

Play, Outcast, Play

by karelia

Runner-Up of Round 6 in The Multifaceted Awards, Category "Courage"! The ability to heal leads to an unusual friendship between the Gryffindor Know-it-All and two Slytherins.

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Chapter 1 of 4

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Disclaimer: I only borrow them and solemnly promise to return them unharmed.

There it was again. So she had heard right the first time. Hermione Granger stacked the books into one pile for Madam Pince to return to the relevant shelves, grabbed her bag and left the library. *It's the unicorn again... I wonder what's wrong with her this time. She sounds urgent* she thought while she made her way from the library down to the front doors of the castle. It was nearly dinner time, but she knew nobody would miss her. Once she was outside, she started to sprint to the edge of the Forbidden Forest, the call of the unicorn leading her way.

Long gone were the days when Harry and Ron played a significant part in her life, when referring to them as 'friends' was justified. They still sat together in classes and at mealtimes, but other than that Hermione went her own way. Most of her sixth year had been spent studying, either school subjects or areas she was interested in, such as the ancient ways of healing or general esoteric subjects. And then there was her music. It became important again for the first time since she came to Hogwarts. Since she found herself alone more and more often, after she refused to give in to Ron's demands to become his girlfriend, a task she simply was not ready for, let alone with Ron. Since more and more of the Muggle-borns disappeared from Hogwarts, either because they were too scared to remain in the wizarding world because Voldemort was becoming stronger by the day, or because they were victims of Death Eater activities. And when she heard Fawkes sing his soothing, healing, euphoric tones to Harry after he had another run-in with Death Eaters, she knew she had to find a way to capture the feel of the phoenix song with worldly instruments. It was a quest that was never far from her mind. She sighed inwardly with relief. Only another week and she would go home for the Summer Holidays where she could spend most of her time indulging in music.

Hermione had just reached the first blooming shrubs that formed the boundary of the Forbidden Forest when she saw the unicorn. She quickly but carefully walked over and slowly put her hand out to the unicorn. "Greetings, Lady, how may I be of service to your kind?" Hermione asked.

"She-Human with coloured hands, a centaur needs your help. She's given birth and both she and the babe are very weak," the unicorn greeted her.

"'Tis late in the season for a centaur birth," Hermione agreed. "Lead the way, please. I don't know if I can help, but I will try my best."

The unicorn gestured for her to climb on her back to reach the centaur mother and baby as quickly as possible. They met a few centaurs on the way, but were left alone by them. The community of dwellers of the Forbidden Forest never bothered Hermione since she had healed one of their kind earlier in the year. She never questioned the fact

that she was able to walk through the forest and take from it what she needed, just like she never questioned the gift of healing when the Sylphs bestowed it on her. As practically, logically minded and inquisitive as she was generally, she had learned early on in life that sometimes there are occasions that did not warrant questioning. Her gift of healing was one such occasion, long after the first, the discovery of her magic.

The unlikely pair reached the centaur mother and baby, and Hermione took one look at the mother to know she was in dire need of replacing the energy it had cost her to birth the child. She carefully knelt down next to the mother and let her hands hover barely above the mother's body. The unicorn sighed with relief when she saw bright turquoise streaming from Hermione's hands into the entire body of the centaur. When the new mother's energy was restored, Hermione shifted her concentration to the newborn. Again, she held her hands just above the baby's body, and vibrant turquoise emanated from her hands until sometime later the colour turned paler and paler until it was a barely visible white. The little one stood up on shaky feet and stumbled over to her mother to have a first go at suckling the milk of life while the centaur mother deeply breathed in her baby's scent. Messenger and healer took in the scene contentedly, human carefully leaning against creature, knowing that possibly two lives had been saved tonight. The other centaurs would take over from here, bringing dark green sorrel leaves to the mother to ensure strength and a ready supply of good milk for the newborn.

The unicorn eventually reminded her it was time to return to the castle. "She-Human, 'tis time to get back. Your work for tonight is not over yet. I will carry you to the edge and see that you return safely."

"I guess you're right, it's nearly dark." Hermione sighed. "What do you mean, my work is not over yet for tonight?"

"Another is in need," the unicorn replied and took off with speed the moment Hermione settled on her back. She did not speak again until they reached the clearing where Hermione climbed down to walk the short way to the castle. "Be well, my friend. And thank you." The unicorn nuzzled her gently. Hermione hugged her briefly and left hurriedly to make it inside before curfew.

She stayed in her dormitory only long enough to pick up pyjamas and a book, and left to enjoy a relaxing bath. The book, *Vibrational Medicine for the Gifted Healer*, let Hermione forget about her surroundings, delving into the fascinating world of healing, and she did not notice how much the water had cooled down until she heard the call again. Only it was not the unicorn this time. She could not make out what or who it was that called her, but she recognized the cry for help and quickly got out of the bath and into her night clothes. On her way out, she threw the book on her bed and grabbed her cloak to throw over her pyjamas and exited the common room shortly after. Suddenly, a feeling of foreboding overcame her, but she shrugged it off impatiently.

The moment she approached the first set of stairs to climb down she knew with complete certainty that the call would lead her to the Dungeons. *Please let the stairs not move now.* The stairs obliged and she reached her destination quickly. Just in front of the classroom door, in a heap on the floor, lay Draco Malfoy. She bent down carefully and turned his face, ignoring the possibility that it might be a trap for her. Seeing his face made her shudder in horror. "Oh Goddess. What have they done?" she whispered. The bloody pulp that gaped out from underneath blond, blood-streaked hair showed absolutely no trace of the once cold, arrogant, but beautiful, perfect face.

She slowly let her hands glide above the entire length of his body to scan for other injuries and applied a few healing spells to mend broken ribs and a broken jaw. Then she decided that his face needed the most urgent attention. One Mobilicorpus and one spell transfiguring a school desk into a bed later, she entered the Potions laboratory and mixed some calendula tincture with cool water to start cleaning his face. Hermione could not tell whether or not he was conscious as his eyes were swollen shut, and the healing spell on his jaw was still doing its work. She figured getting him into a more stable condition before taking him to the hospital wing was the easier solution.

Hermione was on her third bowl of calendula solution, still carefully cleaning masses of crusted blood off his face when Malfoy stirred. She saw his efforts to open his eyes and told him gently, "You're safe, Draco. You'll be okay. I'm just cleaning you up a bit, and then I'll take you to Madam Pomfrey. She'll heal you in no time."

His immediate, almost violent reaction to her words suggested she had said something wrong. He swung his arms about blindly, until his hands found hers to grab. He spoke with great effort. "Not Hospital... Get Snape."

Hermione sighed inwardly. *Great. Why couldn't it have been another unicorn calling me... Here I am, in the middle of the night, and now I'm supposed to get Professor Snape. He'll skin me alive...* She pulled herself together to calm Draco. "It's okay, Draco. I won't take you there if you don't want to. But I don't know how to get to Professor Snape's quarters."

It took Malfoy almost ten minutes to convey the simple instructions how to reach the quarters of his Head of House. He gulped for air after every word uttered, and the pain of his barely healed jaw was troubling him to the point that Hermione considered giving him one of the pain relieving potions. She did not know what kind of curses or hexes he had been subjected to that might interfere with or negate any pain relieving potions, so instead, she gently held her hands above his jaw, as close as possible without actually touching his battered face, and let the energy flow freely. Soon his breathing eased and his eyelids fluttered lightly.

She had no trouble finding the entrance to Professor Snape's quarters and asked the wizard in the portrait to call him. He opened the door quickly, scowling at her but not speaking. "I'm sorry to interrupt you, Professor. Draco Malfoy asked me to get you, he's injured," Hermione told him. Without comment, he gestured for her to lead the way and followed her to the Potions classroom. If he was shocked to see Draco's state, he did not show it. He sat down on the edge of the makeshift bed and spoke softly. "Draco, can you hear me? What happened?" Draco did not even stir. After his exhausting attempt to tell Hermione directions to Snape's quarters and her healing session on his jaw, he succumbed again to blackness, this time less laboured, the pain having subsided somewhat thanks to her ministrations.

Snape turned to Hermione. "What have you done so far?" he asked, his voice holding not even a trace of maliciousness. She told him about mending Malfoy's ribs and jaws and cleaning his face with calendula solution, but did not mention the healing she had done with her hands. "And what would be your next step?" he asked, almost casually, while checking Malfoy's body with the help of his wand. From the way he conducted the body scan, it was obvious to Hermione that he was no newcomer to the field of Healing or mediwizardry. The man's confident movements went far beyond those of a mere Potions master.

"Ideally, I would like to make a *Haldi* paste with some ewe's milk add some neem leaves and lavender, then leave them to dry on his face to aid the regrowth of the tissue," Hermione answered thoughtfully, and then added, "And I think he should take sodium ascorbate internally, to help his body fight off any infection that might occur."

"Go ahead, Miss Granger. You know where the ingredients are," Snape ordered her.

She went back to the lab to mix the paste. When she returned to Draco's side, he was stirring again and his distress was almost palpable to Hermione. Oblivious to the presence of her stern Potions professor, she let her hands do the healing again to ease Draco's pain. She did not notice Snape getting up and moving away from the makeshift bed, never taking his eyes off her, nor did she notice the array of all colours of the rainbow spectrum emanating from her entire body. She was concentrating entirely on the healing energy that streamed into Draco Malfoy's battered body, banishing the distress and pain the young man was in. When the colour coming from her hands finally faded, she turned to the supplies she had placed next to him and started to carefully cover his face with the healing potion.

Her work completed for now, she looked up, directly at Professor Snape who was still gazing at her intently. She stood up slowly. "Uhh. I can't do anything more for him now. I really think he should see Madam Pomfrey, she'll be able to heal him completely," Hermione said, still looking at him, mesmerized by his gaze.

He suddenly came out of his reverie, and started to speak in a low voice. "Miss Granger, Mr Malfoy was left for dead tonight, presumably after he refused to take the Dark Mark. If we take him to the Hospital Wing, Lucius, or anyone else for that matter, will find him. I will find a place to hide him, and he will have no choice but to remain hidden until this war is over."

Hermione nodded dumbly. Her mind was whirling. Draco refused the Dark Mark. Snape was being civil to her. The world as she knew it was rapidly spinning out of control. Before she could get her senses together to say something, Snape continued. "Your knowledge of healing is not inadequate. You will succeed in healing Draco. I will contact you when I have found a safe place for him within the castle... And I don't have to tell you that if word gets out that he is alive it will likely be the end of his life." It was obvious that Draco's condition, and probably more so what led to it, was weighing heavily on him.

"The secret is safe with me." With one last glance at Draco, she exited the Potions classroom and walked back to Gryffindor Tower.

