookshanks in his carrier behind the bar, Hermione made her way to Diagon Alley.

As soon as Hermione stepped through the brick archway, she noticed the difference. The Leaky Cauldron had been empty, but that wasn't too unusual for this time in the morning. Now, however, Hermione realized the quiet stillness at the Leaky Cauldron existed along Diagon Alley as well. Diagon Alley was no longer the bustling, busy street that Hermione remembered as being one of her first views into the magical world. The street was silent, and the few people who were there moved quickly about their business, not stopping to chat or linger any longer than necessary. Almost every window was plastered with purple Ministry posters or pictures of the Death Eaters who had escaped Azkaban. As Hermione passed by a sneering rendition of Bellatrix Lestrange, the young witch had to suppress a shudder as she recalled that Bellatrix had just recently been in Pansy's home.

Hermione quickened her pace in reaction to the eerie silence of Diagon Alley and headed into Flourish and Blotts. Hermione, familiar with the bookstore from her many pre-Hogwarts shopping trips, let herself wander a little and enjoy browsing through all the different books.

An hour later, Hermione hadn't made any progress finding books that would aid in her research, but she did end up purchasing a new Potions text and the latest issue of Transfiguration Today.

Hermione left Flourish and Blotts, her book bag now significantly heavier with her new purchases inside, and headed down Diagon Alley. She felt a bit uncomfortable walking alone down the silent street, but she was determined to find another bookstore that she might have more luck at.

Hermione had been walking down the street for a few minutes now and was about to turn back when she saw it. It was a small shop near the corner where Knockturn Alley intersected with Diagon Alley that seemed to be shoved between two larger buildings. It had no Ministry posters or displays in the window, just a small sign that read 'Books' hanging above the door. Hermione felt a little apprehensive, but decided to check it out. Glancing at the stacks of books barely visible in the storefront window, she warily stepped up to the store and pushed the door open.

As soon as she stepped inside, Hermione's apprehension was forgotten. She stood in the entrance transfixed with what she saw. Books, everywhere she looked. There were books stacked precariously on the floor, on tables and chairs; every flat surface in the room was covered in books. There were high shelves bulging with books in no apparent order. There were even books lying on top of the shelves. The books of this shop weren't the shiny, flashy books like one would find in Flourish and Blotts. These were obviously old and used, as the majority were dusty and bound by battered leather; the titles printed on their spines were faded, some to the point where they were almost imperceptible. To Hermione, this was heaven. She inhaled deeply, loving that smell of old leather and parchment. Her face broke out into a wide smile as she moved toward the first shelf and started to look around.

Hermione was gazing around so intently at the wonders before her that she jerked in surprise when someone addressed her.

'Well, what do we have here?' said a silky voice from behind. Hermione turned to see Professor Snape standing rather close behind her.

'Professor Snape!' she cried, tilting her head back to look him in the eyes.

'Miss Granger,' Snape said, his low voice contrasting almost humourously with Hermione's small squeal of surprise. 'How surprising to find you in a bookshop,' he continued derisively.

'Oh yes, sir, it's fantastic! She had obviously missed his sarcasm. 'I mean, I've only ever been in Flourish and Blotts, but this is much better. I feel as if I could find anything I needed here.'

'Yes, well, if you have the time and patience to deal with the complete chaos Mr. Yosh leaves this place in, you can find some very interesting reads,' Snape answered her, scowling as he looked around at the cluttered stacks of books.

It occurred then to Hermione that she had never had a conversation with Professor Snape outside the Potions classroom, and even then they consisted solely of his taking points from Gryffindor or giving out detentions. Hermione was so distracted by her discovery of the book shop that she had forgotten to feel her usual apprehension around the Potions master. It occurred to her that he probably appreciated books as much as she did. If nothing else, it was one thing she found she could respect about her professor. She noticed then that he was holding a few books at his side.

'What books did you find, sir?' she asked, always willing to find something new to read.

He looked down at the books and then reluctantly held them out to her.

'It's really none of your business, Miss Granger, but I know you can't resist the allure of the written word.'

As he leaned in to hand her his books, Hermione caught a light whiff of the professor's scent of chocolate and sandalwood. For a brief instant it occurred to her fleetingly that chocolate seemed an unusual scent for her Potions master, that he ought to smell of common potions ingredients such as fluxweed or aconite. Hermione quickly dropped that line of thought. *What does it matter if Snape smells like chocolate?* she thought. *I shouldn't be noticing!* But she let herself inhale the chocolate smell once more as she held out her hands for his books and looked them over.

Bound in worn black leather, each looked extremely old. The thickest of them was called *The Curse of Avalon* and Hermione had to fight to keep her face blank. Professor Snape's researching for Voldemort's project! He also had a book called *A Witches Magic and Communicative Theory*, but Hermione was interested in the largest tome; she needed to find a copy of that book! She turned each volume over once, yet she couldn't resist opening the largest to look at the pages inside.

'If I could have my books back, Miss Granger, I don't have the time to wait as you peruse my books at your leisure,' growled Snape. His voice, low and menacing, interrupted her thoughts.

'Oh! Sorry, sir, and they just look so interesting. Hermione handed back the thick tomes, eyes lingering for but a moment more on the thickest before she asked with a voice of casual curiosity. Had you been looking for something particular today?'

If possible, Snape's scowl became more pronounced as he looked down his large nose at her. It was then Hermione noticed that rather than his greasy hair falling forward to frame his face, Professor Snape had it bound back at the nape of his neck. His eyes appeared even darker and more piercing without his hair surrounding his lean face. For many moments he was silent, and Hermione held her breath as his eyes raked over her.

'No, nothing in particular,' he finally answered in a curt voice, startling her slightly after the long pause. 'Now, if you will excuse me, Miss Granger, I must be going.'

Before she could reply, he turned from her and walked to the counter at the front of the shop. It was then that she noticed the man sitting behind the counter, silently reading. Hermione watched as Snape made his purchases and left the store, his customary black robes trailing behind him.

After waiting a few minutes to make sure Professor Snape had gone, Hermione took out a quill and parchment and wrote the names of his books down. She needed to get her hands on a copy of the one on Avalon.

She approached the man at the counter, who was engrossed again in the book he had been reading before Snape had left. She assumed he was the owner of the shop.

Hermione cleared her throat to get his attention. He looked up with an irritated grimace on his face; clearly he hadn't wanted to be distracted from his book again.

'Hi, my name is Hermione Granger, I'm one of Professor Snape's students,' she said, gesturing to the door that the professor had just exited.

Hermione guessed the man to be close to forty years old. He was slim and had messy brown hair and a scruffy goatee. He wore a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles that lent him a scholarly air. He rolled his eyes in response to her introduction.

'Why would that concern me?' he said in an arrogant voice reminiscent of Draco Malfoy.

'Er... I was just wondering if you had any more books like the one that the professor purchased; the one about Avalon?' Hermione asked uncertainly, trying to ignore his rudeness.

Closing his book with a snap, he answered, 'We rarely have copies here. You should go to Flourish and Blotts if that is what you are after.'

Hermione sighed, then replied with a hint of frustration in her voice, 'Well, he showed me his books and that one just looked so interesting. I was just really hoping to get one on Avalon, Mr....' she said, trying to get him to introduce himself.

The shopkeeper looked at her impassively for a second before answering, 'Mathius Yosh. And, I may have something for you.' He stood up, and she realized that while he was very lean, he wasn't that much taller than she. He skirted around the counter and walked briskly towards the back of the store. Hermione assumed he meant for her to follow. He walked straight towards a stack of books in the back corner of the room and pulled out the third book from the bottom. She was amazed that he seemed to know exactly where a specific book was in this general scattered mess of tomes.

He handed her the rather thick volume and said, *The Curse of the Goddess* is about a witch of Avalon.'

After saying this, he headed back towards his seat at the counter, opened his book, and was immersed once again. Hermione looked at the book in her hands. It was bound with worn leather and the title was embossed in a faded gold. As she lightly traced the embossed title with her finger, she gasped in surprise. The title *The Curse of the Goddess* was changing before her eyes. The words seemed to dissolve and a new title appeared. The book was now entitled *The Blessings of a Witch*.

Hermione's mouth dropped open in surprise. She wondered if Mr. Yosh knew the book would do this. She quickly walked towards the counter and set the book on the counter in front of him.

'I'll take this one, please, Mr. Yosh.'

She hesitated for a minute as he put his book down and picked up a ledger and quill to record the sale.

'Um... what's the book called again?' she asked, conscious of how stupid the question sounded. He looked at her incredulously and put his finger under the title.

'The. Curse. Of. The. Goddess,' he said in a mocking voice. 'Can't you can read?'

She nodded in response but was looking down at the book where his finger had been. She could still see *The Blessings of a Witch*, emblazoned across the front, but he obviously couldn't see that the words had changed. Feeling confused, she handed him her money, thanked him for the book, and hurriedly left the shop.

This book was special. She couldn't believe how lucky she was that she had found an enchanted book about Avalon. She was sure that this would be exactly what she needed for her research. She couldn't wait to start reading!

Hermione looked at her watch and yelped - The Weasleys would be expecting her.

Harry and Ron were not going to let her sneak away and read. They would insist she play Quidditch with them and 'have fun for a change.'

Professor Snape clutched his new books tightly in his hands as he walked briskly out of Yosh's bookshop. He couldn't believe he had run into the Granger girl here of all places. He wasn't surprised that she had found the store, for the 'brain' of the Dream Team was well known for her affection for reading. He couldn't count the number of times he had seen her walking in the hallways of Hogwarts with her nose stuck in a book, not paying attention to where she was going. It usually gave him license to take away a good number of points.

Severus sighed in frustration; she had been utterly fascinated and had stood in the entrance of the shop for a full minute staring at the books. He understood the way she felt, for he had felt the same way when he had first discovered Yosh's bookshop.

Snape assumed that was why he let himself get caught up in a conversation with the girl. Normally he would dismiss her without even a greeting, but the temptation to talk with someone who shared his passion for books was overwhelming. He probably would have stayed longer if she hadn't asked about his purchases and reminded him of why he had gone to Yosh's in the first place.

Snape sighed as he recalled the night before. He had been summoned by the Dark Lord and assigned a research project. Voldemort had ordered Snape to take over when the Dark Lord realized that Goyle Sr. wasn't the right man for the job. Severus smirked at the thought of that mindless lump doing research. Sometimes Voldemort could be pretty thick. *Can Goyle even read?* Snape thought to himself. He smirked with amusement.

So the Dark Lord had summoned Snape and told him to find out as much as he possibly could about Avalon and the witch Morgaine.

Severus wondered what Voldemort was up to now. More often than not, the Dark Lord just led his Death Eaters in quick raids ending in death and destruction. Death and destruction were both easy enough to plan, and as a result, people tended to forget how intelligent and shrewd Tom Riddle could be. At Hogwarts, the Dark Lord had achieved top marks, rivaled only by he, Snape, and perhaps Miss Granger. It worried Snape more to think that Riddle could be using his considerable brain power and planning something that would be much worse than the standard raid.

Up until a few weeks ago, Snape had been enjoying his summer. He had only been summoned once and that had been right after the debacle at the Department of Mysteries. After that, Wormtail had moved in on Voldemort's orders, and they were both left alone for a number of weeks.

Snape knew that Wormtail was spying on him, and the shuffling, whiny little rodent was irritating to say the least. However, the company of the annoying little rat was preferable to suffering the Cruciatus from Voldemort, and Snape had enjoyed this reprieve. He had caught up on some much needed sleep and even put on a few necessary pounds after yet another stressful school year had left him feeling like a skeleton with skin.

His peace had only been broken when Dumbledore had Flooed him just days ago in desperate need of a potion. Snape grimaced at the memory. He had brewed the potion for Dumbledore and it had served its purpose, but it wasn't enough.

Dumbledore had been hit with a terminal curse when he had attempted to destroy one of Voldemort's Horcruxes. All Snape could do was slow the process of the curse. Both Severus and Albus knew the potion wasn't a cure. Dumbledore had a year at best unless they discovered a remedy.

Snape cursed under his breath. Instead of finding a cure to save his best and only true friend's life, he was stuck doing research for Lord Voldemort. His hands tightened convulsively around his books as he came to a stop near the entrance into the Leaky Cauldron. He hated feeling so helpless.

In addition to the research, Snape had another thing to stress about; Voldemort was getting suspicious. Snape scowled. Usually the Dark Lord would confide in Snape about his plans, but lately.... Severus didn't want to think about what would happen if his treachery was discovered.

The Potions master sighed; he needed to go report to Dumbledore about this research. Maybe Dumbledore could figure out where Voldemort was going with this Avalon business. With a scowl on his face, Snape Disapparated.

Seconds later, he re-appeared in the outskirts of the Forbidden Forest and looked up at the castle he had come to think of as home. Severus took a deep breath and walked towards the familiar gates of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Well, there is Chapter Three (Please Review!). I couldn't help but bring Snape in on this one. What do you think makes him smell like chocolate?

Anyways, sorry about the wait on this chapter, real life and the gift exchange got in the way. I promise to update at a faster rate from now on!

Chapter 4: Phlegm and Weezes

Chapter 4 of 10

Hermione arrives at the Burrow to finish out her summer holidays while Snape and Dumbledore discuss the upcoming school year.

Chapter 4: Phlegm and Wheezes.

AN: See disclaimer in previous chapters.

Millions of Thank You's to my beta Septentrion! I really appreciate your stepping in and helping me with my story.

I've decided it is time I recorded my experiences and thoughts. Before my mind becomes dim with age, and as men are telling tales and twisting history, I must tell the truth. I must give an accurate account of what has happened.

What I know, what I have seen; these are the reasons I have been exiled. After a full life, I have finally been left in the mist, to end my days alone. I am a powerful witch. I shall not be modest about what I know is truth. Therefore, my knowledge must not be given to just anyone.

As I write this, I am devising the enchantments that will protect my stories. Only the worthy will gain the gift of my wisdom and experiences. If you are reading this now, you are worthy. You are my sister of heart, and you will know what to do with what you have.

I am going to tell you about the Power of women. Make no mistake, my sister, women hold more power than men. This world was created by a goddess, a woman, and we hold her secrets within our hearts. In my lifetime, I have bonded with many women, and we became sisters by blood and by love. I also battled women, and we became bitter enemies, bonded by tears and pain.

I will start by telling you, my sister, of my training. I was trained by a woman and with other women, in the mists of Avalon. The Order of Avalon is extinct now; no more girls will be trained in the sacred order; no more girls will learn the ancient ways. Even from my exile, I see the belief in the Old Magic fading in front of me. A woman finds her power in many things, but one is more potent than the rest: her Voice.