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Hermione was grateful that Snape ignored her entirely throughout the Advanced Double Potions class. She was feeling very tired and was not paying the usual attention in class, but rather concentrating on making it to the end of the school day so she could indulge in some well deserved rest. When the bell finally rang at the end of the class, she slowly put together her potions supplies and packed her bag.

"Miss Granger, a word please." She had not noticed Professor Snape coming silently up to her desk. The classroom emptied quickly as usual, and as soon as the last student had left, the Head of Slytherin started to speak. "Go to the portrait of *Zadok the Priest* near my quarters. The password is *libertas revertit*. Let me know if you need anything." She took in the information rapidly and nodded. "And do use a Disillusionment Charm," he added dryly.

Hermione was not sure what kind of room she had expected, but certainly not the light airy space that was before her as she stepped through Zadok's portrait. Soft, linden green walls complemented the apricot coloured, velvety soft cushions and matching curtains in perfect harmony, both colours in stark contrast with the deep, dark brown, wooden, gracefully aged furniture. A violin hung on one wall near the entrance and opposite, above the single bed in which Draco Malfoy was peacefully resting, was a mural showing a scene of pure serenity. An elderly man with dark, untidy hair, wearing a Charlie Chaplin style suit was playing a grand-piano in the midst of a forest clearing surrounded by oak trees heavy with leaves that were the typical full, almost dark green of late summer, underneath a sunny, deep blue sky.

Draco's somewhat croaky voice interrupted her intensive admiration of the interior. "Granger."

She turned to face him and walked towards the bed, noticing that the swelling of his eyes had receded sufficiently for his sight to return. The rest of his face also resembled more the Malfoy she knew rather than the bloody pulp she was met with the previous night, she observed with relief. "Draco. You sure look better than last night. How are you feeling?"

"Hurting," he croaked, which came as no surprise to Hermione after the battering he received less than 24 hours ago. She concentrated for a moment, rubbed her hands gently together and then held them slightly above his head. As the colour started to flow from her hands - this time it was a vibrant green - her hands started to move almost imperceptibly along his body.

"How'd you do that, Granger?" Draco asked in awe when she had completed the healing session. He looked as if he could easily get up and go about and managed to lift himself into a sitting position without flinching. He gazed at her with what might have been considered an expectant expression, had his face been fully restored to its former perfection.

Hermione looked away and shrugged her shoulders. She was uncomfortable with his obvious admiration and not sure exactly how to answer his question. The healing she had done before had always been on animals or magical creatures who were much more in tune with the less visible offerings of the universe and never saw the need to ask her the most mundane questions. "I was gifted with the ability to heal," she said, hoping that her answer would be sufficient for him. Her eyes fell on the violin on the wall opposite and she looked at it longingly.

"You play the violin? Feel free to use it. It gets kind of lonely and quiet in here." Draco had noticed the way she looked at the instrument. His words encouraging her, she stood up and walked over to give it a closer inspection.

"I'm a piano person, but I guess a violin will do..." Unable to hide her delight at the prospect of playing, she took the violin off the wall. Her absolute pitch enabled her to tune the instrument without the aid of a tuning fork and she was soon lost in the land of music, where different sounds, created by the hairs of a horse's tail strung over a bow stroking over strings clamped between small parts of metal over a wooden polished body, combined with each other to create emotions and feelings of content, happiness, sadness, longing, all rolled into one.

When Severus Snape entered through Zadok's portrait, the primal magic, created by the sounds Hermione tempted out of the violin, the reverence Draco was listening with, and the complete peace that was the by-product of creating harmony in sound, stopped him in his tracks. He stood there, taking in the scene, drinking in the music with every pore, like a shipwrecked man would gulp down fresh water after being rescued. Neither musician nor patient noticed his presence, one too intent on creating the music that would soothe and eventually heal his whole being, the other too busy with absorbing what was offered to his soul.

This first afternoon in the secret room set the stage for the remaining week of the term. Hermione came after the day's classes were over, gave Draco some healing, then took the violin and played. Soon, Draco was well enough to spend an hour talking with her before she joined the rest of the school for dinner. His decision to refuse the Dark Mark, more due to the spur of the moment than thoroughly thought out, had crashed the fundament of his beliefs, and he often found Granger's typical Gryffindor bluntness, saying things as she saw them, more useful than Snape's subtle insinuations for regaining some sense of meaning to his life.

Hermione finished her packing quickly and hurried to the dungeons to say good-bye to Draco for the summer before boarding the Hogwarts Express that would take her to London's Kings Cross Station. As much as she was looking forward to seeing her parents again, to spending entire days playing the piano and other instruments with the aim to recreate the song of the phoenix, she knew she was going to miss her daily encounters with Draco. Their parting was bittersweet. An awkward hug, a rough pat on the shoulder with the words, "Just think of it, while you'll be having a great time doing whatever you want I'll be stuck here, and the only person to talk to will be Snape," that teased chuckles out of both, and she left to catch the train.

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The ambulance with flashing blue lights arrived at the same time as the police at the Victorian house in the outer suburb of London, characterized by its professional, well-to-do inhabitants who spent their weekends manicuring their front lawns and growing hybrid roses. An elderly lady approached the emergency team as they hurried out of their car.

"I'm the neighbour who called you. I heard some god-awful screams and went to check where it came from. Then I saw this tall blond guy running out their front door, never seen him before, and he seemed to disappear into nowhere. And then another two ran out, too. It's horrible in there." She shuddered in horror at her most recent memory. "I can't imagine how anyone would be so evil... They were such nice people... So excited about their daughter's return from boarding school for the summer holidays..." Her babbling became less and less coherent as the shock set in, and she was led to the police car to calm down so she could sign her statement as a witness while the ambulance crew rushed inside the house to see if anyone could be rescued.

"Oy, this one is still breathing. Barely, but she's alive. Dunno what they done to her," one of the crew called to his colleagues. "This job is getting too depressing, I need to find a new career... What's she done wrong to be in a state like this... What'd her parents do to die in such a horrible way..." he muttered to himself.

Unsolved Murder in London Suburb

From the Case Files of Uxbridge Police Station, Crime Unit: An entire family, resident at Melbourne Avenue, was subject to a brutal assault yesterday evening which left two dead and one in critical condition at Uxbridge Hospital's Intensive Care Unit. One witness saw three men, one of them tall with long blond hair, the other two non-descriptive, exiting the resident's home and disappearing shortly after hearing what she described as "blood-curdling screams." If you were in the area and saw anyone or anything unusual, please contact Uxbridge Police at 0208-479 4673. The motives of the murders and assaults are not known. Burglary was ruled out as several hundred Pounds were left untouched on the living room fireplace mantle and nothing appeared missing from the home.

The old lady sobbed as she was reading the short article in the evening edition of the local newspaper. Then she pulled herself together and got ready to see if she could do something for the girl from next door who was lying unresponsive in her hospital bed.

Four weeks later

Fragments of memory were hovering along the edge of Hermione's consciousness. *Screams... Shouts of obscenities... 'Fucking Mudblood'... Pain...* Then a gentle voice, pushing her towards awareness of the physical, never relenting, not accepting any of the excuses she had ready for not waking up, became too insistent to fight anymore.

She opened her eyes to an environment of white, sterile sadness that was typical of Muggle hospitals.

How she had managed to hold on to her life that was hanging from a frail silken thread for weeks was anybody's guess. The highly qualified hospital staff had given up on finding a scientifically valid explanation and jokingly insisted it was divine interference. It came as no surprise to any of them that a week later, she insisted she was well enough to leave. They tried forcing her to stay, but for once Muggle laws came to her rescue. She was orphaned, yes, but her parents had died mere weeks before she turned eighteen, and rather than going through the red tape that was involved in finding a temporary guardian, the relevant government department simply declared her adult 'due to exceptional circumstances.'

She entered her home, suddenly remembering her train journey to Kings Cross, the short walk to the underground station, the uneventful tube ride, then the short walk home from the local station. There, the memory stopped. She heard faint screams of panic somewhere and shuddered. The police had told her all they knew and had shown her the newspaper article that had appeared the next day, but those actions did nothing to trigger her memory. Deciding that now was not a good time to deal with the recent events, and desperate to leave the traces of horror, panic and death that were lingering in the house like the stale air of a pub, she packed her belongings, shrunk her harpsichord, pocketed it and called a cab to take her to the train station, where she took the first train out. She spent the last few days of the summer holiday she had so been looking forward to in the quaint seaside village of St Ives in Cornwall in solitude.

By the time Hermione returned to London, ready to board the train back to Hogwarts, all her physical wounds from the assault had healed almost completely. The mental healing she knew would not happen until she remembered what exactly had happened to her, but there was no point trying to force the memory. It would return in its own time. As the train moved ever closer to the castle that had been more of a home than her parents' home for the past six years, her thoughts turned to Draco, wondering how he was faring, being locked up in the beautiful room behind Zadok the Priest's portrait.

Hermione finally managed to sneak to the dungeons after the Welcoming Feast, much more subdued due to Voldemort wreaking havoc throughout the entire wizarding world. She felt the urge to check that he was still there, that his health had been restored, that he was alive and well. They had only been spending a few hours together during the last week of term, but he saw her as the one who saved his life, and his demeanour towards her had changed drastically.

Relief flooded through her when Zadok opened the entrance as soon as she uttered the password, "*Libertas reverto*". She grinned when she saw Draco smirk at her.

"Granger! Finally! I never thought I'd be so happy to see you of all people," he drawled, in typical Draco manner.

"Nice to see you too," she replied, still grinning, and took a step closer to check his face. Not a single scar was showing, and she was happy to see his face restored to its full former beauty, less the coldness he used to display so evidently.

"So, do tell, how was your summer?" he enquired, starved for company other than his Head of House or the books he was given by the same, chosen to help widen his horizons. Hermione could not help noticing the Muggle literature littering the small table between the bed and the opposite wall.

She shrugged. "Was okay... Spent a few days in Cornwall by the seaside..." she replied evasively and picked up the copy of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* he appeared to be in the middle of reading. "Learning about the French Revolution? A Muggle book? That is so not you, Draco!" she said teasingly.

"Knowledge, Miss Granger, is power. Any kind of knowledge might come in useful one day," he lectured her in a voice resembling that of their Potions professor, although Draco's young voice lacked the smooth silkiness that Snape utilized to mesmerize every student. "So did you play lots of music? Read lots of books?" he asked.

"No." She did not want to talk about the summer holiday, did not want the death of her parents enter this sanctuary.

"Come on, Granger. Your holidays can't have been that bad!" He looked at her questioningly, wondering what she was trying to hide.