Women communicate through speech. We talk about our feelings, we are eloquent and expressive. We tell our stories, listen to our sisters, and lend them our strength. Men lose so much by their show of strength. They close themselves up and their stories get lost. This was the first lesson I learned in Avalon. I began my training at the age of eight...

Excerpt from 'The Blessings of a Witch.'

Hermione arrived at the Burrow in the early afternoon. Harry had not yet arrived but they were told that Dumbledore would be collecting him the next morning. Hermione had arrived in time for lunch which conveniently gave Mrs. Weasley the chance to comment on how skinny the girl had gotten and how it wasn't attractive for girls to be just skin and bone. Ginny grinned and winked at Hermione across the table as a plate heaped high with food was placed in front of her. After saying his hello's Ron had already become engrossed in his lunch.

Hermione smiled with affection as she watched his single minded attack of his lunch, it was so characteristic of Ron that it had almost become endearing. After lunch, Ron, Hermione and Ginny had wandered out in the garden to enjoy the sun and watch Crookshanks chase after the gnomes. They had been there for about half an hour when all of a sudden Ginny started muttering under her breath. Hermione looked at her in surprise, raising her eyebrows.

'Don't look now, Mione, but we are about to be mired in phlegm!' Ginny said in a disgruntled voice.

'Ah, Come on Gin, she isn't that bad!' Ron answered.

'What are you ...?' Hermione started to ask, curious as to what they were talking about.

A beautiful blond was walking gracefully towards them and spoke before Hermione could finish her sentence.

'Ah There ewe are! Molly is looking for you Geeny! We must deescuzz thee wedding plans!'

Hermione's mouth opened in a round 'o' of surprise as Fleur Delacour stood waiting for Ginny to go back to the house with her. She looked down her nose at Hermione and seemed to dismiss her on sight. Hermione looked over at Ron and noticed he had adopted a rather silly smile and had eyes only for Fleur. Hermione decided that Phlegm was definitely a fitting name for the Frenchwoman.

'Fleur started working at Gringotts to 'eemprove her Eenglishz' and she and Bill are now engaged.' Ginny said in a dull voice, as she stood up and brushed off her trousers. She rolled her eyes and started to follow Fleur back into the house.

'Honestly Ronald! Get a hold of yourself!' Hermione said when she noticed his silly smile was still in place. 'I'm going to go do some reading.' She said as she stood up and also walked back towards the Burrow, feeling just a tinge of jealousy. She heard Ron call to her but decided not to bother, she was eager to begin her new book and right now would be a good opportunity, before Harry arrived.

Hermione settled in on her bed in Ginny's room and took her book out of her satchel. She smiled as she noticed that the title still said 'The Blessings of a Witch' across the top. She opened it up and began to read about the life of Morgaine.

Hermione was instantly engrossed in her book and spent the rest of the afternoon reading in Ginny's room, only putting it down reluctantly when Mrs. Weasley called that dinner was ready. Hermione marked her place in the book and got up to join the others, she had read about 100 pages so far and she already knew she would need to contact Pansy.

Right after dinner, Hermione asked Ron if she could use Pig for a quick message to her parents. She got out a quill and wrote her note.

Hey Girl,

I hope your summer hols are going good. I went on holiday with my family. We took a Portkey to India and saw some really great stuff. The magical world is so advanced in that part of the world, I learned a ton of glamour spells that I can't wait to try. I will teach you some when I see you next.

The Blessings of Vivianne be with you!

DG

Hermione sealed the note and tied it on to Pig who immediately zipped around the room a few times in excitement before flying out of the window. She was confident that Pansy would know what to do according to the code they had worked out. The Goddess blessing at the letter confirmed that it was from Hermione, just in case Daphne Greengrass decided to OWL Pansy. Pansy would know to send a note to Hermione about when she would be in Diagon Alley getting her school supplies, they would try to meet at that time.

Harry had arrived early the next morning, and with him their OWL results arrived from Hogwarts. For the first time since that fateful meeting with Pansy, Hermione focused entirely on something else. She breathed a sigh of relief when she received her results. She had gotten all of her OWLs. She frowned at her DADA score (she only received an E rather than an O) but decided that she would just need to work harder for her NEWTs. Harry had met their new DADA professor the night before with Dumbledore and he thought the class would be okay... better than Umbridge's classes at any rate.

For the next couple of weeks were relaxing and uneventful. After he first arrived, Harry, Ron, and Ginny had forced Hermione to stop reading and she was forced to participate in a number of Quidditch matches. The three quickly changed their minds after they realized how truly terrible she was at the game. Hermione knew she was a hazard on a broom and breathed a sigh of relief when she was allowed to go back to her reading. So, for the rest of the summer, Harry, Ginny, and Ron played Quidditch while Hermione sat in the gardens with her book and read.

Because she had promised to not tell anyone about what she was doing, she put a fake cover on her book. Everyone thought that Hermione had become engrossed in *Advanced Rune Translation*, when in reality she was reading *The Blessings of a Witch*.

The book was actually a journal of sorts. Hermione knew from the first page of the book that she had been meant to find it. She normally didn't believe in fate or destiny, but it was like Morgaine was writing to her, that's why she could see the true title. Hermione knew this book could help her and Pansy.

Morgaine wrote about her life and her experiences primarily. Throughout her story, she also included pertinent spells, charms, and potions that she herself had utilized.

Hermione was enthralled. Morgaine wrote a completely different perspective on the stories Hermione had read back at her parents' house online. What fascinated Hermione the most was what the witch had written about the Order of Avalon. Morgaine had begun her magical training on the island of Avalon at a very young age. She had learned ancient and powerful magic. Hermione knew that most of what Morgaine had learned had most likely been lost over the years. However, Morgaine had written down what she felt would be important to women in future generations. Hermione smiled when she read this, she was getting the chance to learn some of this ancient magic from the Order of Avalon. An order that only the most powerful and worthy witches had been a part of. She felt both empowered and humbled by the possibilities this could present.

Severus sat across a large desk, a cup of tea warming his hands as he waited for his mentor to speak. He had been surprised to find Narcissa Malfoy and her sister Bellatrix Lestrange at his doorstep last night, and he had just filled his employer in on what the sisters had to say to him. Dumbledore was silent as he mulled over what his Potions master had just told him.

Narcissa had begged for his help, and Snape had entered into an Unbreakable Vow with her in order to prove his loyalty in front of Bellatrix. Snape sighed as he thought about the predicament he had gotten himself into. Using Legilimency, he had discerned what Draco's assignment from the Dark Lord was. Narcissa had been too distraught to notice any invasion of her mind. Lucius's wife had never been a strong Occlumens, and she had been so distressed that she had practically broadcasted her fears. So now, if Draco was not successful in assassinating the headmaster, Snape would need to choose between death and killing his best friend. There was no decision to make; Dumbledore was the only person who had shown complete faith in Snape, and that was more important than his own miserable life.

He had already accepted that he would die before the end of this war; he saw it as being inevitable, considering his role as a spy and double agent. However, accepting the fact was quite different from actually having a timeline on when that would happen. After Narcissa and Bellatrix had left his home, Snape had sat up and finished his bottle of elf-made wine as he thought about what had occurred. The Potions master had come to a startling realization as he sat awake that night. *I don't want to die.*

Dumbledore spoke, interrupting Severus's morose thoughts. 'Well, Severus, I believe we need to talk about your class schedule for the upcoming school term.' Snape looked up at Dumbledore and saw that the headmaster's eyes were twinkling and that he was sporting a secretive smile on his face.

'What on earth are you talking about, Albus?' Snape asked, confused as to why the older man had not addressed the real problem at hand.

'Don't worry, dear boy. I think we can use this to our advantage.' Severus didn't respond; he was too confused to think of an appropriate question.

'I want you to take over the post as Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher this year. I have already been to see Horace Slughorn, and he has agreed to teach Potions,' Dumbledore said, surprising Severus even more.

'But... Why now, Albus? What are you thinking?' Severus finally spoke in a soft voice.

Albus Dumbledore's eyes twinkled triumphantly as his smile grew wider than it already was. He leaned forward as he filled the new DADA professor in on his plan for the upcoming year.

The next morning dawned bright and sunny as the large group made their way to Diagon Alley. The day before, the Gryffindors had received their textbook lists, and it was time to purchase their supplies for the upcoming school term.

The trip to Diagon Alley was made easier due to the Ministry's willingness to provide cars for 'the Chosen One,' and in no time, they were walking down the familiar street, still purple due to the Ministry posters in every window. As they walked towards Madame Malkin's, Hermione looked longingly towards the end of the Alley where she could just barely make out Yosh's bookshop. She wondered how often Professor Snape went to the small book store; he had seemed so familiar with it.

After a brief and unpleasant encounter with Draco Malfoy and his stuck up mother, they were on their way to Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes. The whole group stopped in shock a few feet before the door to the twins' shop, trying to take in what they were seeing. The twins' display windows were so -- active was the only word Hermione could think of to describe them. There was a myriad of items that moved and flashed and bounced, and it was impossible to take it all in. Hermione heard Mrs Weasley moan about the twins' almost certain death as they entered the busiest store on Diagon Alley.

Hermione stayed to look at the shelves nearest the front windows so she could keep an eye out for Pansy. As she perused the different charms and candies, she thought it was a shame that people didn't recognize how brilliant the twins really were. True, the brilliance seemed wasted on a joke shop, but some of these charms were really creative.

She was standing near Ginny next to a display promising "*daydreams to last a whole class period*" when she felt a sharp tug on her hair. Hermione whirled around in surprise but didn't see anyone. She felt another tug on her book bag in the direction of the front door, so she quickly made her way out. After exiting the store, Hermione found Pansy taking off an Invisibility Cloak at the far wall, away from the windows so that the Weasleys wouldn't see her.

Pansy's eyes darted left to right as Hermione approached her.

'Pansy, you have an Invisibility Cloak?' she asked, surprised that another student possessed such a treasure.

'Yes, yes, but I don't have time for chitchat. Granger, what happened?' Pansy said in a near whisper. She wanted to get straight to the point.

'Pansy, I've found a book that I think will help us. In fact, I think I know what Voldemort is planning!' Hermione said, also whispering. As she spoke, she reached into her book bag and took out *The Blessings of a Witch*. She held it up for Pansy to see the title and asked her to read it.

Pansy raised her eyebrows at Hermione in question but then shrugged and started to read the title. *The Curse of the... What!* Pansy exclaimed in surprise as the words started to change before her eyes. *'The Blessings of a Witch...'* Hermione, what is going on?' Pansy asked, her eyes wide in surprise.

Hermione quickly explained what had happened in Yosh's bookstore, and she handed Pansy a copy of her list of the books Snape had purchased.

'I think we need to get a hold of the books Snape bought. That way, we will know what research he has done.' Pansy nodded and took the list. 'I will see what I can find. Maybe Snape will loan the books to my father,' she said with a bitter voice. The girl paused for a moment, thinking of what her father was committing her to.

'I found some pretty interesting stuff too, about feminine magic. I found this book with tons of spells and glamour charms and love potions... things that were made especially for women.'

Hermione nodded absently at this.

'I have to tell you about what's in this book,' Hermione said urgently, gesturing to the book still in Pansy's hands. She needed to hurry before Harry and Ron noticed she was gone.

'This is a sort of journal written by Morgaine. Morgaine was a witch from the time of Merlin. She has another name, Morgan Le Fey.' Pansy nodded at this.

'Well, Morgaine talks about a number of different spells and curses, all for women who are our age. A lot of them are mind spells, so Legilimency and Occlumency will actually be really useful for most of these.'

'So, you think Voldemort wants me to do one of these spells... maybe that's why Bellatrix is training me in Occlumency and Legilimency,' Pansy wondered aloud.

Hermione nodded. 'Yeah, I think that's the idea. Um... there is one more thing.' She hesitated, trying to think of the best way to say this.

'I'm not sure, Pansy, I need to read some more, but there is one spell in here... I just read about it last night, and it is more powerful than the rest. I think that Voldemort may be planning on using that one.' Pansy was quiet, listening intently to what Hermione was telling her.

'If I'm right...' Hermione took a deep breath. 'Well, if I'm right, you would lose all of your power, not just a small portion of it like Bellatrix told your father.'

Hermione watched as all the color drained out of Pansy's face. She stayed quiet as she waited for the other girl to process what Hermione had just enunciated.

'All of my power,' Pansy said in a low voice. 'My father couldn't have known... I... I can't lose all of my power!' Her voice was sounding panicked now, and she was looking around frantically. Hermione put a hand on the other girl's shoulder in an attempt to comfort her.

'I'm going to read more about this, Pansy; we don't know for sure if this is what Voldemort is planning. The logistics would be really difficult... I'm going to help you. Don't worry,' Hermione said, trying to keep her tone confident. At the same time, she looked behind her at the shop window. She saw that Ginny was still near the daydreaming charms, but she was looking around, a confused expression on her face. Hermione knew she had been gone for too long; she needed to get back inside.

'Pansy, I have to go. They are going to notice that I'm missing,' Hermione said.

Pansy still looked a little shocked, but she was recovering fast. She had been raised to keep her emotions in check, and that breeding was coming in handy now. She looked past Hermione to the joke shop and then met Hermione's eyes. Hermione had been watching Pansy regain her equilibrium and was waiting for her to say something.

'Okay,' Pansy said slowly. 'Yeah. I'm supposed to meet Draco soon, so we should both go.'

Hermione nodded. 'Pansy, I will finish this book, and we can talk on the first day of school. Then we will know for sure.' She grimaced briefly at the mention of Draco: he had been so rude at Madam Malkin's.

'I will see you at school then,' Pansy stated, handing Hermione back the enchanted book. Hermione quickly stuffed it back into her book bag.

'Yeah, see you there,' she answered; then she walked quickly back into the twins' shop.

Hermione entered the shop quietly and walked around a few shelves to approach Ginny from the other direction. She wandered towards Ginny as if she had just been

browsing around. She saw Harry come back into the store from the back room with George; he was holding a number of items in his hand and his pockets looked a little heavier.

George led the two girls towards a disgustingly pink display of love potions and other items 'just for girls,' and Hermione breathed a sigh of relief; nobody seemed to have noticed that she had been gone.

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AN: I know it was a long wait for this one and I do apologize. I had some beta problems but was lucky enough to have Septentrion step in and save the day!

Finding the Right Girls

Chapter 5 of 10

Pansy and Hermione make some new friends.

Chapter 5: Finding the Right Girls

AN: See disclaimer in previous chapters.

As always, thanks to my wonderful beta Septentrion!

Long after I had finished my training at Avalon, a great tragedy occurred. My teacher and mentor, Viviane, Head Priestess of Avalon, was killed. She had ruled wisely over Avalon for thirty years when she was cruelly stabbed by an errant knight of Arthur's Court. Arthur's court was already beginning to lose the unity that had so marked it in the beginning. Arthur had lost so much control by then.

The knight was struck down immediately of course, but the damage was done. The women of Avalon were left without our leader. We were lost in the mists of Avalon without her wisdom and beauty.

For days we wept and wailed in our grief and pain. There were six of us left. As we succumbed to our grief, the world was thrown into chaos. Camelot was at war; Merlin had been lost by this time and could no longer provide the protection Arthur had grown used to. There was no Priestess to turn to, and the heart of Avalon was bleeding. It was weeks after Viviane's death that we checked our scrying glass and saw what had happened to the world. It was obvious that Camelot would be lost; the whole land seemed to be burning down, and there was no helping that. Avalon would be next, and the women of Avalon would need protection. We were sisters, united through our training, united by the great tragedy of Viviane's death. We devised a spell to unite us further so we could fight together for our safety and to preserve Avalon. We called it the Aminadverto Femina...

Excerpt from The Blessings of a Witch.

Hermione sighed as she rushed forward to help shepherd the firsties to the Gryffindor dorms, alone. Ron would never take his responsibilities seriously. She looked back to see him talking quietly with Harry. It was their first day back at Hogwarts, and the start-of-term feast had just ended. Harry was no doubt explaining to Ron why he had arrived in the Great Hall so late.

As Hermione was directing the first years, someone bumped into her hard, and she felt something slip into her hand.

'Watch it, Granger! Stay out of my way!' Pansy barked as she walked away from Hermione.

The Gryffindor witch, ignoring the laughter of Pansy's gang of friends, looked down and saw a small, folded-up scrap of parchment in her hand. She quickly slipped the parchment into the pocket of her robes to read it once she was in her dorm room.

She found it empty, as Lavender and Parvati were still down in the common room socializing, and Hermione pulled out the note that Pansy has passed to her.

RoR tonight 10:30. Be Careful, PM patrols at 10.

Blessings of Viviane.

Hermione chewed on her bottom lip. She didn't like going out after curfew, especially knowing that Snape would be patrolling the halls tonight: PM stood for Potions Master. All she needed was to lose points on her first day back.

Unfortunately, she didn't really have a choice. She needed to meet with Pansy and update her on what she had read in *Morgaine's Journal*, as she had begun to think of her book.

At 10:30, most of the students had left the common room for their dorm rooms, and Hermione was able to slip out of the portrait unnoticed. She had already changed for bed and shivered as the cold drafts from the castle seemed to go right through her pajamas and thin robe. She hadn't bothered with shoes, as socks would enable her to walk quietly. The castle was dark, and she stayed close to the walls in an attempt to not be seen if a certain professor happened by. She made her way quickly up to the Room of Requirement, clutching Morgaine's Journal in her hands.

Pansy must already be in there, Hermione thought when she reached the doorway, facing the well-known tapestry of trolls attempting ballet. She quickly went into a room that closely resembled the Gryffindor common room, the only difference being the green and silver coloring rather than the maroon and gold that she was so accustomed to. Pansy was sitting on one of the couches in front of the fireplace; she was also in her nightclothes and was warming her hands on a teacup. She handed an identical cup to Hermione when the Gryffindor witch sat down next to her on the couch.

For a moment, both girls were quiet, sipping their tea and avoiding each other's eyes.

Pansy took a deep breath and spoke first. 'Gra...er... Hermione, my father talked to me about my 'mission' before I left for school this morning.'

'Do you know what Voldemort is planning to do?' Hermione asked eagerly.

Pansy smirked at this. 'Do you think you could tame that bushy mass?' she teased. The girls laughed at this; Hermione's hair had become a running joke. When they had started to learn new glamours, Hermione had been disappointed that not one was designed to tame hair like hers. It seemed she would have to resort to Sleekeazy's Hair Potion if she wanted to attain shiny, straight locks of hair.

Hermione sighed as she thought about her hair. She wondered if Ron would actually make some sort of romantic gesture if she had straight pretty hair. She started to dwell on the past few weeks. He had wanted to come to the Christmas party with her; that was a good sign. Just as she was remembering when she asked him, she felt someone in her mind. Hermione blinked and realized she was staring straight into Pansy's eyes. Pansy chuckled, not at all abashed that she had slipped into Hermione's mind.

'You looked sad, and since you were also looking right at me, I thought I would check,' Pansy explained. 'So, Hermione, you like Weasley? I always thought it might be Potter,' she mused.

Hermione shook her head. 'I'll leave Harry to Ginny here, actually,' she said as Ginny turned a delicate shade of pink. Even though she was dating Dean, most of the girls already knew of her attraction to Harry Potter.

The other girls had taken to listening to the conversation now, and it was Tracey who piped in next. 'Why do you like Ron Weasley?'

'Hey, watch it... He is my brother,' Ginny said, reacting to Tracey's question.

'Sorry, Ginny, there isn't anything wrong with him... I just don't see him with Hermione,' Tracey answered.

'Well, I don't know why I like him,' Hermione said thoughtfully. 'I just do. There has always been something there between us, ever since third year, I think...an attraction. I think that is why we are always fighting.'

Tracey nodded. 'I get that. It's just... what do you two have in common besides Harry Potter?'

'She has a point, Hermione,' Ginny interjected. 'I love my brother, but his interests are limited; you hate Quidditch, you are terrible at chess, and he could care less about the latest potions journal or anything within academia.'

Hermione was feeling a little shocked. She had never thought about this. She tended to tune Ron out when he talked about Quidditch or anything else that interested him. He tended to tune her out when she talked about her interests as well... or he would just get this glazed look in his eyes that made it obvious that she was talking way over his head.

It was Pansy who took Hermione's point of view in their debate about Ron.

'Come on, girls. It's not like we can choose who we are attracted to. If Hermione's attracted to Weasley, so be it. I wish her luck.'

'We all support you, Hermione,' Millicent said. 'Just think about what the other girls said. I, for one, think you would do better with someone older who is fascinated by research or something. That way, you can spend the rest of your lives talking about said research and being thoroughly boring!'

This lightened the mood up a bit, and Hermione laughed.

'You guys make really good points about Ron and me. I'll think about it.'

'Just be careful,' Luna said, affecting the dreamy look that had earned her the nickname loony. 'Thinking too hard can cause Blurkalidge of the brain.'

Most of the girls laughed at this; as they had gotten closer, they had realized that Luna enjoyed her reputation, and often times, she was just cultivating it.

Hermione thought about how Luna was always saying stuff like that. She had a wonderful imagination. Out of all the girls, Luna was by far the most creative and imaginative.

'Luna,' Hermione said, 'you just gave me a great idea!'

'Blurkalidge of the brain gave you a great idea?' Pansy asked.

'No, Luna's imagination gave me a great idea... Luna, do you think you could imagine something completely fake?'

'Sure I could. Any of us could probably come up with something,' Luna answered.

'Yes, probably, but I want to try and use Legilimency on you. See if you can make it convincing, details and everything. Okay?'

Luna nodded and seemed deep in thought for about a minute.

'Okay, I'm ready.'

Hermione held up her wand and met Luna's eyes. *Legilimens!*

As Hermione entered Luna's mind, she was immediately thrown into what seemed to be a jungle. Luna was wearing Muggle camouflage and holding a large rifle as she ran through the trees. Hermione then saw a very strange animal up ahead; Luna seemed to be hunting it. It had the body shape of a cow with long, zebra-striped fur. It had large horns that zigzagged away from its head in an accordion-like pattern. The tableau was colorful and detailed, but it lacked a little dimension.

Hermione blinked and ended the spell.

'What did you see?' asked Luna.

'You were hunting a strange animal in the jungle, and you were dressed in Muggle camouflage,' Hermione answered.

Luna laughed at this. 'It worked! The animal is how I imagine a Crumple-Horned Snorkak would look!'

Hermione laughed along with the other girls.

'This is great! It's a step up from regular Occlumency. It's always apparent to the person performing Legilimency when someone is blocking them from their mind, but if we can project fake memories and thoughts....'

Pansy agreed. 'It's perfect! We could even trick the Dark Lord himself!'

'When I saw your image, Luna, it seemed a bit flat... We should all start working on this. With a little practice, I'd wager we could get it to look more authentic,' Hermione said thoughtfully.

'We need to work on this!' Pansy said in an excited voice. 'A few of us will be going home for the holidays. If Bellatrix Lestrange visits my house, she will use Legilimency on me. I don't want her to be suspicious. I could make up images of trying to follow Snape's orders.'

The three girls quietly started to walk down the seven flights of stairs. Pansy hadn't brought her Invisibility Cloak with her, and they were worried about getting caught. When they reached the main hall, they whispered goodnight as Hermione headed back up to Gryffindor Tower and the two Slytherins down towards their common room.

Hermione hadn't gotten very far when a voice stopped her in her tracks.

'Miss Granger, are we out for a midnight stroll?' Professor Snape said in a soft mocking tone as he melted out of the shadows to stand in front of her.

'Professor Snape! Sir, I...' she stammered in a high pitched voice. She couldn't think of a reasonable excuse for being out this late. Snape interrupted her before she could say anything else.

'Miss Granger, please come with me,' he said in a curt voice before turning on his heel and stalking away as his robes billowed behind him.

She jogged a few steps to catch up with his long strides, wondering where he was taking her. She followed him into his office, and he gestured for her to take a seat opposite his desk. He sat at the desk and steepled his fingers under his chin. He regarded her for a few seconds before speaking, making her want to squirm under his steady gaze.

'Miss Granger, what were you doing tonight?' he finally asked.

She blinked. She had been expecting him to rage at her and assign her fifty detentions while taking house points. His voice was calm and low. She was so relieved he wasn't yelling that she almost gave him an honest answer to his question, but she stopped herself in time. She thought about her words carefully. 'I was taking a walk, Professor Snape, I couldn't sleep,' she said in a casual voice. The professor shook his head and leaned forward.

'Try again, Miss Granger.' His voice was almost a whisper now, and he was looking straight into her eyes.

She resisted the urge to fidget and cleared her throat.

'What do you mean, sir? I... I wasn't tired and thought a walk would help,' she reiterated, her voice sounding a bit rough.

'Miss Granger, you are lying to me. I saw you say goodnight to Miss Parkinson and Miss Bulstrode,' he stated.

Hermione's eyes widened, and she bit down on her bottom lip.

'Er... yes, sir. Um... I just ran into them in the hall... on my walk.'

'Miss Granger, are you becoming friends with Miss Parkinson?'

Hermione thought about what she should say. Pansy had told her that Snape had paired them up with the intention that the two girls become friends. It would only make it seem as if Pansy was doing what she was told. Hermione would just need to make sure Pansy was made aware of whatever Hermione would tell Professor Snape. She had been hanging out with enough Slytherins lately to know that he would double-check her story.

Hermione took a deep breath. 'Yes, sir, I suppose I am a bit. I mean, we work really well together in your class, and she's quite intelligent.'

Snape was quiet for a moment after Hermione spoke.

'Miss Granger, you are aware of the work I do for the Order?' he asked in a low voice.

Hermione nodded silently.

'Due to the... unusual... nature of this work, I often times have to proceed very carefully when serving two masters.' Hermione saw a slight grimace cross his face and felt a pang of sympathy for him. She wondered what it would be like to have to face Voldemort on a regular basis.

'Miss Granger, I must warn you against forming any sort of attachment to Miss Parkinson.'

Hermione had to hold back a smile. *Snape was warning her about Voldemort's plan!* This proved that he was fighting for the side of the light. He was trying to protect her. Working with Pansy had caused Hermione to start doubting Snape's true allegiance. She was relieved to find that he was still on their side.

She tried to look dismayed at his statement, knowing the role she needed to play.

'But, sir, surely it cannot be a bad thing to build some unity between the Houses... like the Sorting Hat said in its song.'

The corners of Snape's mouth turned down in reaction to her idealism. 'You do not know Miss Parkinson as I do, Miss Granger. Please believe me when I tell you that she has ulterior motives for befriending you,' he said in a curt voice.

Hermione nodded and looked down at her feet. 'Yes, sir.' She tried to sound disappointed.

'I believe it is time you got back to your dormitory, Miss Granger,' Snape said, his tone gentling in response to her apparent disappointment. He stood and walked towards the door, waiting for her to precede him.

'I will walk you to Gryffindor Tower so that you do not get caught by Mr. Filch.'

Snape was silent as they walked towards her dormitory. When they reached the portrait of the Fat Lady, he grasped her elbow before she could climb through. He was standing rather close to her, and she had to tilt her head back to meet his eyes. She raised her eyebrows questioningly.

He leaned down to speak softly in her ear, and she recognized the scent of sandalwood and chocolate that she had smelled on him in the bookshop.

'Miss Granger, I know you had hoped to be friends with Miss Parkinson. Try not to be too disappointed. You must remember to be more on guard, especially with members of my own House.'

Hermione's breath hitched at his closeness, and her heart started to beat a little faster. He was so close she could feel the heat from him, and his breath was warm on her cheek.

'Thank you, sir. I appreciate your looking out for me,' she said, her voice sounding just a bit breathless.

He straightened up, nodded at her and quickly strode away. Hermione watched him walk away before entering the Gryffindor common room.

Hermione sighed gratefully when she found it silent. It was quite late, and the rest of Gryffindor had gone to bed. She could see remnants of the Quidditch celebration scattered about the room in the form of sweets wrappers and butterbeer bottles.

She quickly walked to her dorm room and changed for bed. Once in her bed, she pulled the bed curtains closed and lay back in the bed, thinking about the night. It had been an eventful evening. She heard soft snores coming from the next bed over; Lavender was fast asleep. Hermione wondered how Lavender would act towards her tomorrow: the other girl had been with Ron when Hermione had set her canaries after him.

Hermione smiled when she remembered Pansy and Millicent's reaction to her story. She was so glad she had found them to be such good friends. It was so nice to talk with other girls about her problems and to know that they sympathized and understood.

She then thought about her conversation with Professor Snape that evening. He had stood so close to her outside in the hallway. She felt goose bumps rise on her arms as she thought of his breath on her face.

She had liked the way it felt to have him stand so close. During one of their slumber parties, the Slytherin girls had all talked about how sexy Professor Snape was. At the time, Hermione had protested along with all the other girls.

Professor Snape was greasy and cruel, not sexy. Hermione remembered what Daphne had said in his defense. *'He's not nice and handsome in a classical sense, but his eyes are amazing! They are so intense and full of passion... and that voice! All soft and smooth. I could listen to him talk forever!'* Hermione hadn't understood at the time and had just wrinkled her nose at the thought of Snape being sexy. Tonight had changed her opinion of him. She understood what Daphne was talking about now. She wondered, as she had at the bookshop this summer, what it was that made him smell like chocolate. Sandalwood wasn't too surprising it was a rather masculine scent and seemed to be a good fit for a Potions teacher but chocolate? *Where did the chocolate smell come from?* she wondered.