She looked at him briefly, lost now how she could divert his attention from the holidays and saw, in front of her mind's eye, a bigger, taller, older version of Draco, face arrogant, a calculating look, ripping her jeans down with one hand while the other held her hands above her head. She started shivering. "Oh Goddess. No.... No..."

"What on earth?" Draco did not know what to say or do.

"I'm sorry, Draco... I... I better go." With that, she turned around and fled through the portrait.

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Chapter 2 of 4

The friendship is growing tentatively, and the Potions master appears to be in the right place at the right time saying the right words.

Disclaimer: I wish I did own them, but alas, I only borrow them to play with.

She was running, running away from the portrait, running up the stairs leaving the dungeons, running through the front doors of the castle, and finally running towards the Forbidden Forest, oblivious to anyone looking at her strangely, deaf to rude comments students made in passing. *Get out of here, get out of here, get out of herewere* her only thoughts, until she finally stopped just inside the forest. At the first clearing she finally allowed herself to fall down onto the late summer earth, sobbing her heart out, all the while the memory playing and replaying in her mind.

'Mudblood, you've been alive far too long already. But before I kill you I'll have some fun, at least your life won't have been for nothing.' Evil laughter. 'I'll make sure it'll be a long, slow death for you. Just like you deserve...' A cold feral grin while he held her hands up above her head, his knees resting on her legs making it impossible for her to move. Ripping her jeans down, then her knickers, laughing like a maniac. Tremendous pain, the feel of blood pooling beneath her. Then, finally, complete darkness.

"No. No. Why?" She sobbed, unaware and not caring that nobody could hear her. When one of the unicorns found her, her sobs had become irregular, and she was drifting between sleep and wakefulness. The unicorn laid down and nudged her gently, and she moved her head to rest against his stomach. His soft crooning soothed her, and eventually sleep took over, long after darkness called the end of the day.

She returned to her dormitory early in the morning after a long, hot, revitalizing bath. Her roommates looked at her curiously when she entered, but said nothing. She made it through classes, trying not to think that she could not possibly face Draco. Every teacher was emphasizing the importance of students' last year at Hogwarts, to pass the

NEWTs at the end of the year, which would be their ticket to the outside world. "Pass your NEWTs with good grades," McGonagall said, glancing expectantly at Hermione, "and the choice of career will be yours, no matter which field you choose. Poor grades will not give you that choice."

When classes were finally over for the day, Hermione went straight to her dormitory and pulled the curtains around her bed. She was not ready to face Draco, scared that more memories might resurface, scared that she might see Lucius in him, and irrationally scared that he might turn into Lucius. When she was done with her homework, she used the remaining free time to study for various subjects until it was time to go to the Great Hall for dinner. Not feeling hungry, she only played with the food on her plate and managed to tune out her classmates' heated conversation about the Chudley Canons' latest spectacular win.

Looking up at the head table, she noticed Professor Snape looking at her intently and felt herself blush *He's probably wondering why I've let Draco down... I can't face this...* She suddenly felt as if the oxygen was being drained out of the air and got up abruptly to leave the hall and go out for a walk before turning in for the night. Spending time in the common room did not appeal to her these days - hardly anyone talked to her, and she was not in the mood for socializing in any case.

'Mudblood'... Large, manicured hands ripping her jeans down... Pain... Unbearable pain... Darkness.

"Bloody hell, Granger! Go get yourself laid!" Lavender Brown was clearly annoyed, having been woken up by Hermione's screaming and whimpering. Hermione muttered an apology and placed a Silencing Charm around her bed. Sleep was evading her now, and after some time tossing and turning, she decided that a bath might help soothe her. Undressing herself while running the hot water, she felt scars on her chest that had not been there before. She looked in the mirror. What she saw made her want to scream. "That.... that bastard," she whispered, hardly believing her eyes. Black welts had formed, barely above her breasts, just high enough that any low cut top would show them perfectly, spelling out the word *MUDBLOOD*. "What next?" she whispered to herself. *Aren't I outcast enough already? Maybe they'll just put me away. Not fit for human society, wizard or Muggle...* Her thoughts came unbidden and were laced with a sudden bitterness.

Her next few days were spent in an uncomfortable routine of classes, homework, studies and evening walks - nature and the wild inhabitants of the forest being the only constant in a life that had been rapidly losing appeal lately. The unicorns still came to join her on her solitary walks, their presence soothing to her entire being, and even the centaurs grudgingly acknowledged her well-earned right to walk the earth of what they considered magical creature territory and ensured that none of the darker creatures would jeopardize that right.

Her nights were riddled with nightmares of memories that were still festering on the edge of consciousness, too far away to grab and digest, too close to ignore. Occasionally, in the Great Hall and during Potions classes, she noticed Professor Snape's gaze on her, but she refused to meet his eyes. She missed the talks she had had with Draco before the holiday. She missed playing the violin, missed playing her harpsichord that was still shrunk in her pocket. But she could not bring herself to face him for fear of more memories returning.

On the last day of the following week's classes, Professor Snape called her back at the end of Double Potions just as she was getting ready to leave. She knew he would confront her, it was inevitable, but she had been pushing the thought out of her mind for over a week. Hermione did not dare look at him, stood there fidgeting with her schoolbag, not noticing a piece of paper falling out onto the floor.

"Miss Granger, what is the matter with you? You are not usually known to neglect your duties. What happened to your task of ensuring that Mr Malfoy heals completely? You have not been to see him since the day you arrived back here," he sneered at her in a low voice the moment the other students had left.

She did not know what to say or where to look as she felt his gaze on her. The silence was growing increasingly uncomfortable. Eventually, when she could no longer bear it, she stammered, "I... I'm sorry, Sir."

"I'm sure you are, Miss Granger," he said, his voice lacking its usual mocking quality. "However, your being sorry does not resolve the matter." He exhaled audibly. "What happened to you between the end of last term and the beginning of this term?" He stood close, but refrained from towering over her, nevertheless invoking in her a feeling of intimidation. She stumbled backwards to increase the distance.

"I... Nothing happened... Sir," Hermione stuttered. She finally looked at him as he bent down to pick something up from the floor. He unfolded the piece of paper and disassembled the wards placed on it. A hot jolt shot through her, her eyes wide with horror as she recognised the newspaper article the police had kept for her. She hoped against hope that Snape would not make the connection between herself and the assault.

He scanned through the article and exhaled hard before turning to face her. "I'm so sorry, Miss Granger." He looked at a loss how to proceed, what else to say. She stared at the floor.

"May I have the article back, please, Sir?" she asked, fighting the panic that was gripping her like an iron hand. Her mind was whirling with incoherent thoughts *He knows... He can see it written on my face... Now he'll call me a Mudblood and tell me to return to the Muggle world...*

"And this was a Muggle assault?" he asked, disbelief evident in his voice, as he handed her the paper.

"It looked like it. Nobody from the Ministry of Magic turned up as far as I know," she managed to say, her voice not quite her own.

He nodded grimly, seemingly gaining more insight from the short article than she had from personally going through the entire ordeal. "So there was magic involved?" he asked, looking at her intently.

All she could do was nod, not trusting her voice at all. She did not want to be here, she did not want to discuss her parents' murder.

"And you recognized Lucius Malfoy." It was not a question.

As the words of his statement, delivered matter-of-factly, sank in, she started to shiver uncontrollably, trying hard at the same time to hide her reaction. He was by her side in an instant, grabbing her by the shoulders. "You're safe now. He won't come after you here." His assuring words, uttered in a most urgent manner, calmed her almost immediately, and she swallowed the last traces of panic down hard.

"Hermione..." She looked up at him, startled by his use of her first name, and he cleared his throat before continuing. "Miss Granger... Whatever Lucius has done to you is not Draco's fault." He seemed to notice only now that his hands were still grabbing her shoulders and took them off as if suddenly burned. "Draco suffered at the hands of his father, too. I cannot say more or less than you, but suffer he did." He took a deep breath.

"I believe he needs your company as much as you need his. You not only healed him physically but gave him the appearance of normality that he craved for so long, knowingly or not is entirely secondary. He can help you regain that sense of normality. He is not his father, Hermione. I would have thought you of all people would be the first one to look beyond one's exterior."

He was right, she thought wonderingly. She did not remember even one occasion in her life where she would judge someone by their looks, and yet she did with Draco after the first fragments of her memories were triggered when she saw him again. Her disgust with Lucius Malfoy took on a new dimension as she realized that she herself allowed her most recent feeling of misery and discomfort because of what Lucius had done to her. *He won't drag me down any further...* she thought as her shoulders straightened, and her face took on an expression of steely determination.

She ignored the intent gaze the Potions master was giving her but could not help smiling when he smirked. "This is more the Miss Granger I know. Now go. Mr Malfoy is waiting." Speaking these words, he pointed at the door, and with a heartfelt "Thank you," she left the classroom to see Draco Malfoy.

* * *

"What's up, Granger? Got bored with nobody for company?" Hermione was greeted by a remorseful looking Draco slouched in a chair.

She walked to his side and said, sincerity evident in her voice, "I'm sorry, Draco. I didn't mean to run off and abandon you. It... It wasn't you, honestly."

He looked at her with an unreadable expression then stood up slowly, took her into his arms and held her closely. "It's okay," he said softly. "I don't know your demons, and I'm not sure I want to know them, but I'm assuming that Lucius has something to do with you running out on me in a panic."

A sob escaped her as she nodded, her face buried in his chest. "Shshshsh, you're safe here. I'm not him, you know. No matter how much I look like him."

Hermione pulled herself together, and after a few deep breaths, said, "Yes, I know you're not him. That's what Professor Snape said, too, and you're both right... I'll be okay - eventually."

"I want to show you something," Draco said, slowly letting her out of the embrace. Hermione looked at him expectantly as he moved towards the back of the room and returned with a guitar and a book. "I've taken to studying extracurricular stuff, to humour you, so to speak." He smirked at her.

She looked at the book, *Charm Your Way Into Music*, and her eyes widened. Draco grinned as he took the guitar and played a few chords. "Oh... don't stop! I know that song!" She took the violin off the wall and joined him playing 'I Dreamed A Dream' from *Les Misérables*. "... I dreamed a dream in time gone by when hope was high and life worth living. I dreamed that love would never die. I dreamed that God would be forgiving. When I was young and unafraid, and Dreams were made and used and wasted. There was no ransom to be paid, no song unsung no wine untasted..." Hermione sang softly to the musical harmony created by guitar and violin, then Draco joined in, just as softly. "But the tigers come at night. With their voices soft as thunder. As they tear your hope apart. As they turn your dream to shame..."