Hermione sighed; she needed to stop focusing on what her Defense teacher smelt like. There were more pressing matters to think of.

She knew it was time to tell the other girls about Professor Snape's role as a spy. Tonight had made that clear to her. She knew it was a vital piece of information, and not everybody could know, but she trusted the other girls now. Pansy, especially, needed to know that Snape was someone they could trust. It was time to lay all their cards on the table.

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Hermione felt a small pang of nervousness as she walked into the seventh floor classroom on Monday night. She wasn't looking forwards to revealing Snape's secret. Some of the girls were already paired off and practicing Occlumency with each other when she arrived. Since their last slumber party, the latest practice sessions were checkered with the girls bursting into laughter. The girls were all working on projecting fake images in their minds, and the images tended to be rather amusing; they all decided that Luna was the best at this.

Hermione wiped her wet hands against her school robes before announcing loudly, 'I need to talk to everyone, please. It's rather important.'

She waited until all the girls had gotten comfortable as she resumed her place in front of the couches. She was reminded of the first time they had all met here in this room. The only difference was that Pansy wasn't standing beside her; the Slytherin witch currently had the same curious look on her face as every other girl as they waited for Hermione to speak.

Hermione cleared her throat.

'Okay, well, I have to tell you all a secret. I think that we have gotten to the point where we can trust each other, and it's time you all know of this. Harry, Ron and Ginny already know about this,' she said, nodding towards the redhead. Ginny smiled slightly as the other girls looked towards her.

'What I have to tell you is about Professor Snape. You all remember our first meeting when Pansy told us he was a Death Eater. Well, that is true. He is one... or rather, he was one.' Hermione noticed that most of the girls looked confused at her choice of words. She continued before anyone could interrupt.

'Snape became a Death Eater when he was quite young... I think he was eighteen. I am not sure when exactly this happened, but while Voldemort was still in power, Snape came to Dumbledore and begged for help. It was about that time that he started teaching here at Hogwarts. Since then, Snape has been a spy for Dumbledore.'

Hermione heard a number of gasps when she announced this. Only the Slytherins kept their faces blank.

'How do you know?' Pansy asked in a skeptical voice. 'For that matter, how does Ginny or her brother or Potter know? Why do you all have this information?'

Hermione told the girls about staying at the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix. She couldn't tell them where it was exactly because of the Fidelity Charm, but she explained how they had spent their summer before fifth year. She went on to tell them about Sirius Black and the fight in the Department of Mysteries.

With the exception of Ginny and Luna, all the girls looked surprised at the end of Hermione's narrative. She had just given them a lot of information to digest.

It was a few minutes before anyone said anything. It was Pansy who broke the silence first.

'Are you sure we can trust Snape? Why was he helping us to be friends? Remember, he told me he had paired us up so I could make friends with you and follow the Dark Lord's orders.' A number of the girls nodded their heads in agreement at her words.

Hermione told them about Saturday evening when Snape had caught her after curfew.

'He was trying to warn me away from you, Pansy. It was actually kind of funny.' She related to them about how she had acted disappointed and sad that her new friend might have ulterior motives.

'I think he felt sorry for me!' she finished, smiling at the memory. 'I really played up my disappointment over the fact that you weren't really my new best friend.'

Millicent turned towards Ginny 'Do you trust Snape, Gin?' Most of the girls looked towards Ginny to see what she had to say.

She nodded slowly as she thought about it.

'Yes... I do. He was at a lot of the Order's meetings that summer, and I eavesdropped on a few before Mum discovered our Extendable Ears. I think he is spying on Voldemort for Dumbledore. Besides, Dumbledore trusts him, and the Headmaster is the most powerful wizard in the world.'

Millicent nodded, accepting what Ginny said before she turned back towards Hermione.

'You trust him too?' she asked, looking at Hermione. Hermione acquiesced.

'I think he is walking a fairly thin line. He has to show his loyalty to Voldemort by helping Pansy, but he also has to prevent Voldemort from succeeding.'

'Should we tell him?' Susan Bones spoke up. 'Tell him that we are on his side and can help him?' Susan was a Hufflepuff through and through and hated to think of anyone in pain or suffering.

Hermione was already shaking her head when Pansy intervened. 'No, I don't think we should tell him... yet. Voldemort is a strong Legilimens. I don't want him to find out about us through Snape's mind.'

'I agree with Pansy,' Hermione added. 'Snape is actually a strong Occlumens, so maybe we can tell him later. But for now, I think, this should be our secret. Just us girls.'

'Snape is a strong Occlumens?' Anjali asked in an excited voice.

Hermione nodded. 'He tried to teach Harry Occlumency last year. Apparently, it's the reason he has been such a good spy for Dumbledore.'

Anjali turned her eyes to Padma. They had become close friends, and they frequently partnered up to practice their Legilimency and Occlumency.

'Maybe we could use him!' she suggested to the Indian girl. Padma's eyes were twinkling as she nodded slowly. 'That's a good idea; we should give it a try.'

The two girls smiled at each other before Anjali stood up and stepped to the front of the room. 'Padma and I had an idea.'

Hermione sat in Anjali's seat, gratefully relinquishing her place at the front of the room.

'Padma and I were thinking about the fake images we have been practicing lately,' Anjali said.

'We have all gotten better at it lately, and obviously we all feel confident with our Occlumency and Legilimency.' The rest of the girls nodded when she said this. They had all worked hard and felt proud at what they had accomplished in such a short time.

'Padma and I found one problem. We are all so comfortable with each other. We have never had our skills tested by someone outside of our group.'

Hermione glanced at Pansy and could tell they were thinking the same thing. It would be disastrous if Pansy tried Occlumency against Bellatrix over the holidays and was unsuccessful.

'We need to try our skill against someone we aren't comfortable with...somebody whose mind is unfamiliar to us,' Anjali continued. 'If Snape knows Legilimency and Occlumency, maybe we can test ours on him.'

'How are we going to do that?' Tracey Davis asked. 'We already agreed not to tell him what we are doing. It would be suspicious if eleven girls, all of a sudden, asked him to train us in Occlumency and Legilimency. Not to mention the fact that only Slytherins would be brave enough to ask him for anything.'

'We have a plan for that,' Padma retorted as she stood up next to Anjali.

'We need to do two things; we need to prompt Snape to use Legilimency and then imagine something that will surprise him enough to get a reaction. He is pretty good at hiding his emotions, so it will have to be pretty drastic. The only way we will know if our fake image is working is by his reaction,' Anjali said slowly.

'We thought,' Padma resumed, taking over for Anjali, 'that if we were acting out of character in class, maybe Snape would use Legilimency to find out what was wrong or different.'

'Like if we smiled after he yelled at us, or even laughed out loud,' Anjali said.

'So, if I laughed at him instead of acting terrified, he might use Legilimency to find out why I'm acting that way?' Jarilyn inquired with a smile.

'Right,' Padma answered. 'Then you just have to make sure he can maintain eye contact with you and imagine something that is so horrifying that he can't hide his reaction.'

Pansy smiled her Slytherin smile. 'Something horrifying... like an image of you having sex with Snape right there on his desk.'

Hermione felt herself blush and noticed she wasn't the only one. Daphne laughed as she noticed the red faces. 'It might not work for me, given my reputation, but it will definitely work for some of you Gryffindors.'

'Daphne, you could imagine yourself hunting Crumple-Horned Snorkaks!' Luna interjected. The girls erupted in giggles.

'This is a great idea,' Millicent said, looking at Anjali and Padma. 'I say we take a week to perfect our fake images, and then we test Snape out.'

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The next week, unfortunately in her opinion, flew by for Hermione. The girls met frequently as they worked out their fake images and practiced on each other. Hermione still felt her cheeks grow pink when she thought of the fake image Pansy had helped her devise. She bit her lip nervously as she walked towards the Defense classroom. They had decided to include Dumbledore in their test as well as Snape. Snape would get suspicious if every one of them acted strangely and was imagining something completely out of character. Today would be their first day of testing, with Hermione going first.

Hermione felt herself break out into a cold sweat as she entered the classroom. She took her seat next to Pansy, trying not to let her nervousness show.

'Relax!' Pansy whispered into her left ear. 'You look really suspicious, and you are fidgeting!'

Hermione took a few deep breaths, trying to calm herself down. *I can do this. I can't believe I'm going to do this! Why did I agree to this?*

In typical fashion, Snape burst into the classroom, slamming the door behind him. He immediately started to lecture the class on casting silent spells. At this point, most of the class had mastered simple spells without speaking. The harder and more difficult the spell, the more focus and energy it would take to cast silently. Snape asked the class if anyone could name some of the defensive spells that used the most energy and focus of the caster.

Hermione bit her lip and almost felt like sitting on her hands. The first part of 'their plan' was to act in a way that would prompt Snape to use Legilimency. Pansy pointed out that all Hermione had to do was avoid participating in class, and that would be enough to make him suspicious.

Severus stalked around the classroom as he lectured the students on defensive spells. A majority of the dunderheads had a glazed look in their eyes, and he wondered if they ever listened to anything he tried to cram into their hard skulls. He curtly barked out a question and then slowly let his gaze drift around the classroom, waiting for someone to volunteer the answer. After waiting a few seconds, he looked towards Granger; parroting the textbook was better than nothing.

To his surprise, Miss Granger did not have her hand in the air. He briefly thought that the day her hand was not eagerly waving in the air should be declared a national holiday.

Snape allowed himself a small sneer. 'Well, well, our resident know-it-all doesn't have the answer? Will wonders never cease?' he said, lowering his voice an octave as he strode towards her, weaving around a few desks.

When he stood in front of her and Parkinson, he spoke again. 'Miss Granger, I'm surprised. Could it be that you did not complete the reading?'

'Per... Perhaps I am just trying to please you by not being a 'know-it-all',' she answered, her voice shaky. She then tried to affect a smug smile.

It might have been effective if her face hadn't turned an unflattering shade of pink.

*Interesting*, he thought. *What is she up to?* He glanced at Miss Parkinson and wondered if this was her influence.

'Ten points from Gryffindor, Miss Granger, for your impertinence.'

There had been a 'murmur' throughout the classroom when Miss Granger had talked back to him. The class had never seen her talk back to a professor before. Snape quickly turned to face the rest of the class. 'Take out your books and read chapter fourteen. After you are finished, I want three feet on the energy used by three different defensive spells. You may choose which ones you want to write about.'

Snape stalked back to his desk and sat down before looking back at Miss Granger.

She was still acting nervously and was now white rather than pink in the face. Her eyes were wide, and she was staring right at him. He was becoming impatient with her behavior. *What on earth is making the girl so nervous?* He looked into her eyes and silently cast *Legilimens* on her; he wanted to know what was making her act so unusually.

Severus had to hold back a gasp as he entered her mind, which must have been wide open because he was immediately thrown into what must have been a daydream.

*She was sitting on top of the desk with her legs straddled on either side of him. Her skirt was hiked up around her hips, and he could see the expanse of her white thighs. He kissed her passionately while unbuttoning her blouse to reveal a lacy, black bra. Her legs came up to wind around his hips as she threw her head back and pressed her lace-covered breasts closer to him. She moaned his name as he pulled aside one lacy cup of her bra to suckle on her breast. She reached between them and slowly unzipped his pants to free his erection. Snape watched breathlessly as the fantasy Hermione ran her hands up and down his erect cock. Fantasy Snape was slowly pulling off her knickers...* when he came to his senses and ended the Legilimens.

Tearing himself away from her gaze, he took a few deep breaths, trying to compose himself. He didn't know what was more unbelievable, that the Gryffindor know-it-all was daydreaming in class, or that she had such creative and graphic daydreams.

He realized that her little fantasy had made him rock hard, and he felt a flash of shame as he adjusted himself underneath his robes. He would not be getting up to stalk around the classroom today.

After he had composed himself enough, he looked up towards Miss Granger. She had opened her book and was quietly writing her essay.

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AN: Please review! This is my first ever fanfic, and you just read my first attempt at adding a little lemon to my story, even if the lemons only took place inside Hermione's mind. Was it at all believable? What do you think? Was it hot or was it boring? Constructive criticism, ideas, suggestions are all welcome!

I hope you enjoyed seeing a good deal more of Snape in this chapter. I promise that he will become a major player in this story from now on!

AN: I want to thank everyone who has already reviewed this story. Every time I get a review, it gives me a burst of writing energy and it makes me want to update all the sooner!

Love and Blood

Chapter 8 of 10

The girls take the next step.

Chapter 8: Love and Blood

See disclaimer in previous chapters.

The adminadverto femina is effective because it devised of the purest intentions for women who held a special bond. So we began by celebrating that bond, my sister. We performed a blood ritual of the strongest magic. This ritual must be entered into with pure loyalty and love. Nothing less will do and anything less could be the end of you. It is not magic that can be tampered with.

There were six of us, and we pledged to be sisters for all time. We vowed eternal loyalty and love to each other, with everything in us, never to be broken. Even now, as I approach my final days, I have not broken my bond with my sisters. We have moved on, the adminadverto has been fulfilled, but the bond was never broken.

Indeed, the bond couldn't ever be broken. The unbreakable bond of sisterhood, it was something that no man could possibly understand. No matter what kind of magic was used; lust, force, persuasion, love, nothing was effective against a bond of sisterhood. A bond of women.

My sister, if you are in need of this magic, find your sisters and know now that they will be your sisters for evermore.

For evermore within your bodies, minds and souls.

As this ritual is a celebration of women, it will need to be performed on the night of the full moon...

Excerpt from 'The Blessings of a Witch.'

Hermione thought her stomach might burst from laughing so hard. Over the next few weeks, each of the girls had taken her turn testing her Occlumency. For three weekends in a row they have had a slumber party on Saturday night in order to review their experiences. Ginny had just finished telling her story and all the girls had erupted into fresh bursts of laughter.

Always quick on the uptake, Ginny had gone to Transfiguration class early to find Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall talking. Struck with inspiration, she had walked up to say hello and acted like she was trying to hide something. Dumbledore had silently cast *Legilimens* on her only to see a romantic daydream between Ginny and McGonagall. The girls were rolling on the floor by the time Ginny described Professor McGonagall pulling her aside the next day to tell her that 'having feelings for a professor isn't wrong, and she shouldn't be ashamed, but please understand that it would never work out.'

'Ginny, you are absolutely brilliant!' Millicent said as she shrieked with laughter. 'I would have given anything to see the look on Dumbledore's face after seeing your daydream!'

'I think he turned purple!' Ginny replied as she tried to imitate the way his usually twinkling eyes had widened and he had opened and closed his mouth three or four times before he quickly gave an excuse and fled the classroom. The girls continued laughing as they all tried to imagine the unflappable headmaster turning purple.

It was Susan who was finally able to break their hilarity.

'Oh my gods,' Susan abruptly said in a serious tone of voice. The laughter died down as the girls sensed that Susan was distressed about something.

'Susan? What's wrong?' Jarilyn asked in a low voice. Susan was staring off into space with a scared look on her face.

'I just realized something. Ginny, you fooled Professor Dumbledore. He believed the Occlumency you projected.'

Ginny shrugged. 'Yeah, so? Lots of us have in the past few weeks.'

'Think about it. Dumbledore. The headmaster, the only wizard that he-who... I mean... Voldemort is afraid of!' Susan's voice was shaky as she tried to imitate Hermione's nonchalant use of the dark Lord's name.

'You fooled someone who is arguably the most powerful wizard in Great Britain!'

The room was silent as the girls mulled over what Susan had said. Until now, they had not thought about the implications of their Occlumency projections. It had almost turned into a game about who could be the most creative when they tried to fool their professors or headmaster.

'I guess we never considered it in those terms,' Millicent stated after the long moment of silence.

'We have come really far since our first meeting here,' Jarilyn said, her voice trembling.

'I guess the book was right.' Hermione's voice was slightly strained.

'Women are more powerful than men. Each one of us could probably fool Dumbledore. That has to mean something.'

'Mean something! It's incredible. For the first time, I am not so worried about going home for Christmas. I can handle Bellatrix Lestrange. If I can fool Dumbledore, I can fool her!' Pansy said excitedly.

Pansy had projected an image of herself working in the greenhouse with Neville Longbottom and Colin Creevey. Dumbledore had later spoken to her about inter-House unity and how it would be okay if she wanted to be friends with some of the Gryffindors.

Hermione took a deep breath.

'Girls, I think its time for us to take the next step,' she said, looking around the room at her friends. She stood up and pulled Morgaine's Journal out of her book bag; she never went anywhere without the book nowadays.

She placed it on the floor, and the girls gathered around the book as Hermione thumbed through, looking for the right part.

'Here.' She pointed to the ritual spell.

I think it's time we did this. We are ready. I trust you girls with my life now, and we have definitely mastered Legilimency and Occlumency.' She was pointing to a complicated blood bonding ritual. It was the first step towards the *Aminadverto Femina*.

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Snape let out a breath slowly as he let his eyes move over his sixth-year class. It was the first week in December, and the students were already starting to get restless for the holidays. He had gone the easy route and assigned an essay in an effort to keep them quiet.

He felt a now familiar feeling of confusion as his eyes rested briefly on Hermione Granger. He didn't know what to think about her. She was quietly whispering to Pansy Parkinson as the rest of the class quietly wrote their essays. The annoying Gryffindor, who had almost been religious in her zeal to show respect for all of her professors, was whispering with a Slytherin while they were supposed to be working. She had obviously not heeded his warning to stay away from that Parkinson girl, he decided, feeling frustrated.

He didn't want Granger to get involved in this. The information he had uncovered about Voldemort's project talked vaguely about a 'slight variance in power.' He wasn't sure yet what that meant, but Granger was a powerful and intelligent witch. He wouldn't admit this to anyone, but he respected the witch and didn't want her to loose any of that potential.

Something was going on with Granger, he thought as he watched the two girls smile at each other as they continued to whisper. He was going to need to watch her more closely, her behavior was decidedly odd. He wondered if it was due to Parkinson's influence. He briefly considered using Legilimency on the two girls, just to see what they had been discussing so earnestly, but he immediately disregarded that idea. He didn't want a repeat of the last time he had tried using Legilimency on Miss Granger.

Snape shifted in his seat as he remembered Hermione Granger's fantasy and grimaced. He needed to stop thinking of that, he thought as he remembered the way she had looked in her fantasy; on top of the desk with her blouse unbuttoned and her skirt bunched up around her hips. He felt his body reacting to the memory before he could stop his line of thinking. He was not used to being the object of any woman's fantasy.

He looked back at Miss Granger and Miss Parkinson; they had stopped whispering but were staring straight into each others eyes and Miss Granger put a hand over her mouth to stifle a giggle. *Why are they staring into each other eyes?*

Since he had watched Miss Granger's fantasy, he had taken more notice of her in class, and this was not the first time he had seen the girls looking at each other that way. Whatever it meant, he wagered that it had to do with Miss Parkinson's work for the Dark Lord. He decided that it was time to have another talk with Miss Granger.

'Miss Granger, I have asked you to write an essay; that does not involve speaking with your classmates,' he snapped out, startling a few students by breaking the silence in the room.

Miss Granger and Miss Parkinson looked up at him guiltily before bending their heads over their essays.

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Hermione had almost made it out of the classroom before she heard his voice.

'Miss Granger, a word before you go,' he said silkily. She smiled reassuringly at Harry, who was scowling at the professor.

'I'll catch up. See you,' she said before turning back towards Professor Snape.

'Yes, sir.' Hermione said, moving to stand in front of his desk where he was sitting.

'I apologize for today, sir. I shouldn't have been talking in class,' she started before he could speak, deciding that it was better to get it over with.

This last weekend, the girls had agreed with Hermione about doing the blood bonding ritual. They were all feeling a mixture of nerves and excitement; this was very powerful magic from the time of Avalon, and it needed to be done just right. Both Pansy and Hermione had not been able to resist talking about it, even though they were in class. Pansy had used Legilimency to tell Hermione that Snape was watching them, making Hermione laugh when she urged Hermione to craft another fantasy for 'Snape's viewing pleasure.' When Snape had spoken, Hermione had felt immediately guilty. She couldn't believe she had let Pansy distract her from her work, and she knew she deserved whatever Snape said.

He looked at her for a minute before standing up and moving around his desk. He came to stand in front of her before flicking his wand towards the door, startling her when it was shut and locked.

He leaned forward and grasped her arm above her elbow as she tilted her head back to look at him.

'Miss Granger, I have already warned you about Miss Parkinson,' he said, keeping his voice low.

'There is more at stake here than just inter-house unity. You can not afford to be taken in by her.'

Hermione had to hold back a smile as Professor Snape warned her about Pansy. Pansy had just received a letter from her father, congratulating her on the good job she was doing. One of her fellow Slytherins had seen her speaking with Hermione in the hall and had reported back to their parents. Voldemort had gotten word and assumed that Pansy was working hard to befriend Hermione and complete her assignment.

After reading the letter, the girls decided that they should act more friendly towards Pansy from now on in public. Voldemort would think that Pansy was making progress on her project for him, and they didn't want to risk her getting into trouble when she was home for the holidays.

'Professor, I know what I am doing,' she replied, thinking about her words carefully. She didn't want to make him worry, but she couldn't reveal any of her secrets.

'You are being naive if you think you can handle this. Miss Parkinson is only befriending you in order to use you.' He took a deep breath as if gearing up for something.

'Miss Granger, Miss Parkinson is working for the Dark Lord. What she is working on will directly affect you, and you need to be on guard.'

Despite what you think, I do realize that you have enormous potential, Miss Granger. I don't want to see that go to waste.'

'What is she working on?' Hermione asked, wondering how much information he would trust her with.

He looked away from her for a minute before turning back to her, his face blank.

'You know the nature of my work. I cannot say anymore,' he answered, his voice so low she had to lean forward to hear him clearly.

Their faces were close, and she felt his breath on her face. His hand, still on her arm above her elbow, had softened, and his thumb was moving up and down in a soft caress. She idly noticed that, if possible, he was looking even more gaunt and thin than he had at the beginning of the year.

She felt a small pang of worry for him; Voldemort had been very active lately, and it was probably an added stress for the spy.

She heard a noise outside of the classroom door, and the moment was broken. He blinked once and immediately let go of her arm as if she had burned him. She took a step back as well and gave him a small smile.

'I guess I should get to my next class.'

He flicked his wand towards the door, unlocking it.

'Indeed. Miss Granger, remember what I have said; you need to be careful of Miss Parkinson. She is deeply involved in the Dark Lord's plans, and you are no match for her.'

Hermione scowled at that. How dare he imply that she couldn't handle Pansy; he probably only thought that way because Pansy was a Slytherin. *Well, I am capable of handling any Slytherin*, she thought angrily.

'Sir, I can handle Pansy Parkinson. I know what I am doing!' she retorted before turning and walking out the classroom. She stopped just at the door when he called her name.

'Oh, Miss Granger, before I forget, twenty points from Gryffindor for talking in class.'

She let out a breath in frustration.

'Fine. Thank you, Professor,' she ground out before leaving the classroom.

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The girls had decided to perform their ritual on the last day of school before they left for the holidays. It would be the night of Slughorn's Christmas party. The ritual needed to be performed during a full moon, which was a greater source of power than any other stage of the moon. They would meet in their classroom at eleven and be ready to perform the ritual by midnight.

One week before the night of the ritual, Hermione came into Defense class and sat near Pansy. Ron and Harry were in deep conversation across the room, and she didn't bother saying hi. She only ever saw Harry when he decided to study with her in the library. She sighed; things were so different this year. Her time was almost all used up between classes, the Slug Club and her time with the girls. She wondered how Ginny managed to do all of that and Quidditch.

Pansy turned to Hermione after hearing her sigh. 'What's wrong?'

Snape hadn't entered the classroom yet so it was still safe to talk.

'I was just thinking about how things have changed this year. I barely see Harry anymore and Ron... well, you know.'

Pansy looked over at Harry and Ron and narrowed her eyes at the boy with the ginger hair.

'I wish you would let me hex him. Him and that slag, Lavender Brown. Even her name is ridiculous.'

Hermione let out a short laugh.

'I'm mostly over it. I just feel like he humiliated me, leading me on... I mean, he said he would be going to Slug's Christmas party with me. I thought we understood each other.'

'You could do so much better than him. Besides, you heard what Padma said the other day. He's a lousy date,' Pansy said, still scowling in his direction.

'You know, Pansy, I agree with you. I deserve better than him,' Hermione acknowledged, trying to bolster herself up.

'Oh... I have an idea,' Pansy said in an excited voice. 'You should make him jealous, Hermione. Go to the party with someone who would make him jealous!' Pansy exclaimed; she was wearing her Slytherin smile.

Hermione mimicked her smile, looking just a bit Slytherin herself.

'You know, Cormac McLaggen would make him really jealous. Cormac was his competition for keeper on the Quidditch team. In fact, if it weren't for me, Ron wouldn't even be on the Quidditch team. Cormac would.'

Pansy didn't get a chance to reply, as Snape took that moment to slam into the classroom. She tapped Hermione on the arm and they met each others' eyes. Pansy silently cast *Legilimens*; I still can't believe you used the Confundus to affect the Quidditch tryouts! I'll make a Slytherin out of you yet... That is a perfectly brilliant idea, take Cormac to the party!

Hermione stifled her giggle before resolutely looking back up at Snape so she could take notes like the know-it-all she was.

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The day of the party had arrived cold and dry. The girls had spent the last few weeks reading Morgaine's journal and practicing all the different aspects of the blood ritual. The ritual itself seemed simple enough, but everything had to be done exactly right. They also needed to wear the right clothes, bathe thoroughly prior to the ritual, and Hermione was given the task of finding the proper ritual knife, necessary for blood ceremonies.

Getting Cormac to come to the party had been surprisingly easy for Hermione. A little make-up and an adoring stare and he had leapt at the chance to come with her to the party. After two hours, she decided it really hadn't been worth it. After ducking Cormac McLaggen and avoiding anything resembling mistletoe, Hermione decided she was done with the party. She saw Luna standing in the corner with Professor Trelawney. 'Luna, I'm going to go up to my dorm now... Where is Harry?' she asked, noticing that he wasn't anywhere near his date.

Luna shrugged but leaned in to whisper.

'He left, said he had something to do. Malfoy was caught gate crashing and Snape left with him. I think Harry was following them.'

Hermione sighed. Pansy had said that Draco was working for Voldemort. Harry wasn't wrong in his suspicions, but Hermione couldn't help but wish he would keep his nose out of it. She was worried it might eventually lead to Pansy. Nobody seemed to know what Draco's assignment was, but the girls decided to be as cautious as possible around him. 'Well, I'm going to head up and start getting ready. I'll see you at eleven.'

Luna smiled at her, her excitement for tonight evident in her eyes. She grasped Hermione's hand and gave it a quick squeeze. 'See you then.'

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Stepping out into the cold, dark night, Hermione shivered as she walked quietly along with the other girls. They were all dressed in white silk lounge pants and a matching white silk tank top procured by the wealthier Slytherins of their ranks. They were barefoot, devoid of all makeup and jewelry and had all recently taken baths to cleanse themselves in preparation. They were all pink from a combination of their recent scrubbing and the cold of the December night.

What they were doing would have been considered madness to an outside observer. Eleven girls entered the forbidden forest under the light of a full moon in December, they were lucky it hadn't snowed yet this year. When they reached the clearing in the forest, scouted earlier by Pansy and Millicent, they assembled themselves into a circle without speaking. They had talked at length about this ritual beforehand and knew exactly what needed to happen. There was no need to speak now, and Hermione suspected they were all a little too nervous and overwhelmed.

Hermione looked at Pansy, standing directly opposite her in the circle. Pansy would start the ritual when she felt ready.

They had decided to represent each of their Houses in the four points of the circle. Hermione and Pansy represented Gryffindor and Slytherin while Susan and Luna stood for Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw.

Pansy took a deep breath, meeting Hermione's eyes for a moment before closing her own.

'I stand here in a circle of my sisters. I stand for my values and my house of the snake, I come in love.'

Hermione spoke next, 'I stand here in a circle of my sisters. I stand for my values and my house of the lion. I come in love.'

'I stand here in a circle of my sisters. I stand for my values and my house of the badger. I come in love.'

'I stand here in a circle of my sisters. I stand for my values and my house of the raven. I come in love.'

After they had each spoken for their houses, all four girls raised their arms above their heads. 'We call upon the goddess to protect us and to accept our supplication. Goddess, Mother, Sister, Friend. We call upon you, we ask for your love. We ask for your protection. We ask for your wisdom. We ask for your peace.'

The four girls said this together once before the other girls joined in, their eyes closed and arms outstretched. They repeated the words three times before opening their eyes.

There were small gasps of surprise when they opened their eyes. Their circle was surrounded by a large shimmering violet bubble of light. Once the ritual was begun, the casters were supposed to be protected from outside harm or interference. Hermione supposed that their violet bubble served as protection. She felt a small flash of relief; it was a full moon after all, and she had had a healthy fear of werewolves after her third year.

Pansy held her arms out front with her palms up. An Athame Ritual knife was lying across her palms. Hermione smiled when she saw the knife, remembering that in the end, after hours of endless research and searching, she had simply asked her mom to order it for her on eBay of all places.