"So true..." Both sighed at the same time and then started to laugh. The musical spell was broken for now, but so was the charged up, tense atmosphere around them. The air was cleared, and both were comfortable with each other, starting again where they had left off before the holidays.

"Have you seen Pansy lately?" Draco asked. Hermione looked at him curiously.

"Only during Potions classes," she replied. "Coming to think of it... she seems to be kind of subdued compared to the other Slytherins... You like Pansy then?" She had not been paying much attention to the Slytherins' ever-present denigrating bickering, but was unable to recall any comment Pansy might have made.

"I like her, I miss her, I'm in love with her... And I owe her. She spent the last couple of years convincing me to break away from my father's beliefs," Draco replied quietly and sighed. "I wish there was a way I could let her know that I'm okay, that I'll be with her once that evil snake is gone... If she'll still have me..."

Over the next days, Hermione thought a lot of what Draco had told her about Pansy. She wished she could help find a way to let Pansy know in a subtle way that there was hope, that Draco was, indeed, alive. Draco figured that besides Hermione and Snape, only Dobby knew of his hiding, being the one to bring food and take care of mundane everyday chores. Dumbledore had never made a statement as to Draco's whereabouts. It was as if the entire school was instructed to forget he ever existed.

Although Draco had not brought up the subject of Pansy again, she knew it was weighing on him despite the cheerful front he put up whenever they were together. Hermione had finally brought the harpsichord and restored it to its full size, and the two spent many hours playing and singing, all vastly improved with Draco's increasing ability to handle musical charms. It was as if they had an entire orchestra at their beg and call rather than the three instruments and two voices available to them.

Finally, a few weeks later, when Hermione informed Draco that she would not be visiting him until after dinner the following day as it was a Hogsmeade weekend, Draco came up with an idea. "Hermione, you couldn't pick up some stuff for me from Honeydukes? Well, not just for me..." He looked at her expectantly.

"Sure, whatever you want," she replied, although the thought of the overly sweet candy made her stomach churn. She had not been able to eat much lately as it was, and anything sweet caused her to feel nauseous almost instantly.

"Pansy absolutely adores Drooble's Best Blowing Gum, and I'm the only one who knows, because she's embarrassed to tell anyone," he said, grinning at her.

Hermione nodded in agreement. "That'll work. I'll pick some up from Honeydukes and then find a way to give it to her." Her mind was working overtime. She would find something to say to Pansy that would give her hope that Draco was alive.

* * *

Security was tight when the students left for Hogsmeade. Most teachers were accompanying them to ensure nobody would be trailing off or worse, snatched away by Death Eaters. At the entrance to the village stood a group of Aurors, greeting some of the teachers and exchanging words with Professor McGonagall.

"Students, you must be back here by four o'clock so we can all return to the school together. There are Aurors stationed throughout the village, and if you see anything unusual, be it a person or an unusual activity - anything at all - please report to the Auror nearest to you. I will see you all later." McGonagall waved them off and remained behind to talk to one of the Aurors. The students quickly dispersed, some heading straight towards The Three Broomsticks, Madame Puddifoot's or The Hogshead, others towards the High Street to lighten the monetary load in their pockets in exchange for other forms of entertainment that would take their mind off school and war, if only temporarily. Hermione joined Harry and Ron who made a straight line to Honeydukes, purchased the sweets for Draco and Pansy and then left alone to choose some books at the Hogsmeade branch of Flourish and Blotts.

Whilst her recently passed eighteenth birthday was a far lesser event in the magical world than a seventeenth birthday - after all, seventeen was the magical coming of age - she decided it was reason enough to treat herself to a few books, even though, or perhaps because, nobody except herself wished her a happy birthday on the day.

Some time later, lost to the world in the paradise of written beauty, she had narrowed her choices down sufficiently to make her final picks, when suddenly, from behind, a hand fell heavily on her shoulder.

"Mudblood. I knew you would turn up here. Now I can finish you off, finally." She would recognize this voice from hell anywhere. Lucius Malfoy had returned for her. "I hope you appreciate the tattoo, you've had enough time to admire it," he added, his dark chuckle ringing in her ears like evil personified.

Hermione was shaking uncontrollably, her mind at a complete stand-still. Hand still firmly grabbing her shoulder, he nudged her roughly towards the exit, and she noticed two staff members lying motionless on the floor, whether dead or simply immobilized, she could not tell. As she was being pushed out of the shop's front door, she saw Professor Snape hurrying towards them. *He's here.... Everything will be fine...*

"Let her go, Lucius. There are Aurors everywhere. You won't escape," Snape hissed at her captor.

Lucius laughed the maniacal laughter of a madman. "The Aurors? Ah, Severus, but we've taken care of them. You don't seriously think our Lord would let such mundane creatures as *Aurors* stop his work? Look around you, can you see any of them?" For once, Lucius Malfoy was speaking the truth. There were no Aurors to be seen.

The moment she saw Professor Snape approaching, her mind rid itself of its shock-induced paralysis and started working feverishly *I need to get away from him... Two steps will do it...* Then, a voice from far away, but not entirely alien to Hermione, demanded, *Heal him.*

Right, I'm losing my marbles... Never mind. Can't get my wand right now, so I might as well try She sighed imperceptibly. Her overworking mind correctly calculated that if she turned into her captor before turning away from him, rather than turning to the other side as would be the natural inkling in trying to get away, he would be startled.

"*Heal him,*" the voice was becoming louder and more insistent. The one second delay in Malfoy's reaction gave her enough time to concentrate and put her hands out, palms facing him.

"*HEAL HIM.*" This time, it was an urgent scream, and the colour started shooting out as if in response to the demand issued by other-worldly beings, unseen by most of

earth's inhabitants and heard by only a few.

The surprised expression on Malfoy's face almost made her smirk. The colour coming through her hands, she noticed, was a very bright gold. As the stream flowed stronger and wider, his face turned from surprise to horror. Hermione did not notice Snape retreating several steps, nor did she notice the rapidly growing crowd of people gathering around at a respectable distance.

She realized the reason for Malfoy's horror, suddenly able to witness what the golden colour forced him to see, like a faulty film projector that could not be turned off. Every atrocity he committed, from childhood, through his teenage years, young adulthood, to his most recent assaults, played in front of his mind. Stoning his neighbour's dog. Tying his younger cousin upside down to a tree, laughing heartily at her panicked screams. Mocking and bullying a young Severus Snape hesitant to accept the Dark Mark. Raping a young Muggle girl, barely old enough to be a teenager. Killing a man in the middle of a busy road. Torturing a distant cousin who was in love with a Muggle girl. And on and on it went, until it was his turn to relive the torture he imposed on his own son, followed by the murder of Hermione's parents and her own ordeal. She had no doubt that had he simply witnessed his misdeeds from his own point of view, he would never have lost the smug satisfaction he felt whenever he could induce pain and often death. Instead, he was made to experience the emotions and physical pain his victims had felt at his hands.

Lucius Malfoy was screaming in pain that became more unbearable with every moment. He felt as if his heart was slowly being ripped out of his body, each one of his former victims taking a chunk as one perception of pain disappeared only to be replaced with another. After feeling the horrors and pain the first few of what he had always considered toys had felt, he was no longer able to hold his body up straight and simply let himself fall, crouching on the ground, until even that became too much for him, and he rolled into a fetal position, barely able to breathe. And still, there were more victims coming, who kept haunting him, forcing him to live their emotions at the time of his assault. When, finally, he felt his own death approach, he embraced it like a long lost friend, and his last thoughts were of his son, believed dead. "Forgive me, Draco." With this whisper, he drew a last shuddered breath.

The gold emitting from Hermione's hands gradually started to fade. "He will forgive you, Lucius. As do I," she whispered softly and looked around, barely noticing the crowd of people as her eyes fell on Professor Snape who stood a few feet away from her.

Getting up on shaky legs, she saw Macnair coming up silently behind her Potions professor, wand pointing at him. "Watch out, Professor," she screamed and then threw the last of the energy still emitting from her hands towards Macnair to deflect the curse or hex he had no doubt ready for Snape as he yelled, "Traitor."

She never knew whether or not her last deed did as intended, as complete and utter exhaustion overtook her so suddenly she was unable to summon the energy to fight it and quietly succumbed to darkness.

3

Chapter 3 of 4

Hermione discovers another after effect of Lucius' assault, does some more healing, and we learn something about the Potions master.

Disclaimer: I don't own any of the characters, I only play with them.

* * *

Hermione was dreaming. Someone in need was calling to her when voices from somewhere above tugged at the edge of her not quite yet regained consciousness. "We have to inform the headmaster..."

"Yes, I agree.... Oh Poppy, I simply cannot imagine that she of all people would be so silly and not take precautions..."

"Minerva, it only takes one time, and just because she is always so perfect at school doesn't mean she is perfect in every way!"

"No... But she simply doesn't strike me as the type to... I can't imagine..."

A snort in reply. Darkness again.

There was the call again. More voices.

"Are you absolutely certain, Poppy?"

"Headmaster, do you doubt my abilities as a mediwitch? I may not come across this condition often, but I do recognize a pregnancy when I see one." Words spoken indignantly.

"Maybe Severus can shed some light on the situation when he wakes up. Although I doubt it, even though... They were both brought in together." The headmaster's soothing voice again.

The mediwitch's next words catapulted Hermione into consciousness and made her want to jump out of bed. "If Severus wakes up, Headmaster. He's been completely unresponsive to any treatment. I've tried everything I could think of, and it's been nearly forty-eight hours."

Hermione heard several steps slowly fading away. A door snapped shut. She opened her eyes and recognized Hogwarts' hospital wing in the dim lights that were always left on. Looking to one side, she recognized the prone form of Professor Snape on a bed on the opposite wall. She felt, rather than heard, the call for help again.

Hermione slowly made her way out of bed, her mind still feeling slightly fuzzy and her body as stiff as if hit with an *Arthriticus* curse. She staggered to Professor Snape's bed, and even before she reached him, her hands started to glow. Holding her palms barely above his body, almost touching his chest, she could feel the life force that had been drained out of him. *Macnair's curse*, Hermione thought and silently urged him to hold on, watching the turquoise energy emitting from her hands enter his body steadily. After a few minutes, she realized it was to no avail. He was not reacting to the healing energy and still getting weaker.

"Come on, you dolt! You can't just rescue me and then die, it's not fair!" Panic surged through her as she remembered Lucius Malfoy's fate, and she wondered if her healing power had suddenly turned into some killing force. "Please, Professor! If you hadn't turned up when you did, I would have died, and I would have been happy to. Don't just die on me. Please," she whispered desperately.