When Pansy spoke, her voice vibrated with emotion and her eyes seemed to be lit from within. 'I come into the circle with my sisters. Closer than any family. I denounce the Lord of my parents and forsake their ways. Instead I give it all to my sisters. My love, my faith, my support. I come here in love with my sisters, from now and evermore, they have my body, soul, and mind.'

Hermione felt her heart swell with excitement. Each girl was required to make a vow to her sisters; up until now they had not revealed what their vows would be. After Pansy said her vow, she used the knife to cut an 'X' across the palm of her wand hand, making sure that some of her blood remained on the knife. She then passed the knife to Daphne who stood on her left. Daphne laid the knife across her palms and stretched her arms out in front of her.

'I come into the circle with my sisters. Closer than any family. I denounce the loves of my past and turn away from my days of old. I am a new person, alive and pure in the love of my sisters. I give my heart and my devotion to my sisters whom I will fully support to the end of my life. From now and evermore, my sisters have my body, soul, and mind.' Daphne mimicked Pansy by cutting her hand with the knife before passing it to Padma, who denounced her relationship with her twin sister before passing the knife on. The knife went from Padma to Luna and to Ginny, who denounced her brothers for her new family of sisters, before it was passed along to Hermione.

Hermione held the knife out on her palms. 'I come into the circle of my sisters. Closer than any family. I denounce the love of two men. Friends forged in battle, bonds never broken by conflict. I give the battle and the bonds to my sisters. I place my protection and my power in the hands and hearts of my sisters. I give them my faith and my confidence. From now and evermore, my sisters have my body, soul, and mind.'

She barely felt the sting as she cut the 'X' shape on her palm. The knife was red with the blood of her sisters, and she added hers before passing it along to Anjali.

From Anjali, the knife went to Jarilyn, Susan, Tracey, and Millicent. After Millicent had cut her palm, she handed the knife back to Pansy.

When she looked at Pansy, Hermione noticed that her eyes were shining with moisture. She realized then, that every other girl in the circle, including herself, had wet

cheeks and eyes. Pansy threw the knife forward. It floated to the direct center of the circle where it landed and stuck into the ground. The girls clasped their hands and held them up. Speaking in unison, 'We come before the goddess, bonded by blood. We are sisters in our hearts, in our bodies and in our souls. Goddess, we ask that you bless our bond. Forged in secret and in power. Maintained by trust, faith, and love.'

They repeated themselves three times and Hermione felt the wind pick up her hair, whipping it around her face. She felt overcome by emotion. She had the urge to laugh and weep at the same time, but also felt a strange peace come over her. It was indescribable. Hermione thought of what Dumbledore had always said, and she wondered if they were feeling love in its truest and most raw form. It was truly powerful, and she could understand what Dumbledore had meant.

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A/N: Well that's it; the first part of the spell, what do you think?

That ritual has been in my head since I began writing this so I really enjoyed writing this chapter. I am not a practicing Wiccan and made up the ritual; the only part that has any reality is that the ritual knives are called Athame (I looked that up online). I honestly don't know anything about the wiccan religion and hope that this doesn't offend anyone, it wasn't meant to.

A/N: I also want to thank you for your reviews so far.

What Are You Thinking?

Chapter 9 of 10

The somewhat surprising results of their spell.

Chapter 9: What Are You Thinking?

Disclaimer: see previous chapters.

...Speaking in unison, 'We come before the goddess, bonded by blood. We are sisters in our hearts, in our bodies and in our souls. Goddess, we ask that you bless our bond. Forged in secret and in power. Maintained by trust, faith, and love.'

They repeated themselves three times, and Hermione felt the wind pick up her hair, whipping it around her face. She felt overcome by emotion. She had the urge to laugh and weep at the same time, but also felt a strange peace come over her. It was indescribable. Hermione thought of what Dumbledore had always said, and she wondered if they were feeling Love in its truest and most raw form. It was truly powerful and she could understand what Dumbledore had meant.....

Excerpt from the end of Chapter 8

It was silent. Even the wind whirling around them was quiet as the girls stood within their shining protective bubble. Hermione didn't know how long they'd been standing there in silence; it was as if they were waiting for something. Instinctively, she knew they were supposed to remain standing there, silent and unmoving.

All of a sudden the world became brighter; she looked up to notice that their bubble was changing colours. From violet to red to a blinding orange, and she heard something like a drumbeat in her head. It began rhythmic and slow but increased in frequency and became louder and louder. She knew it was still silent in their clearing in the forest. She watched as the bright bubble seemed to be throbbing in time with the drumbeat in her head; every girl had her head thrown back as they watched it. It increased, faster and faster, louder and louder. Pounding over and over. It was primal and beautiful. Hermione felt as if she was being embraced; warm air blew around her, and she felt safe, secure, and loved.

One more whoosh of air around them and the drumbeat, which had increased to a frenzied beat, stopped. Their bubble burst. Each girl, including herself, crumpled to the ground.

As Hermione sat up, she blinked and looked around. She felt overwhelmed by emotion. Their ritual had been the most beautiful thing she had ever experienced. She hoped she would never forget a moment of it for the rest of her life. She didn't feel up to talking yet, so she was surprised when she heard the voices of every other girl in their circle. They all seemed to start talking at once, and she couldn't distinguish between who was saying what.

'That was amazing...'

'Is that what love feels like?'

'I feel so special and so warm...'

'I hope I never forget...'

Hermione couldn't believe they had the capacity to talk so soon after their experience. She looked around confusedly at the other girls, and then she realized something.

Nobody's lips were moving.

Hermione's mouth dropped open as she tried to puzzle out what was happening to them. Each girl was now looking around confused. Nobody had spoken yet. Hermione gasped as she slowly realized what was happening. *This must be the special gift.* Could they communicate through each other's minds? Morgaine had mentioned that their bonding would bring them something special, and this might be it. Hermione heard a voice in her head rise above the rest.

'Hermione, can you hear me?' It was Pansy, and she had managed to force her 'voice' to the forefront of Hermione's mind.

'Pansy?' Hermione thought as she concentrated on the Slytherin girl.

'This is amazing! I'm communicating with you and I don't have to look at you or cast Legilimens!' Pansy thought to her, and Hermione could feel a sense of glee and something a bit more calculating.

*'I can feel what you are feeling too!*she thought to Pansy. *'When you think something towards me, I can hear you and feel what you are feeling.'*

*'So can the rest of us!*A new voice entered her head, and she recognized it as Padma's.

*'I wonder if we can turn it off and on or if we will always hear each other's thoughts and feelings.*Hermione wondered. Her mind was racing, and she felt a myriad of questions overwhelm her. Is it selective? Can they control their new power? How far does it reach? Will they be able to communicate while they are home over the holidays? Could they influence each others feelings? *I need to research this.*

*'HERMIONE! You're thinking too fast and too loud!*She heard Millicent 'shout' into her head. She felt amusement and laughter from each of the girls in reaction. It felt so weird to feel so much at the same time.

'We are going to need to figure out how this gift works for us,' Hermione said aloud, and her voice sounded rusty and unused. She felt the startled reactions from each girl as the silence was broken. The girls began then to take in their surroundings. They were sitting in their clearing in the forest, still forming their initial circle. Hermione still felt warm from the spell, even if the December night air was freezing.

One by one, each girl stood up and looked around. The sky was a bit lighter than it had been when they had started their spell. Hermione realized with a start that it was almost dawn. How long have we been out here? she wondered. How long they had stood there, listening to the drum beat as the spell completed itself?

'Well, I guess we should go in. Some of us have to leave this afternoon on the train,' Daphne said as she stifled a yawn.

*'Snow!*It was Luna who thought this, as they began to make their way to the castle, and Hermione looked up to watch the first flakes fall from the sky. Hermione felt a mixture of emotions: surprise, delight, and wonder from the other girls as they looked up. She smiled as she tried to distinguish between each girl's emotions. It was still disconcerting to feel eleven different sets of emotions, but she was starting to recognize which emotion matched its owner. She wanted to spend a few days researching telepathy and testing the bounds of their gift. She wanted to research.

'I'm not going home. I need to stay here and research our gift,' she thought to the other girls.

'Will your parents be okay with you changing plans so late?' Susan asked.

'I'll send them an owl. They won't be happy about it, but I'll tell them I have some important research to do for school. They understand stuff like that,' Hermione said. Ginny nodded, remembering that Hermione had used that excuse in the past to stay at Hogwarts over the holidays.

'I'm staying too, Hermione. I can help you with the research,' Tracey said. Hermione felt some delight and anticipation coming from Tracey at the thought of having company over the holidays. Tracey was one of the only Slytherin students staying over for Christmas.

Millicent stopped at the edge of the forest and addressed the other girls.

'We don't know anything about our gift, but it is going to take practice to get control over it. We need to know how to be selective about who we are communicating with, and we need to know if someone can sense it if they use Legilimency.'

'Since you are staying Hermione,' Anjali said, *'can you look into this? You can teach the rest of us how to control it when we get back, but you and Tracey can practice while we are gone.'*

Hermione nodded, already making mental notes to herself to owl her parents to send her Muggle books about the theory of telepathy. *wonder if I could get to Diagon Alley,* she thought to herself, imagining Mr. Yosh's dusty little book shop. *Maybe I could owl Mr. Yosh...*

'HEY, PAY ATTENTION!' Ginny's thought forced itself into Hermione's head. *'Pansy has been talking for a while, and you were too busy thinking of bookstores to hear what she had to say!'*

'Oops. Do you think she noticed?' Hermione looked over at Pansy with a sheepish look on her face.

'Of course I did! I can hear your thoughts too, and when you are thinking of research, they get louder!' Pansy said. *'We can all hear what you are thinking!'*

'Who's Mr. Yosh and why did you think of Snape when you imagined his bookstore?' Daphne asked.

Hermione felt herself turning red as the other girls looked at her speculatively when Daphne mentioned Snape. *'It's just that I found this great bookstore this summer on Diagon Alley, and I happened to run into Professor Snape when I was there.'* She tried to shrug nonchalantly.

'And you just happened to notice that he smelled like chocolate?' Daphne asked with humor in her voice. *'I knew you couldn't help but notice how sexy he is! It's not just me!'*

Hermione was sure she was a full blown Gryffindor red when Daphne mentioned Snape smelling like chocolate.

'Urrgh! Get out of my head! We need to learn how to control this gift!' Hermione said in frustration. The other girls laughed at her tone of voice. Instinctively, Hermione put up her Occlumency barriers, imagining a brick wall being erected behind her forehead.

'Hey!' Hermione heard Pansy's voice but it was faint, as if it was coming from very far away. *'I can just barely get through, but your Occlumency wall made a big difference.'*

Hermione dropped her wall, wanting to keep herself open to the other girls for now. She smiled at Pansy. *'Well, that's our first bit of research done. We know that Occlumency does make a difference!'*

Before Pansy could reply to Hermione, Susan interrupted the conversation. *'Girls, we need to get going. The sun is coming up.'* Most of the girls tilted their heads up to the sky, noticing the slight pink tint from the sun peeking through the cloudy sky.

'We need to get going. I need to finish what I was saying before Hermione started dreaming about Snape,' Pansy said in a mocking voice as some of the girls chuckled quietly. *'I think that we need to continue to communicate with each other all morning, keep our minds open to each other. We can test how far it will reach, like when we go to Hogsmeade to catch the train. We need to know if our gift extends beyond the barriers of the school.'*

The other girls nodded in agreement as they quietly made their way from the forest to the castle. Once in the entrance hall, they stopped once more to hug each other goodbye for the holidays. Hermione smiled as she realized they had managed to do so in complete silence while using their minds to say their farewells. This gift was going to be very useful.

'Hermione!' Hermione jerked awake with a start when she heard her name, looking around her room with blurry eyes. Lavender and Parvati had already packed their trunks and left the room. Hermione blinked a few times, trying to wake up. What time is it? she wondered, looking out the window to see snow falling from an overcast sky.

'It's eleven o'clock. The boys and I are leaving now.'

'Ginny?'

'Yes, it's me. I have been trying to get your attention. We are leaving right now for the Burrow.' Another 'voice' popped into Hermione's head after Ginny said this. *'You can't be leaving right now. The carriages haven't left yet for Hogsmeade Station.'*

Hermione identified that as Pansy.

'I guess we are still all hearing each other when we communicate this way, she thought wryly.

Pansy chuckled a bit in her mind, and she thought she felt amusement from some of the other girls.

'We are leaving by Floo through Professor McGonagall's office. It was decided that it would be safer for 'the chosen one,' Ginny thought, emphasizing Harry's latest title. *'The boys still think you are going home and are probably already in the entrance hall getting ready to leave on the carriages. I decided it would be easiest if they didn't know you changed your plans.'*

'That makes sense; I don't need them asking questions about this. Thanks, Gin.' Hermione imagined herself smiling thankfully at Ginny.

'Hey, I caught that smile. Wicked. You need to teach me... Oh, we are leaving now. BYE GIRLS!'

There was a cacophony of 'bye, Gin!' in Hermione's head as Ginny stepped through the fireplace and left.

Dressed and wide awake, Hermione grabbed a book from her trunk and headed towards the Great Hall. She had slept through breakfast and now that she was awake, she was ready to eat lunch. Hermione sighed as she looked around the almost empty Great Hall. Everything at Hogwarts seemed so quiet now that the carriages had left, taking most of the students with them.

She sat by herself at the end of the Gryffindor table, noticing that Tracey was also seating alone at the Slytherin table. She smiled, hearing Tracey's voice in her head as she filled her plate.

'Hi.'

'Hey. All right?'

'Yeah, good. So, what are you pretending to read?' Hermione turned over her book to look at the cover; she had just grabbed whatever was available.

'Apparently, I am reading my advanced Potions book.'

'Speaking of that... don't look, but Snape is staring at you.'

Hermione felt herself stiffen as she resisted the urge to look up at the head table. She casually reached for the pumpkin juice and glanced up towards the head table, just in time to see the Defense professor glance down at his plate.

'He's been pretty suspicious of me lately, since he has noticed that I've become friends with Pansy. He keeps warning me about her.'

'I wonder if he will see her at one of the Yule parties over the holidays.'

'Yule parties?'

'Yeah, it's pretty common among the pureblood families. The Malfoys usually host one of the largest parties at Christmas time. I've heard that Snape usually attends that one, Draco used to brag about it... Of course, with Mr. Malfoy in Azkaban, they probably won't be hosting one this year.'

'I bet Snape would be happy to not have to attend a party this year. He doesn't exactly seem like the party type... or the Christmas type, for that matter.'

'You're right about that. Can you actually see him drinking hot chocolate and opening his present on Christmas morning?'