Looking at her hands, she noticed the colour flowing out of her hands change to a silvery white, with intermittently woven threads of what she could later describe only as 'other-worldly pink'. It was not baby pink, nor was it Barbie pink, it was not even rose pink. She had never seen this shade of pink, which was displaying a soothing, almost palpably happy quality to its flow. Nevertheless, she concentrated on the healing energy streaming now faster from her hands into Professor Snape's body. Finally, she could feel his life force increase in strength again, and soon the colours faded, until her hands went back to their normal skin colour. Having completed her task, she returned to her bed, exhausted from walking the short distance between her professor's bed and her own.

Hermione had barely settled into her hospital bed, getting comfortable and ready to fall asleep, when the door opened to reveal a grim looking Madam Pomfrey. The moment she reached her bed, she started to speak. "Now, Miss Granger, that you're awake, maybe you can tell me who the father is."

"What?" Hermione looked blankly at the mediwitch.

"Oh, don't pretend to be stupid, Miss Granger! You can't tell me you are not aware of your pregnancy! We need to inform the father!" Madam Pomfrey said, clearly annoyed.

Scenes of the past weeks suddenly flickered in front of Hermione's mind. Her feeling nauseous at the mere thought of anything sweet. Her playing around with food because she was not hungry. Her aching breasts, as if they had grown and the skin not quite adjusted to their new size. Her missing periods. "No! Not that as well," she wailed in desperation.

"You should have thought about that possibility before the act," Madam Pomfrey said, her voice carrying a nasty undertone. A movement on the other bed caught her attention and she left Hermione's side, uttering, "You *will* tell me who the father is, Miss Granger. Have no doubt."

Hermione noticed Professor Snape stir and later wake up only on the periphery of her awareness, too devastated to feel even relief that he was finally recovering. She spent the remainder of the night curled up staring unseeing at the wall.

Hermione barely looked up when Madam Pomfrey swept in, looking more cheerful than the previous night. "Right, Miss Granger. You will drink this tonic, and then we will have a talk," the mediwitch instructed in her typical don't-mess-with-me voice, and, grabbing her chin with thumb and forefinger, she forced Hermione's mouth to open and poured the potion down before she could react.

The young witch, still exhausted from recent events and sleep-deprived from trying to digest the devastating news of her pregnancy, coughed at the rough administration of the potion and realized only after she had swallowed most of the liquid that it was laced with Veritas serum.

"Now, Miss Granger. Who did you sleep with?"

"No one," Hermione replied in a toneless voice.

"Don't be ridiculous, girl! *You are* pregnant, there is no doubt about it," Madam Pomfrey admonished her. "Who is the father?"

"Lucius Malfoy."

Madam Pomfrey's face turned white upon hearing the evildoer's name. "Oh my Gods, what have I done?" Her words were spoken in barely a whisper as if all life had been drained out of her. "I need to see Albus... No.... No.... It can't be..." With that, she abruptly turned and broke into a fast walk towards the door, exiting her domain, never hearing her other patient's angry reaction to her unethical administration of truth serum.

"That is quite enough, Poppy!" A voice was shouting, which Hermione recognized as that of her Potions professor. He came into her view, a concerned look on his face. "I'll get you the antidote." He turned and went to the hospital's supply room to fetch the potion. As soon as she had downed it, Hermione felt her mind return to her own control. She wanted to tell Professor Snape how happy she was to see him recovering so fast, but almost unbearable tiredness overcame her, and she instantly gave in to the fitful sleep that insisted on claiming her.

Hermione was aware that she was dreaming. Someone was stabbing her with a knife, only she could not see or sense anyone attacking her. Her entire body felt as if set on fire, but there was no fire to be seen. Suddenly, Lucius Malfoy appeared. "*Don't hold on to the babe, Miss Granger. No soul wishes to enter into a life that was conceived by brutal force. You deserve better, witch.*" He sounded sad and regretful, his face no longer displaying the smugness and arrogance that had characterized it in his lifetime. She wanted to ponder over the drastic change in the man who had murdered her parents, but the immense pain in her abdomen wiped out any coherent thoughts.

*I'm going to wake up now and I'll feel fine...*The young witch opened her eyes, only to realize that the pain was not a dream. Invisible knives were stabbing her abdomen, and hot jolts of fire licked at her body. The pain made her want to scream, but only a pathetic whimper came out. A soothing voice instructed her to swallow a small amount of liquid poured carefully into her mouth. The pain subsided and everything went dark.

Occasionally, her parents visited her, sometimes together with Lucius, all of them urging her to hang on *Hang on to what?* she thought wonderingly. As soon as the thought was completed, the answer was furnished to her. "*You need to hang on to life, Hermione, love. You have many years of happiness ahead of you, you can't give up now,*" her scholarly father told her sternly, like a teacher admonishing her for not completing some homework assignment.

"Let me go with you, please! It hurts so bad..." Hermione whispered to her mother, who was gently stroking her face. She appeared to be restored to her former radiant self with no trace left of Lucius Malfoy's abuse.

"Come, let me show you something," Mrs. Granger said, taking her daughter's hand. Hermione followed her mother's lead and floated along with her until they reached some apparatus resembling a screen that was showing the young witch holding her hands out. Hermione remembered the scene, which had happened not so long ago. While she was busy healing Draco, first with her hands, then with the herb paste, Professor Snape was watching her intently, all his typical sneers and expressions of disdain wiped off his face. She had never noticed him observe her as the movie-like scene was displaying.

The next scene appeared and Hermione saw herself asleep, leaning against the unicorn the night after she remembered the ordeal Lucius had put her through. The screen showed her tear-streaked face and her body tossing and turning in an uneasy sleep. Then the scene changed to follow Professor Snape as he approached and stopped abruptly when he spotted her. He stood a long while watching her, his face unreadable. A unicorn appeared from the depths of the Forbidden Forest, spoke some words to him at which he nodded and turned to head back towards the castle.

The last scene showed an obviously frantic Potions master running from Hogwarts Castle into Hogsmeade, heading straight towards the bookstore. When Hermione came into his view, he looked momentarily relieved, then absolutely horrified when she fainted mere seconds before Macnair's only partially deflected curse knocked him into complete darkness. The screen went blank and the apparatus disappeared.

Hermione looked around and saw her parents observe her with interest. "Do you understand now, love, why you have to return?" her father asked benignly.

"Mum, Dad... What does it all mean?" Hermione was not sure what there was to understand, except that there appeared to be some sort of bond between her stern Potions professor and herself. She remembered the time he had talked to her when she refused to visit Draco, how he had put sense into her, and she was able to face the carbon copy of her assaulter again. She suddenly knew that it was not his mere words spoken to her, but his entire demeanour, his holding her by her shoulders, his urgent assurance of her safety. She remembered her own feeling of immense relief, knowing instinctively all would be well when she saw him approach while she was being held by Lucius Malfoy.

Her parents were watching their daughter's face as her mind was digesting what she had seen and what she had remembered. She was still not quite certain why they had wanted her to see these events of the recent past but it did not matter. She knew she would find out in time. "It's time to return now, love," her mother said gently, but

nevertheless insisting. She led Hermione back to the hospital wing where she saw her own prone form lying in bed for a moment before she slipped back into her battered body. Darkness engulfed her again.

Hermione desperately wanted to open her eyes, but was unable to gather the strength to do so. *"You'll be pleased to know that Miss Granger's fever broke last night. Hopefully she'll wake up sometime today,"* she heard a deep voice say.

"That's the best news I've heard for a while, Severus," another voice replied.

Thinking was not nearly as hard to do as anything physical, no matter how mundane. She recognized the voices as those of her Potions professor and the headmaster. *Okay... I'm alive then. I've had a fever,* she concluded from what she had just heard, then listened to the conversation taking place somewhere near her.

"I really appreciate what you've done for her, Severus. Thankfully, the new Healer is due to arrive in a couple of days, so you won't have to stay here day and night," came the headmaster's voice, quickly followed by an incredulous sounding Professor Snape.

"After the fiasco with Poppy, you are going to trust some outside Healer with her care? A Healer who was provided by the Ministry no less? A ministry that was too incompetent to detect the dark magic at the Grangers' home? Have you lost your marbles, old man?" His voice was thunderous now.

"Now, Severus..." The headmaster was trying to interrupt the younger man, with no success.

"Do I need to remind you that Miss Granger is the only Muggle-born witch left at Hogwarts? Or that her name graces the top spot of the Death Eaters' Wanted list? That alone should be enough reason to protect her with utmost care and without fail."

Hermione heard steps approaching her bed. She finally managed to open her eyes and looked straight into Professor Snape's, which were still sparkling with anger. His face softened immediately. "You've woken up," he stated in a quiet voice that seemed to carry various emotions, she thought. Relief, gladness, even happiness were replacing the anger that was there not even one minute ago.

"I've woken up," Hermione confirmed, voice croaky from lack of use.

"Miss Granger, I can't even begin to tell you how happy I am to see you rejoin the world of the living." Dumbledore had stepped next to his Potions master and looked down at Hermione, his relief evident in his expression, his eyes dancing but for once lacking the usually present twinkle. Hermione attempted a smile but found it was too much effort. Soon she gave in to the urge to close her eyes and sleep claimed her once more. Only this time, it was a strengthening, healing sleep.

When Hermione woke up again, she found herself alone. She looked around and realized it was now easier for her to move, so she carefully pulled herself up into a sitting position. The door opened to reveal an angry Potions master and an obviously annoyed headmaster. Both schooled their expressions into more neutral ones as they noticed her sitting up. Snape sat down on the side of her bed, rested his fingers under her chin and tipped her face up, looking at her intently. "Better?" he asked.

"Yes, thank you," she replied with a still rusty voice.

Snape looked at the headmaster. "I'll leave you to do the talking then," he said sardonically, stood up and swept out of the hospital wing.

When Dumbledore had finally finished filling her in, Hermione felt exhausted at the thought of digesting the news. Madam Pomfrey had been subjected to the Imperius Curse for several months, forced to report every event to Lucius Malfoy. His death and her mention of his name as the one responsible for Hermione's pregnancy had triggered the mediwitch's realization and led to her breakdown. She was now at St. Mungo's, her recovery considerably slowed down by insistent repeated questioning by Ministry Aurors.

Dumbledore admitted to Hermione that Severus Snape had voiced his suspicions that something was going on with Poppy Pomfrey several times, only to be ignored by the headmaster. "And this is probably why Severus is insisting on hiding you, to give you a chance to recover without any potential dangers, until you are well enough to join classes again," Dumbledore finished and sighed deeply. "I'm getting too old for this war, Miss Granger. You will have to discuss your preferred location of recovery with Professor Snape; I tried to reason with him that you're better off here in the hospital wing, but he won't listen to me."