Hermione stifled a giggle as the mental image of Snape excitedly ripping open a package flitted across her mind.

'Speaking of chocolate, what was that about this morning, when we were coming in? Snape smells like chocolate?'

Hermione felt herself flush. *'I don't know what it is, but every time I have been around him, I smell chocolate and sandalwood.'* She took a large bite of her sandwich to cover her embarrassment.

'You know that most students don't spend a lot of time noticing what their professor smells like, right?'

'I didn't mean to... I just noticed when I ran into him at the bookstore this summer. Oh. The bookstore. I bet the Professor knows if Mr. Yosh takes mail orders!'

'What?'

'The bookstore where I ran into Professor Snape. It was amazing and I wanted to order some books on telepathy from there, for our research. The Professor seemed to be familiar with the store. I could ask him about sending in a mail order.'

'You know, he is my Head of House, and even I wouldn't want to waste some of my Christmas holiday talking to him about books. He will probably just deduct points from you for being too curious and give you detention or something.'

Hermione smiled at that. *'Well, I have to try. It would only be a quick question, and we need as much research material as possible. Hey, are you done eating? Want to meet me in the library to start researching?'*

'Isn't it too soon for us to be seen together?' Tracy asked apprehensively. They had never decided with the other girls when they would make their friendship more apparent. It was hard to decide because it had to be enough to please Voldemort, but not enough for him to order Pansy to move forward with the spell.

'I doubt anyone would be in the library today and besides, there aren't any other Slytherins around to report it.'

Hermione could feel that Tracey was pleased with the idea that they could spend time together. Otherwise it may have proved to be a very lonely Christmas for them both.

'I'm going to grab some stuff from my room and I will meet you in the library,' Hermione said as she stood up from the table. She flashed Tracey a smile across the room and headed out towards her dormitory.

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Snape took a deep sip of his hot chocolate as he looked out over the Great Hall. He felt himself relax as he took in the almost empty hall and felt the warm chocolate slide

down into his belly. It was finally quiet, most of the students were gone, and with any luck he could enjoy a few weeks of peace. He frowned when he noticed the Gryffindor table. There were only two occupants: a first year and Granger. Minerva had mentioned over breakfast that Granger had come to her first thing in the morning and let her know that she would be changing her plans and staying for the holidays. Why had Granger changed her plans?

He idly traced his lips with his fingers as he watched the Gryffindor witch eat her lunch. She had a book open in front of her, but hadn't once turned the pages and he wondered why she would bother to pretend she was reading. She blushed and then smiled as he watched her, and he found himself feeling puzzled. She wasn't reading and she was sitting alone, so what was making her blush? Damned girl. He had spent entirely too much time thinking about her lately. He was worried. She seemed to defy him at every turn, no matter what he did to try and warn her.

He saw her flash a smile towards the Slytherin table's only occupant before leaving the Great Hall. Miss Davis was the only Slytherin who would be staying over the holidays. As a half-blood, her family was rarely invited to the regular round of balls and Yule parties that were so much a part of pureblood culture. Severus frowned when he saw the shared smile between the two girls. Was Miss Granger friends with another Slytherin? He had never even seen Miss Parkinson and Miss Davis together. *When would Herm -- Ms. Granger have had a chance to meet Ms. Davis?* He needed a way to watch the Gryffindor witch more closely.

There was a flash of lurid purple in Severus' peripheral vision, indicating to Severus that Dumbledore was leaving the table. He wiped his mouth on his napkin and stood to follow the older man up to his office. He needed to tell his employer about the conversation he had conducted with Draco last night.

'Headmaster, do you have a moment?'

'Of course, Severus, of course. Come up to my office with me.' Severus fell into step next to Dumbledore as they made their way to the headmaster's office.

'Severus, I trust you are feeling a bit more relaxed now that most of our students have gone home for the holidays.'

'If only it could be all the students, headmaster,' Severus murmured, causing Dumbledore to chuckle.

'Now, Severus, I'm sure you don't really feel that way. The students this year are a delight! I, for one, am glad to have such a wonderful group of students to remember Hogwarts by.'

Snape felt a lance of pain at Dumbledore's words, and he sucked in a deep breath trying to compose himself. When he spoke, his voice was rusty and low.

'Headmaster, really I think if I spent the holidays researching...'

'We've already had this conversation, Severus.' Dumbledore's voice had taken on a hard edge that brooked no argument. Snape sighed, feeling defeated. It made it even harder to accept in the face of his mentor's evident cheerfulness and acceptance.

After turning down a lemon drop and settling himself in a seat opposite Dumbledore, Severus began to describe the conversation he had had last night with Draco. Under the guise of trying to help him, he had tried to get Draco to talk to him about his plans.

'So, young Mr. Malfoy has some talent for Occlumency,' Dumbledore said in a voice muffled by the candy he had recently popped into his mouth.

'Before he put his shields up, I was able to determine that Bellatrix has been teaching both him and Miss Parkinson over their holiday breaks. His mental shields are crude but strong.'

'Miss Parkinson too? Has there been any indication that she will be successful in her particular endeavor anytime soon?' Dumbledore asked thoughtfully. Severus was quiet for a moment before answering.

'Albus, I believe that she still has a way to go on that, but I am getting worried.'

'Tell me.'

'Well, Miss Granger has consistently ignored all of my attempts to warn her away from Miss Parkinson. They seem to be becoming closer. I also have reason to believe that Miss Granger has begun to see a few of the other Slytherin girls as friends,' he said, thinking of the shared smile he witnessed between her and Miss Davis this morning.

Miss Granger has also been acting erratically lately; I believe it is due to Miss Parkinson's influence. I believe we will need to watch Miss Granger closely from now on.'

The headmaster was nodding his agreement.

'Too true, Severus. Miss Granger is powerful enough to make or break Voldemort's plans for Miss Parkinson... I think we will make arrangements to watch her more carefully.'

Severus noticed that Dumbledore had a small gleam in his eyes, and he felt his stomach tighten. Whatever the headmaster was about to suggest would not be good.

'I think, Severus, that you have too much on your plate and will need an assistant. Certainly, Miss Granger is accomplished enough to brew some of the basic medicinal potions?'

Snape stiffened in reaction. 'Surely, Albus, you can't mean for me to start babysitting the girl! Besides, I am no longer the Potions professor. Shouldn't Slughorn be brewing the potions for Poppy?'

'As Horace is teaching this year as a personal favor to me, I hate to ask him to do something we both know he views as a waste of his skills and time.' Severus snorted at this. *In other words, Slughorn is too lazy to be bothered.* 'Besides, you did say you wanted to watch Miss Granger more closely. Have her help you brew a couple nights each week; I am sure she would be more than willing.'

*Gods help me; it was bad enough spending his evenings with Potter last year, and now this!* 'Very well, Headmaster.'

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A/N: Made in part possible by the lovely Septentrion.

Christmas Cards and a Headmistress

Hermione and Tracey celebrate Christmas.

AN: Thanks to my Beta, Septentrion for her wonderful work.

Hermione and Tracey didn't have any success with their research until Christmas day.

The two girls had already spent most of their holiday in their classroom or in the library researching. Frustratingly, the library had yielded little to no success.

Every time Hermione felt that she had finally found some accurate information on telepathy, the book would end up referencing Occlumency or Legilimency. The girls had hit a stale-mate two days ago and agreed they couldn't find anything new for their research in the Hogwarts Library.

It was on Christmas morning when the girls received a few items that helped them to make some real progress in their research. With Seely's help, they spent Christmas Eve together in their classroom. They woke up to find the usual collection of gifts at their feet.

Among her own gifts, Hermione received from her mom, as promised, a number of Muggle books about the theory of telepathy. Tracey received a Christmas card.

As was common among pureblood families, Daphne Greengrass's mother was distant cousins with Tracey's mother, so Daphne could send her cousin a Christmas card without raising suspicion. It was through the card that Hermione and Tracey were able to learn about what their friends were experiencing during their holiday.

They could all communicate with each other.

Daphne told them that on leaving Hogwarts, they had only lost contact with two people; Hermione and Tracey. Every other girl could hear each other as clearly as if they were in the same room. For the holidays, the members of their little club had scattered across the United Kingdom, but that hadn't limited their gift one bit.

Hermione's mouth dropped open when Tracey read Daphne's card out loud.

'There is no limit to this gift. The only limit is... Hogwarts!'

'Hermione! The wards! Didn't you tell us that Hogwarts has all kind of special wards on it to keep it safe? Something in the wards must restrict our gift!'

Both girls, after realizing they had stopped speaking out loud, smiled at each other. Hermione had assumed their gift was limited to the girls being within a specific proximity of each other. Upon learning this new information from the card, her mind went into overdrive thinking of the possibilities. Even after school was out this summer, they would be able to remain in close contact with each other.

Hermione didn't know when they would complete the spell of Morgaine's blessing. She didn't know how long it would be until the final confrontation between Voldemort and Harry, but she knew that she and her new friends would be there. This gift would help them get there.

'Okay, so it works in and out of Hogwarts, but the wards prevent it from getting through,' she said, looking at Tracey.

'Whatever wards are doing this, they must work like a really strong Occlumency wall. Remember when you put your walls up that first morning? Your thoughts were muffled for the rest of us; we could just barely hear you. The Hogwarts wards are probably just a stronger version of that,' Tracey mused as she absently twirled a strand of hair around her finger.

Hermione's mind was going through everything she had learned about Occlumency.

'The wards... Snape told Harry that the wards would keep Legilimency out. But it didn't work with Harry because of the scar.'

Tracey looked at her, confused.

'Snape... ?'

Hermione continued on in her thought process before Tracey could ask her about Snape and what he said to Harry.

'Snape would know more about the wards... so would Dumbledore or another headmaster... We need to ask someone... I don't want Dumbledore to know yet... The scar! I need to know how that connection works.'

Scar.

'There is something significant about... maybe in the new books my mum sent. No. Not enough... I need to check...'

'Tracey!' Hermione was almost shouting in her excitement as her mind whirred through so many thoughts that Tracey was having a hard time keeping up with her leaps in logic. She flinched as Hermione's voice outside of her head surprised her.

'We need to research the wards around Hogwarts... No, we need to research everything we can about wards. That's going to be the key to learning how to control this. You research wards. Meanwhile, I need to research scars.'

'Scars? Hermione, what do you mean?'

'Scars: magical scars to be exact. Like Harry's lightning scar, its significance. It's how Voldemort got through.'

'WHAT!' Tracey asked in a high pitched voice. 'What are you talking about Hermione?'

Hermione took a deep breath and made herself calm down. She quickly explained to Tracey what had happened the previous year when Harry had seen the snake and when Voldemort had made Harry see Sirius.

Tracey's eyes had widened while Hermione told her tale. Voldemort had projected an image in Harry's head. It wasn't too dissimilar to what the girls had done when they had fooled Snape and Dumbledore.

But Voldemort had done it through the seemingly impenetrable wards of Hogwarts.

Tracey sat stunned and silent as Hermione began to gather up her books on telepathy. The Gryffindor witch was in full research mode. She muttered to herself as she organized her thoughts. *I need to head back to the library and...*

'Misses must hurry!'

Hermione's thoughts were interrupted by a voice, high pitched and panicky.

Seely had popped into the room and was holding both of her ears as she shifted her weight nervously.

'Seely? What's the matter?' Tracey asked, leaning forward in concern for the little elf.

'Misses must hurry. They is being late!'

'Late for what, Seely?'

They is eating feasts in the Great Hall! The professors are wondering where misses be! They has sent Dobby to your dormitories!'

Hermione slapped the palm of her hand against her forehead. It was Christmas day. Of course Dumbledore would expect them to be in the Great Hall for Christmas dinner.

'Bullocks! We forgot!'

'We need to hurry,' Tracey said as she slipped on her shoes. 'I'll go first and you follow.'

Hermione nodded as she held out one of her new books.

'I'll say I got caught up in reading my new Christmas present.'

Severus drummed his fingers on the table impatiently for a few minutes before turning to the older man sitting at his right.

'Headmaster, perhaps we could send someone to go find Miss Granger and Miss Davis.'

The entire staff and the few students who had stayed for the holidays sat around the large round table waiting to begin their Christmas dinner.

'Oh Severus, please don't worry. I have asked Dobby to locate our missing students,' Dumbledore said cheerfully as he smiled at the other occupants at the table.

'It won't be too much longer; I am sure the girls are on their way... Ah, see, this is Miss Davis. Good day, my dear. Happy Christmas.'

Miss Davis was breathing heavily, indicating that she had run to the Great Hall.

'I'm so sorry, Headmaster! I lost track of the time and didn't realize how late it had become!'

'Oh no, don't worry, child. Severus is just eager to begin the festivities!'

Snape scowled at the headmaster.

'I simply do not feel like we should allow our students to display such bad manners as to make the rest of us wait. Miss Davis, were you not with Miss Granger?'

Hermione walked in just as he finished saying this and smiled sheepishly at the group.

'I'm terribly sorry I am late. I was given a new book for Christmas and I started reading and well... I got caught up.' She held up the book as she spoke. She sent another sheepish smile at Snape to show she had heard his comment about manners. His scowl became more pronounced as he looked back and forth between Hermione and Tracey.

'Professor Snape looks ready to spit!'

'He probably is, and lucky you; look where you get to sit.'

Hermione looked at the table, and she understood why Tracey was sending her a mental smirk. The only available chair was right next to Professor Snape. Apparently none of the other students had been brave enough to sit so close to him. Hermione ignored Snape's scowl and took her seat.

'Excellent! Now everyone, happy Christmas, and tuck in!' Dumbledore said cheerfully as he picked up his fork. A feast had just appeared on the table, consisting of every good thing Hermione could possibly think of for Christmas dinner.

'I'm glad Seely came and told us. I didn't realize how hungry I was!' Hermione thought, glancing at Tracey as she took a large bite.

'I think you are a bad influence on me. I can't believe I almost forgot about Christmas dinner because I was busy researching with the know-it-all!'

Hermione coughed a couple times, trying to cover up her urge to giggle at Tracey's comment.

'Don't make me laugh! Snape will wonder if I start laughing out of nowhere!'

Hermione looked up in time to catch a smug smile flash on Tracey's face.

In order to avoid looking at Tracey and erupting into laughter, Hermione turned to her dinner companion.

'Er. Happy Christmas, Professor. Have you had a nice day?'

'No different than any other day, Miss Granger. The only exception being that the headmaster insisted on gifting me with yet another pair of lurid wool socks. I must have an entire drawer full of his "Christmas gifts."'

This time Hermione did let out a gasping laugh. Tracey looked up at her in confusion, but she just shook her head.

'I'll tell you later.'

She couldn't believe it. Was Professor Snape actually joking with her?