Hermione had a fairly good idea where her Potions professor planned to hide her and could not help smile at the thought. "I'll talk to him, Professor," she assured him, deliberately not making any promise.

* * *

Professor Snape's choice of hiding Hermione had clearly won over the headmaster's preference to let her recover in the hospital wing in the care of a stranger. The young witch was comfortably settled in the second bed that had been put up in the room Draco was hiding. Her recovery was making fast progress, much helped by Draco, whose never tiring encouragement boosted her confidence every time she was about to cry in frustration over not being able to walk a short distance without stumbling or unable to sit up for more than an hour. He was more than relieved to have his friend back and told her so one afternoon.

"You know, it was bad enough to only have Snape to talk to during the summer. But those two weeks when you were out, that was just horrible and lonely. Snape never turned up, spending all his time at your bedside after he recovered, so I only had Dobby to talk to whenever he brought food. And Dobby was so worried about you that he couldn't talk about anything else. It was really depressing."

Hermione looked at him dumbstruck. "I was out for two weeks?" she asked incredulously. "And... And Professor Snape didn't come here even once?" She could hardly believe Draco's words.

"He was worried sick about you, Hermione. He thought that you had overexerted yourself when you healed him, that that was the reason you got so ill," Draco replied. "He told me about it the night before he brought you here from the hospital wing."

A vague memory hit Hermione. She was watching Professor Snape in several situations, all of them involving her in one way or another. It was an almost creepy déjà-vu feeling that she could not make sense of. She shook it off, not wanting to feel uncomfortable.

The weeks following Hermione's arrival in the secret room were filled with studying, talking and most of all, music. Draco's musical skills had improved tremendously, and both enjoyed playing instruments together. Hermione's mind was once again set to find a way to create some music resembling the song of the phoenix, music that transmitted the feel of euphoria, music that inspired the feel of the pure energy of the universe in anyone who heard it.

As was inevitable for two friends living in close proximity with barely any outside stimulation, a vast variety of subjects, including uncomfortable ones, came up. Draco was desperate to know details of his father's death, and eventually, Hermione was ready to talk. "His last words were 'Forgive me, Draco', and I know he meant it, Draco," she told him seriously. "I hope you can forgive him."

"I don't know..." Draco said hesitantly. "He's committed so many atrocities, and he was proud of everything he did. He forced his beliefs on me like some Muggle priest trying to convince a non-believer of his own religion..." He sighed deeply. "Maybe... One day..." The young witch knew the issue was not laid to rest but decided to let it go for now. He would find a way to make peace with his father in his own time.

Professor Snape had made a habit of joining the two young adults in the evenings. First he had to check on his patient, to report her progress to the headmaster. He also checked their Potions assignments he had started handing them, insisting that both students needed to prepare for their NEWTs regardless of whether they were in hiding or not. Hermione soon discovered that her professor had a vast knowledge of not only healing potions, but all aspects of healing. She reveled in the fact that he seemed to be the complete opposite of his classroom persona and never tired of answering her many questions where healing was concerned.

One evening, Professor Snape was supervising a detention, and Draco and Hermione sat peacefully reading. Draco had discovered a love for Muggle literature and was avidly reading *Wuthering Heights*; while Hermione was devouring a book on Cranio-Sacral Therapy that Snape had lent her. Suddenly Draco looked up. "Have you forgiven him?"

Hermione did not need to think. "Yes, I have forgiven him," she replied firmly.

"How?" Draco asked incredulously. "He raped you!"

"He raped me and he marked me," Hermione confirmed, opening the top buttons of her shirt to reveal the *Mudblood* tattoo Lucius had hexed on her. She had not heard Professor Snape's silent entrance and only realized he witnessed her words and action when he drew in his breath sharply. She gaped at him in surprise and utter horror. *NO*, she screamed inwardly. *Now he knows how filthy and disgusting I am... I never wanted him of all people to find out...*

"I never knew..." Professor Snape did not finish the sentence, but stood there for a moment, then turned abruptly and left through the portrait.

Hermione buried her head in her arms, kneeling on her bed, to hide her tears from Draco. The last thing she wanted from him, or anyone else, was pity. Her entire body was shaking with silent sobs. Draco sat down on her bed and pulled her shoulders insistently, until she turned around to face him. "What do you want, Draco?" she asked. "I don't need your pity. I know my body is repulsive. Just... Just leave me be!"

Draco's reaction was entirely unexpected. He took her face between his hands, forcing her to look at him. "You idiot," he said with more affection in his voice than Hermione thought possible. "How can anyone ever find you repulsive, Hermione? Just because you have a hex that proves that you've been attacked by a Death Eater doesn't make you any less attractive or less beautiful!"

Hermione only stared at him, shocked at his passionate outburst. Draco was not finished. "You are everything anyone could wish for in a mate, Hermione. You are beautiful, no matter how you perceive yourself, and no matter how many stupid tattoos Lucius has hexed on you. You are pure light, you are loving, you are fair, you are nonjudgmental. And what's most beautiful is that you don't preach it, you simply live it! If everyone was like you, we would never have to fear Voldemort, because there would be nothing to feed his power."

"Well-spoken words, Mr. Malfoy. I could not have said it better myself," a quiet voice came from the door. Hermione and Draco looked up to see their Potions professor turn towards Hermione. "There is a potion that will lift the black colour of the hex. It takes four weeks to brew, so it will be ready in plenty of time for the Yule Ball," he told her.

"Th... Thank you," Hermione stammered, taken by surprise yet again by his unnoticed arrival as well as his words. *He doesn't hate me... He doesn't think I'm repulsive... He's brewing the potion for me...* Professor Snape nodded imperceptibly and turned to Draco.

"It's time you get some fresh air, Draco. The headmaster was kind enough to borrow Mr. Potter's invisibility cloak," Snape drawled and turned back to Hermione. "While we have the cloak, I suggest you two take turns in going for a walk in the evenings. And since Draco has not seen the outside of this room for longer than you, I shall take him out first."

The two men left, Draco hidden under Harry's invisibility cloak, and Hermione returned to her book, reading until she felt tired enough to go to sleep.

Some time later, Hermione woke up just enough to realize the two men had returned and were talking quietly in the room with only one candle lit. She could tell they were discussing the war and let herself drift back to sleep when her ears perked up at the mention of her name.

"I have hope that Hermione might come up with a less traditional solution that will help defeat him." That was Professor Snape speaking, again referring to her by her first name. The way he pronounced it made it sound special to her, as if it was a caress.

"You love her, don't you," she heard Draco say.

His reply took her breath away. "Yes, Draco. I love her. I don't even know when she changed from the annoying Gryffindor know-it-all to this... to this pure, perfect, lovely being. I never thought I'd be able to feel such strong emotions for anyone. But, yes, I love her."

Hermione needed all her strength and wits about to not let the men notice that she had woken up. Her mind was reeling. *He loves me, he loves me, he loves me.* She knew the world was all right, no matter how many Dark Lords there were to be defeated. With the knowledge that he loved her, she would be able to face any challenge that was thrown her way. *He loves me.* With that thought, she allowed sleep to claim her once more, confident that tonight, at last, her dreams would be pleasant.

She never saw him approach, but smiled in her sleep when he softly placed a kiss on her forehead.

4

Chapter 4 of 4

Hermione talks to Pansy. Draco enjoys music. And Dumbledore has a theory.

The weeks flew by. Hermione had fully recovered after nearly three weeks spent in the room behind Zadok's portrait with Draco. Whilst she, herself, was convinced to be well enough to rejoin classes after a few days, Professor Snape had insisted that she remain with Draco for longer. Looking back, she was grateful, for she finally managed a major step forward in her ever-present search to create music resembling the Song of the Phoenix.

It was as if the simple knowledge that she was loved had opened the floodgates to Hermione's musical creativity. The conversation she had overheard between Draco and Professor Snape entered her mind often, yet she was not ready to act. She knew she would approach him eventually, if only to let him know that she cared deeply for him. Whether it was love or not, she was unsure. But, she knew without even a shadow of doubt that she felt safe, comfortable, secure, content, and most importantly, happy in his presence. For now, however, she was driven by some unknown force to concentrate on her music, as if it would drive Voldemort out of this world.

The two friends had been spending all of their time that was not taken up by studying, playing and creating music. Draco had succeeded in charming the harpsichord to sound like a chamber orchestra, and one afternoon, Hermione finally hit the right notes, in the right pitch, in a perfect sequence. When Draco suddenly stopped playing his guitar, now charmed at will with the tones of a grand piano, and started weeping, Hermione looked up alarmed.

"What's wrong, Draco?" she asked, concerned. It was very unlike Draco to have an emotional outburst, seemingly out of nowhere.

Draco was sobbing hard, too hard to speak coherently, and too occupied to weep through the grief that seemed to be hitting him from all directions. All Hermione could do was hold him gently, letting him soak the front of her robes. After a while, she noticed a soft turquoise light emitting from her hands, slowly engulfing Draco's entire body. Eventually his tears and sobs lessened and then finally died as the colour from Hermione's hands faded until it was a barely visible colourless light.

Draco took a deep breath. "Blimey, Hermione, I have no idea what happened," he said, shuddering at the intensity of the emotions he had just felt.

Hermione looked at him thoughtfully. "You've suddenly been overwhelmed with some emotions; or grief; or... I don't know. I have no idea what happened, either." Her thoughts drifted to just before Draco started weeping. "Draco... What were your thoughts when you were weeping?" Hermione was glad that he had long lost any emotional inhibitions where she was concerned. She could not imagine asking anyone else such a blunt question, no matter how Gryffindor she considered herself.

"I was... Suddenly Lucius was in my mind, all miserable and sad, because he can't have closure. He can't rest; and all because I've not been able to forgive him." Draco looked at her now. "And I thought about how utterly stupid and selfish I was. That probably the main reason he died was so that I could live with a clear conscience rather than give in and do his bidding, eventually following Voldemort; just like he had been doing for most of his life. And I realised, he gave his life so that I could become a *good* person." Tears were running down his cheeks again, but he ignored them and continued to talk. "And I was finally able to forgive him... And then, I thought of Pansy, and how she must feel, like; I've deserted her; just after we realised how much we mean to each other. And, I'm not even sure, for all I know, she might think that I joined Voldemort and that I'm fighting on his side now." He took a deep breath. "I just hope she doesn't think I've betrayed her," he whispered the last words, as if hoping that by denying voice to that thought, Pansy might refrain from thinking it.