She turned back to smile at him once her laughter had died.

His face was once again blank as he returned to his meal.

Hermione scowled in confusion. They had almost carried on a civil conversation. What was his problem now?

It seems that Miss Granger has befriended yet another member of my house.

Snape scowled as he finished the last of his dinner. Miss Granger and Miss Davis were lying. His life depended on his being observant of all that went on around him. The two witches kept looking at each other throughout the meal. They were discreet, and he wouldn't have noticed if he hadn't been looking for it. He had thought it too much of a coincidence that they had both lost track of the time this afternoon, and so he had been watching them closely.

When he told Miss Granger about the socks Dumbledore purchased for him, both girls had automatically shared a look. There was something going on there.

Considering the way Miss Granger was acting in regards to her friendship with the Parkinson girl, he wouldn't be at all surprised to find that she and Miss Davis were now forming a bond.

Severus picked up a cup of tea and took a sip. He tried not to grimace as he closed his eyes against the bitter taste of the hot beverage, thinking longingly of the hot chocolate that the house elves would have ready for him in his chambers. Tilting his head down, he peeked through his hair and covertly watched the young Gryffindor witch daintily eat her pudding. He would have to talk to her soon about becoming his assistant. He wanted it all squared away before the rest of the students returned from their holiday breaks. Once she was working with him, he would have to speak with her one more time about the new friends she was making.

It was rare that a student openly defied him like this. No matter what he told her, she continued to ignore him and maintain her friendship with Miss Parkinson. It seemed now that Miss Davis was another new friendship of hers that he would have to question.

Severus frowned at this. How much did Miss Davis know? Her family members were not supporters of the Dark Lord. In fact, they had brilliantly managed to remain neutral and keep themselves under the radar of the Dark Lord.

Was she working with Pansy to complete Voldemort's assignment, or was she just as much a pawn in this as Hermione?

Taking another sip of his tea, Severus resisted the urge to groan in frustration. It seemed he would have to keep an eye on Miss Davis in addition to Draco, Miss Parkinson and Miss Granger. How many more students was he going to be watching this year?

Snape looked around the table; most of the group had finished their dinner and were engaged in idle conversation. He sighed with relief. He could now leave without reproach from Dumbledore; he had been here long enough. With one more glance around the table, he quietly stood and left.

Tracey had started making a list on Boxing Day. Three days later and the list was still growing. She sighed as she pulled out a quill and continued her list on yet another piece of parchment. After reading a few different volumes of *Hogwarts: a History*, Tracey had decided to start listing off each ward mentioned. It seemed that each headmaster had layered on more and more wards to the ones already in use. Hogwarts had to be the most heavily warded building in the whole United Kingdom. Tracey sighed to herself. *There are too many of them. How will we ever know which ones are blocking our gift?*

'Don't forget, once the other girls are back, we can all do the research.' Hermione's voice sounded in her head. Tracey looked over at the other girl to see her smiling at her.

'Don't worry Tracey, we will figure it out.'

Before Tracey could answer, she was interrupted by Seely.

'The headmaster is wanting miss to come now,' came the squeaky voice as Seely popped into the room.

'The headmaster? Who does he want, Seely?' Hermione asked.

'He is wanting you miss. He asks Dobby to find you and bring you to his office.'

'Oh. Er, Seely, do you know what he wants? Did he look mad or anything?'

'Seely not see him, miss. Seely hears Dobby say it. Dobby is to tell miss that the headmaster eats Nestle bars.'

'Oh, that must be his password.' Hermione looked over at Tracey. *'I guess I had better go see Professor Dumbledore.'*

It was only after turning down a lemon drop that Hermione noticed Professor Snape sitting in the darkened corner of Dumbledore's office.

'Oh, er... hello, Professor,' she said, feeling nervous. Was this about her friendship with Pansy?

'Miss Granger,' was all he said by way of a greeting.

Bloody Hell, I should have known Snape wouldn't let this rest, and now he's bringing the headmaster in on it.

Hermione? Tracey's voice sounded nervous in her head.

What's going on? Snape is there with you?

Yes. I don't know what it is about yet. Try to concentrating on listening with me. Maybe you can hear everything I hear.

'Ah, Miss Granger. I trust you are enjoying your holidays so far?' Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling as he sat behind his desk and regarded the witch.

'Er, yes sir.'

'Very good, very good. Miss Granger, Severus and I asked you here because we have a proposition for you.' Hermione thought she heard a faint snort coming from Snape's corner, but when she looked over to him, his face was blank.

'Now, as you probably know, Severus is responsible for creating all of the medicinal potions for Madame Pomfrey.'

'But I thought that...' Hermione didn't finish her sentence as she thought about what Dumbledore said.

'Yes, Miss Granger?'

'Sir, I thought that Professor Slughorn would be responsible for that. He is the Potions Professor.'

Now she was sure she heard a snort from Snape.

'Well, yes, usually this is part of the Potions Professors duties, but Professor Slughorn is rather busy and Severus has been kind enough to offer his services.'

Dumbledore sent a twinkling smile towards Professor Snape before turning his gaze back on Hermione.

Hermione stayed quiet. No doubt Professor Slughorn was too busy with his 'Slug Club' to be bothered with potions making. She felt like imitating Professor Snape with a snort of her own.

'Yes, Severus is very generous, but he is rather busy, with his... other line of work.'

Dumbledore's voice had lowered an octave and his eyes narrowed a bit as his conversation became serious. 'We had hoped that you might be a kind of an assistant to him this next semester. You could help him complete some of the simpler potions.'

'Oh. Well... Of course I would be willing to help, Headmaster.'

Damn! I don't have time for this!

'But, are you sure I am the right person for the job? I mean, I've never even received a perfect score on any of my potions homework. I believe that Draco Malfoy is quite good at potions.'

Professor Snape scowled in her direction when she said this. His eyes bore into her as he spoke in a sharp voice. 'Miss Granger, I find it hard to believe that you of all people would turn down a chance to prove just what a know-it-all you are. One would think you would be grateful for a chance to improve your skills in potions.'

'Yes, sir. I am grateful that you thought of me.'

Hermione tried to look properly grateful. It was true that she would normally jump at the chance to help with potions.

'Excellent! I knew you would be willing to help us out! Now, what say you, Severus? Two or three times a week?'

'Hermione! Hermione!'

'Tracey? What is it?'

'Hermione, I've been looking through your new Muggle Books, and I found this one called Telepathic Theory and its Physical Host.'

'Okay, what about it? What is so urgent?'

Snape was still speaking, and Hermione tried to keep an attentive look on her face.

'It's written by an M. Derwent. His last name is the same as a former headmistress of Hogwarts!'

Hermione's eyes flew up to the row of portraits on Dumbledore's wall. There she was; Dilys Derwent, celebrated former headmistress of Hogwarts. The witch had silver ringlets, one of which she idly twirled in her finger as she listened to Professor Snape speak.

'Is that clear, Miss Granger?'

Merlin! I didn't hear a word of what he said!

'Er. Yes, sir, quite clear.'

'If that is all, Headmaster, I need to be going. Miss Granger, I will see you in a week.' After shooting one more look in her direction, Professor Snape stood and stalked out of the room.

'Miss Granger, before you go, I have something for Harry. Could you see that he gets it once he has returned from The Burrow?'

'Yes, of course, sir.'

'A moment then, Miss Granger.' The headmaster stood and went through a door behind his desk that must have led to his personal quarters. Hermione quickly stood and moved to the portrait wall.

'Headmistress, I need to speak with you privately. Is there another portrait in the school that I could meet you at?'

'What? My dear, this is quite unorthodox!' The silver haired witch exclaimed.

'Its quite important Headmistress, and I need to speak with you in private,' Hermione insisted. She glanced at the other portraits whose subjects were all looking at her with interest.

'Er... it's a woman thing,' she said in explanation to the other portraits before looking back at the headmistress with an appealing look on her face.

'Very well, dear. The old infirmary was located in the west wing of the fourth floor. My portrait still hangs there.'

Hermione smiled in relief as she quickly returned to her seat. 'Oh, thank you. I will go there tonight.'

A moment later, Dumbledore returned to the office with a rolled-up scroll in his hands.

'Please deliver this to Harry when he has returned, my dear. I am sure you know all about our little lessons.'

'Yes, sir. Thank you,' she said as she stood to leave.

**

After leaving Dumbledore's office, Hermione went straight to their classroom to find Tracey waiting for her.

'Did you hear it all?'

Tracey nodded. 'Yes, I did. It was like you repeated everything in your head as you processed the information and I was able to hear everything you did.'

Hermione smiled. 'So, we know a little bit more about the capabilities of our gift; we can eavesdrop on each other. Did you happen to hear what Professor Snape said when you were telling me about Headmistress Derwent?'

'No, I could only hear what you processed. You weren't listening to him, so I didn't hear it.'

'Oh, well I suspect the headmistress heard it. I think he was telling me when we were to meet.'

'I can't believe you will be helping him with potions. I don't think he has ever had an assistant or an apprentice or anything like that.'

'I think he suspects something and wants to keep an eye on me.'

'Because of Pansy?'

'Yes. Remember when I told you how he had warned me away from Pansy?'

Tracey nodded. 'So, you think he wants to make sure you won't be sucked into her scheming and used by Voldemort?'

'Something like that, although, he didn't look too happy about the idea. Maybe Professor Dumbledore wants Snape to watch me.'

'Do you think Snape tells the headmaster everything?'

'I think so. I wonder if we should tell Snape that Pansy is on the side of the light now... What do you think?'

'I think we need to talk to everyone else and then decide. Maybe for now you can just test the waters a bit while you are helping him.'

Hermione nodded. 'Well, I can't do anything until the other girls return. For now, we should continue our research.'

Tracey held out a book to Hermione.

'This is the book written by M. Derwent; you will probably want to look it over before we meet with the headmistress' portrait tonight.'

**

They hadn't been specific about what time that night they would be meeting the portrait, so the girls waited until after dinner before sneaking up to the fourth floor. When they arrived, Dilys Derwent was reading a book in the dusty portrait that used to hang in the infirmary. For some unknown reason, when they had moved the infirmary to a new location in the castle, they hadn't moved the portrait as well.

As the two witches approached her, Dilys looked up and smiled.

'Hello, hello, girls. I had forgotten that this portrait was painted to include some of my favorite books! I haven't read this one in years.' She held up a copy of Jane Austen's *Emma* to show the girls.

'Now, my dear, what was it you needed to speak to me about? You made the other portraits in the headmaster's office very curious.'

Hermione held up her own book for the portrait to see.

'Headmistress, we were wondering if this book was written by a relative of yours. It's really important to a... personal project we are working on.'

The former headmistress began to laugh.

'Oh, my! I had forgotten all about that! It was written by my husband, Maximilian Derwent. He made it a hobby of his to write for the Muggles... Oh, and please, feel free to call me Dilys.'

Hermione beamed up at the portrait. 'Dilys, this is my friend Tracey Davis. She and I are working together on researching telepathy.'

'Hello my dear. I see that you are from Slytherin house. It is nice to see a Gryffindor and a Slytherin getting along. It happens so rarely. Why, I remember when I was headmistress; those two houses certainly caused a lot of trouble!'

Hermione and Tracey both smiled at this.

'The two houses are still great rivals. We are kind of special case,' Tracey said.

'Yes, well it is very nice to see. I was a Hufflepuff myself and hated to see such animosity between both houses. My, well I could prattle on all night if you let me. What is it you wanted to ask me about my husband's book?'

'Well, I am interested in what I read in chapter eight, about physically manipulating telepathy. Did your husband have any experience with telepathic powers? What is he basing his theory on? I don't really understand what he means when he says you can physically manipulate your powers. Is it like using a wand to focus your energy?'

Tracey started to laugh softly as Hermione asked her questions in rapid succession.

'It's no wonder Professor Snape calls you a know-it-all. You can't stop asking questions, can you?'

Dilys laughed at this. 'Oh, you're the know-it-all! I overheard Severus talking to Albus about the 'know it all Gryffindor.' We wondered who it was he was speaking of. Now I have a face to put with the title.'

Before Hermione could respond, Dilys held up her hand to stop her.

'Never mind about that. Let me see if I can answer your questions.' The portrait absently twirled a strand of silver hair around her finger as she thought.

'My husband did experience some telepathy. His was a result of a potion gone awry. He was working in his lab with his apprentice, and they were both doused with the potion when the cauldron exploded. They were never able to duplicate the results of that potion, but from then on, they had a telepathic connection.'

'Were they able to control their connection?' Hermione asked eagerly. 'What was the connection like? Did they hear each other's thoughts?'

'When it first became apparent that they had this connection, my husband did complain about their inability to control it. It seemed that they had no control over when they would hear each other's thoughts. They spent a few months testing their powers. They would try different ways of communicating with each other. They would go far distances from each other and see if the connection was still strong, and they tried different ways of blocking each other from their minds.' Dilys chuckled softly. 'It was quite an ordeal for a while there, and my husband became obsessed with discovering as much as he could about his power.'

'So, they did discover a way to control it, didn't they?' Tracey asked.

'Oh yes, they did. You asked about physically manipulating the powers of telepathy? Well, that is essentially what they did. They worked out a method where when one wanted to contact the other, he would press his fingers to his right temple. When they wanted to block each other, they would press their fingers to their left temple.'

Hermione felt a stab of disappointment. That was not going to work for them. She was certain it wouldn't be anything that easy.

'Now, understand girls, I don't think it was their temples that gave them the control. I think it simply meant that with a physical action, they were able to focus enough to retain control over it. It is similar to using your wand to perform a charm. Any charm can be performed without a wand if you have enough concentration and focus.'

The room was silent as Hermione and Tracey thought over what Dilys had told them. Hermione's voice sounded overly loud when she did finally break the silence.

'So, they discussed it and agreed to use the action of pressing their temples as a way to control it?'

'Yes, they wanted something that was easy to do but unusual enough to help them focus their power.'

'Dilys, I think you answered all of our questions. Can we meet with you again sometime if we have more?'

'Certainly. It was so nice talking with you both, I usually only get to converse with Dumbledore and the other headmasters. They can be such a tiresome lot after so many years. If you need me, just drop by Dumbledore's office and give me a significant look. I will then meet you back here.'

'Wonderful! Thank you so much. I can't tell you how much this has helped us with our research.'

Hermione and Tracey waved goodbye once more before heading back to their classroom.

'Now we have a good starting point for our research. I can't wait to dive in!'

'Somehow I am not at all surprised that you are genuinely feeling excitement as you think about research. I think it will be good when the other girls get back. You will then have a whole new crop of people who will be forced to submit to your color-coded research schedules!'

AN: Sorry about the wait on this chapter. Unfortunately, I am currently trying to work full time and be in school. Please say you will forgive me and review.