Hermione rested her hand on Draco's arm. "As soon as I rejoin classes, I will find a way to talk to her, Draco. That I promise," she assured him and was rewarded with a watery, but genuine smile. *Music... Sound... Sound of... Pure unconditional love... Emotions... Forgiveness...* Some freak fragments of thoughts flew at her but edged off her consciousness before she could grab it. Hermione shook her head in slight annoyance.

"What is it?" Draco enquired, watching her intently.

Hermione shook her head again. "Oh... Nothing... Just had a thought, but it kind of disappeared before I could make any sense of it," she replied and shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, I see. The train of thought has crashed, eh?" Draco teased her, and both grinned at each other. Hermione was relieved to see her friend recover so quickly after the musically-induced emotional outburst.

"Want to go back to the music?" Hermione asked. Looking at her watch, she added, "I don't think Professor Snape will turn up now. It's pretty late."

Draco picked up his guitar, and Hermione sat back down at the harpsichord. The two played the new sequence Hermione had created earlier in harmony, taking turns with leading the music. Once her "orchestra" was playing the lead, then Draco's "piano" took over, all the while creating different effects of sound and, as both much later realised, triggering emotions.

The two unlikely friends were lost together in the world of beautiful sounds, oblivious to their surroundings. Neither heard Professor Snape enter through Zadok's portrait, neither saw the emotions play on his face as he stood there listening, neither saw his eyes fill with water, and neither of them see or hear him exit the portrait as quietly as he had entered.

Once she had moved back to her dormitory, Hermione soon fell into a comfortable routine similar to the one established after she healed Draco at the end of last school year. Classes in the mornings and early afternoons were followed by study sessions, and evenings were spent in the room behind Zadok's portrait with Draco and often Professor Snape.

Nothing had changed. The young woman was still treated like an outcast, either completely ignored by fellow students or mocked, although there was less of the latter now. Some students probably thought they might face the same fate as Lucius Malfoy; if they overstepped any bounds with her. Nobody knew exactly what had happened that fateful afternoon, but many had witnessed the display of colours that had flown out of Hermione's hands as well as Lucius' reaction and consequential demise. They reached their own not necessarily correct conclusions about the Muggle-born witch. She ignored most comments as well as most students outside classes. Spending time with both Draco and her Potions professor was far too enjoyable a substitute for sitting in the common room or her dormitory on her own with nobody to talk to. Draco's musical talents, achievements, and enthusiasm were growing in leaps and bounds, and Professor Snape was always game for a constructive debate, not only about healing and potions, but also esoteric aspects of the healing arts.

Hermione's most pressing task was now to find a way to speak to Pansy Parkinson and let her know in a subtle way that Draco was alive and well. She was grateful that Lavender and Parvati had brought back all her purchases from the last Hogsmeade visit. At least she still had the sweets she had purchased that day. All school visits to the wizarding village were cancelled until further notice after the Order of the Phoenix had learned that the Death Eaters, on Voldemort's orders, had taken a leaf out of Lucius Malfoy's book and were planning to cause havoc on any students visiting Hogsmeade.

One Saturday, Hermione found herself alone with not much to do. Professor Snape had taken Draco on a hike in the Forbidden Forest with the help of Harry's invisibility cloak, which Professor Dumbledore had secured. He needed to harvest some potion ingredients the efficacy of which depended on the first frost. He also wanted Draco to replenish much needed fresh air and natural daylight. Hermione's school work and studies were up to date, so she first went to the library to find some books to read, but it was far too crowded with fifth - and seventh - year students panicking about OWLs and NEWTs later in the year. She deliberated going for a walk in the forest, but the cold weather did not appeal to her in the slightest.

Eventually, the young witch had the idea to try the Room of Requirement, hoping she might find either a quiet space to read or some musical instruments to play. The room kindly obliged and provided her with a sanctuary for the day. As Hermione entered, her eyes fell immediately on the grand piano in the centre, making her heart beat faster. Two walls were lined with shelves filled from floor to ceiling with books of all sizes. The third wall showed a large window overlooking the Hogwarts grounds with the Forbidden Forest in the distance, and one wall displayed various paintings, some resembling Muggle landscapes, others the typical wizard portraits. Scattered around the room were various musical instruments.

Hermione spent the first hour or so simply playing different tunes on the piano and charming some of the other instruments to represent orchestral sounds before moving on to her project that was ever-present in her mind, creating a tune resembling the Song of the Phoenix. She knew she was getting closer when she was overcome with a feeling of peace, serenity, and content. After a short break, she sat down at the piano again to continue playing, only to be interrupted by a sound that did not belong to any of the charmed instruments. It sounded like a snuffle.

Hermione looked around to find the source of the unexpected sound and saw Pansy Parkinson standing in the door, tears running down her cheeks, but her face exhibiting a content if not happy expression. "Gods," she breathed, "that is so beautiful. It's like pure magic what you just played." She looked at Hermione in awe. "I've... I've not felt this content since Draco disappeared," she said with a sad undertone.

"Thank you, Pansy," Hermione replied quietly and moved towards her bag to retrieve the package of Drooble's Best Blowing Gum. She handed it to Pansy and spoke hesitantly. "Rather than using subtle Slytherin tactics which I'm pretty useless at, I'll be blunt and simply suggest that you know who this gift comes from."

Pansy opened the package and stared first at the contents, then at Hermione. "Draco..." she whispered and drew a shaky breath. "You mean to say... He is alive?" she asked in disbelief.

Hermione smiled tentatively. "Okay, before I say even one word, I'll have to point out that if you tell anyone what I'm about to tell you, his life will most likely be over, so you will have to offer a wizarding oath before I spill the beans."

"Oh, Hermione, I'll do absolutely *anything* if you tell me he is well," Pansy pleaded and took her wand out to proceed with the oath.

Once the oath was taken, Hermione told the Slytherin witch what had happened to Draco since he disappeared. The only fact she left out was Draco's location, afraid that Pansy, in her desperation to see her love, might act irrationally and put him in danger.

The two girls spent the remaining hours in the Room of Requirement talking, mainly about Draco, until Pansy asked the Gryffindor witch to play the music again. Hermione gladly obliged, and was surprised how appreciative Pansy was. "I'm not musical, but your playing is so soothing... It's... It's as if the music drives any bad thoughts away," Pansy explained.

Over the next weeks, Hermione noticed a distinct change in the behaviour of her fellow students, especially Slytherins. Nobody was mocking her anymore, and some would even speak to her; or smile at her in passing. She was almost certain it was because of Pansy Parkinson, who had started to openly speak to her on every occasion, as if it was the most normal thing for Slytherins and Gryffindors to be best friends.

And it soon was entirely normal. The two young women had an affinity unlike any Hermione had ever encountered. Whilst she had no doubt that Pansy's initial acceptance of her was entirely due to the fact that she knew about Draco, she realised within days that it was not the only reason that Pansy sought her out.

They talked about everything: school subjects, Draco, cancelled outings and the reasons for the cancellations, Apparition lessons, purebloods, Lucius, Muggles, Slytherins, Slytherin tactics, and again school subjects. What had started as tentative acceptance of each other soon turned into a solid friendship that would last for many years to come.

One evening, Hermione and Draco were enjoying what Draco had dubbed *ajamming session*, a Muggle term Hermione was surprised to hear from her pure-blooded friend. When they took a break - it could have been minutes or hours after they started, Hermione had no idea - both were surprised to see that Professor Snape was present.

Silence ensued, doubly palpable after the music had been filling the room, and Hermione's eyes locked with her Potions master's. Finally, Draco broke the silence with a sigh, and his professor and friend snapped out of their trance.

"I believe," Professor Snape said slowly, "it is time to bottle the essence of your musical creation, Hermione, and see what it can do. If the headmaster's theory is right, we might have a way to defeat the Dark Lord in a most unconventional way."

Both Hermione and Draco stared at him for a while, before the young witch hesitantly replied, "Bottle the essence? Could you explain this in more detail, please?"

"There is a way to give substance to sound by using the *Ratum Facio* potion. Whilst it is not complicated per se, the process is somewhat laborious in that the music has to be played without interruption whilst the *Ratum Facio* is prepared. This potion will envelop, or capture, the essence of the music, so it can be bottled and released into the air as and when desired," Professor Snape offered in his typical lesson manner.

Hermione was intrigued. She had never come across this particular potion, nor had she any idea of how her musical creations might help in the defeat of Voldemort. "It sounds interesting! I've never heard of this potion," she said, fascination evident on her face.

Professor Snape smirked at her enthusiasm. "Let's arrange to do it on the weekend then. You and Draco play the music while I make the potion and bottle it. Then I'll release it into the Great Hall around dinner time on Sunday night and we'll see what happens."

Hermione spent a considerable amount of time in the library during the week, trying to find any information on the *Ratum Facio* potion, to no avail. Eventually she resolved to ask Professor Snape about the potion as well as his idea of defeating Voldemort. She had an idea that he had informed the headmaster of both Draco's and Pansy's emotional reaction to her musical creations and that both professors knew something she evidently did not.

Hermione and Professor Snape met with Draco in the secret room behind Zadok's portrait on the following Saturday to proceed with their plan. Professor Snape set up the cauldron and started to create the *Ratum Facio* base. The two youngsters started playing as if their lives depended on it, but soon Hermione's thoughts drifted whilst her hands seemed to act entirely on their own. Lucius came to the edge of her consciousness, speaking almost seductively. "Go on, witch, you can do it. Play your music, play your Sound of the Phoenix, and you'll defeat the dark."

When the base was complete, the Potions master proceeded with some intricate wand movements, and it took some minutes before either Hermione or Draco noticed that their playing was suddenly without sound. They stopped almost simultaneously, and looked at their professor's smug expression. "Hm. This should work."

Dinner in the Great Hall the next evening was an interesting affair. Hermione figured that Professor Snape must have released the *Ratum Facio* potion into the air, when some students were openly crying, even weeping, so overcome were they with emotion. It was like Draco's outburst and Pansy's reaction to her music, only on a much greater scale. Some showed happiness on their faces as if they had only just discovered how to be happy. There was much commotion going on between the houses, students seeking out others to apologise for any misdeed, or even to simply say something friendly to one another. Hermione gaped when Ron Weasley approached her and started stammering an apology for the way he had been treating her. She accepted his apology with good grace, but realised at the same time that it did not mean anything to her. They had grown so far apart, and her life no longer included Ron. It was nice to know that he had gained a conscience, at least as far as his behaviour towards her was concerned, but that was all. To her, spending time with Draco, and most of all, getting to know Professor Snape better now that he joined them often in the room behind Zadok's portrait, was far more important than Ron. So was her new friendship with Pansy. She looked around to see where her friend was and saw her approaching the Gryffindor table.

Hermione excused herself and turned to Pansy. "I didn't hear your music, Hermione, but I felt *exactly* the same way I did when I listened to your playing in the Room of Requirement. Some Slytherins seem to have gone completely catatonic, though. What's happened?" Pansy whispered.

Hermione motioned for her friend to follow her outside the Great Hall. "I don't want to be overheard, Pansy. Let's find a safe place and I'll tell you."

The two young witches had barely reached the exit when Professor Dumbledore approached Hermione. "Miss Granger, could you come to my office, please?"

"Yes, Professor Dumbledore," Hermione replied, and turning to Pansy, she said, "I'll see you later or tomorrow, and we'll talk then."

The young witch was wondering what the headmaster wanted as she followed him up to his office. She took the offered seat and Dumbledore immediately came to the point. "You probably know that Professor Snape released the *Ratum Facio* potion that contained the essence of your music into the Great Hall tonight. And I'm sure you observed the various reactions." Hermione nodded, and he continued, "I've had a theory that I have discussed with Severus, which is what led to his experiment of making the potion and trying it out with the students and staff. Miss Granger, if that theory proves correct, and right now it looks as though it will, then we have a weapon to defeat Voldemort, without even having a battle to fight."

Hermione looked curiously at the headmaster, but before she could ask him to elaborate, there was a knock on the door, and Professor Snape entered. "Ah, Severus, you're here. I've only just started to tell Miss Granger of my theory."

The Potions master curtly nodded and turned to Hermione. "Miss Granger, what did you notice at dinner time?"

Hermione took a deep breath to gather her thoughts before speaking. "Umh, suddenly people were extremely emotional." She paused, not sure how to continue, with her mind still half on what the headmaster had said. "Some were crying, some were happy.... And I didn't witness this, but Pansy told me briefly that some Slytherins reacted strangely. She said they were in a catatonia-like state." She shrugged, uncertain what to make of all this.

Both professors looked at her and nodded in understanding. "You see, Miss Granger, my theory was that your music -- I believe you started out by trying to capture the song of a phoenix -- triggers certain emotions, similar to the way healing Lucius triggered his, albeit unconscious, need to finish this wasted life so he could start anew

sooner rather than later. When Severus told me about his own reaction, I had a feeling there was something to the music you created," Dumbledore explained, and Hermione looked at the Potions master in surprise. She was unaware that he had ever reacted to her music. "I was then made aware that young Mr Malfoy experienced an emotional outburst, and then later, Miss Parkinson as well." The headmaster paused for Hermione to take it all in.

Severus Snape was getting impatient with Dumbledore's careful wording. "Albus, just get on with it. Miss Granger may have created the *weapon* to defeat the Dark Lord, and I highly doubt trying her patience will be helpful to anyone."

The headmaster sighed. "You are right, Severus." Then, turning to face Hermione, he continued, "What leads me to believe we are on the right track is Miss Parkinson's observation. The students who suddenly became unresponsive, who went into a catatonia-like state, as she so aptly described it, are the ones we suspect of being active Death Eaters. They are in the hospital wing now, and I'll be checking shortly if they carry the Dark Mark."

Hermione stared at the headmaster, unable to quite follow him. "Sir," she stammered, "could you possibly explain this? I'm not quite sure if I understand. How can the essence of my version of the Song of the Phoenix send someone into a catatonic state? And what does it have to do with defeating Voldemort?"

The Potions master's patience was wearing thin. He took a deep breath and said, "Let me clarify what Albus is trying to say in simple terms, Miss Granger. Metaphysically speaking, you have captured a form of energy that triggers certain emotions with your musical creation. For normal people; who have a conscience, who could be considered *good*, this means they'll have some suppressed memory coming to the surface, which might be in disagreement with their conscience. Their typical reaction is to right whatever they felt they did wrong, such as forgiving someone they had not been able to forgive, apologising for some wrongdoing on their part, or even mourning for the loss of someone they had not allowed themselves to mourn before. However, those who are heavily into the Dark Arts, who have continuously suppressed any conscience for a length of time, such as certain members of my own House, will be overwhelmed. Probably by having their conscience jump-started, they have entered a state of catatonia, because they cannot cope with the sudden onslaught of emotions." He paused and looked at her expectantly.

Hermione nodded slowly in understanding. "I see what you mean. Your theory is to release the potion within Voldemort's vicinity, and hopefully he'll go catatonic. So... What's the plan of action now?" She looked questioningly at her Potions professor, and their eyes locked. She observed the depth of his black eyes baring every emotion he felt. There were awe, admiration, and deep concern; all clearly shown for her to see. She saw anger -- anger at the Dark still holding control over his life by the sheer existence of the Dark Lord. But, she also detected a steadily strengthening ray of hope -- hope to end the reign of Dark for once and for all.

The headmaster's voice catapulted them back to the realms of earth. "Maybe you should continue your soul searching in the privacy of your own quarters," he suggested kindly. "You will need to work closely together in order to succeed with Tom Riddle's downfall, Hermione is of age and will graduate in a mere few months, Severus. I don't have to tell you to be discreet, but know that I will not stand in the way of your happiness."

Hermione looked down, unable to meet Professor Dumbledore's eyes. She felt uncomfortable having laid bare her own emotions so obviously, yet knew there was no point fighting it. As much as she had tried to concentrate solely on creating the Song of the Phoenix, the knowledge that her professor loved her was never far from her mind. She realised at that moment that this simple knowledge was the trigger for her exceptional creativity, and it was so because she loved him.

She barely heard the headmaster dismiss them and silently followed Professor Snape down the stairs towards the dungeon.

When they entered his living room, he motioned for her to take a seat and busied himself starting the fire before turning to face her. "Care for a glass of wine?" he asked.

"Yes, I think I would like that." Her voice sounded brittle and shaky to herself, with a somewhat indecipherable emotion.

Hermione decided there was no reason to try and use subtle Slytherin tactics since both knew a talk was inevitable. Gryffindor bluntness and honesty were the only way to go for her. "I overheard you telling Draco how you feel about me," she started, her voice now mirroring her decisiveness for a straight, honest talk. "And I've been wanting to tell you that I did. It's just... There never seemed to be a right time for it."

Professor Snape sat down opposite her after pouring two glasses of wine and looked at her, his face lacking any sign of emotion. "And now is the right time? Months later?" He raised his eyebrow questioningly, his face still devoid of any expression.

"Now is the first occasion that there is nobody else around," Hermione replied quietly. "I also want you to know that I'm happy. Your words are always on my mind, and I couldn't have created the music the way I did had it not been for that," she continued, looking at him.

"My words came in handy then, did they?" Her professor asked in a voice now laced with sarcasm. "Well, I'm surely glad that I provided you with an aid to your creativity, Miss Granger. Now, if you'd be so kind and see yourself out."

The young witch looked at him incredulously and stood up. "I don't know what was wrong that I said, but if this is how you feel, I'll leave." She picked up her bag and headed to the door. As she opened it, she turned around to look at him again. "Maybe I should keep quiet now that you dismissed me, but please know that I meant every word I said. And I want you to know that I return your feelings. With all my heart." Having said what she had to say and feeling tears well up inside her, she quickly turned back to exit through the door.

Hermione had no idea how her professor managed to cover the distance between the sofa and the door in a split second, but before she could let herself out, she was jerked back and spun around to face the man she had come to love.

"What did you just say?" He asked, his voice so low, it was hardly above a whisper and full of disbelief.

Hermione looked straight into his eyes and said, slowly and deliberately, "I said I return your feelings with all my heart. I love you, Severus Snape. Is it that hard to believe?"

He did not reply immediately, evidently feeling the need to take a few deep breaths, as if deprived of oxygen. When he did speak, it was slow and hesitant. "Yes. ~~It~~ *is* hard to believe... Hermione..." She relished the sound of her name on his lips. Nobody else spoke her name the way he did. "You are everything I could ever wish for in a partner... You are everything I value... And, you are everything I am not." He took another deep, shuddering breath before continuing. "You are beautiful, both inside and out. Your mere presence is soothing for the soul, let alone your ability to heal anyone, human or creature, magical or not. You have no prejudice; you just accept things -- and people -- the way they are. You are incredibly talented; in the healing arts, in music, and in just about every subject you choose. How can I believe that *you* might give me even a second look?"

Hermione looked at him intensely. "Because, Severus, you have a beautiful heart; and you are incredibly strong." He snorted at her words, but she continued impatiently, "You are one in a billion, Severus! How many Death Eaters do you know who have turned to the side of Light; when all the odds were against them? I don't know much about your past, but from what little I've been able to piece together, you were literally destined to follow Tom Riddle, just from your upbringing alone. Yet you spent hardly a year on his side. Your conscience got the better of you, even though you knew that if your cover got blown, that'd have been your death. You stood up for me when Lucius came after me, and you would have willingly died to save me. Don't deny it! Stop putting yourself down and start appreciating your own worth! There is nothing wrong with the fact that I love you. It feels entirely right to me." She averted her eyes and studied the pattern on the floor rug, embarrassed by her outburst. *I just hope it doesn't always take this much effort to convince him of something*, she thought, her eyes firmly on the floor.

Severus lifted her chin up, making her face him once more, and said, "I won't pretend to understand your reasoning, but I'll take your word for it. But... Hermione... We have work to do. If you can think of any way to strengthen the energy of your music, go ahead and do it. In the meantime, with the Dark Lord still getting stronger every day, nobody -- absolutely nobody must find out... about our feelings. I will not have your life put at risk now that I've found you. Let's concentrate on getting rid of the Dark for now, and when all this is over, and you still feel the same way, then let's face a future together."

Hermione thought for a moment. It had occurred to her that although her music was on the right track, there had to be a way to increase the energy force of it. A stronger potion would give Voldemort's demise a greater chance. Of course, it all depended on how those catatonic Slytherins were progressing. For the potion to be effective,

Voldemort would have to remain catatonic long enough for the Aurors to find him, strip him of his magic and put him into Azkaban, with sufficient security measures to ensure he would not be able to escape.

"I wonder... If I spend an entire weekend with Draco in his room, just concentrating on music, the energy of it will remain in the room, won't it? So, if you prepare the potion at the end of Sunday, it should have considerably stronger energy than the one you released into the Great Hall."

Severus watched her thoughtfully. "Your idea has merit. However, I think, to be on the safe side, maybe you should spend an entire week in the room. I would imagine that amount of time would generate sufficient energy to make the potion strong enough for our purpose." A motion in the suddenly green flames of the fireplace interrupted their discussion.

Albus Dumbledore came through and asked Hermione to join him in the hospital wing, as the Healer was somewhat lost about what to do with the Slytherins. They had not responded to any treatment whatsoever.

"Maybe your healing abilities will help them, Miss Granger. I cannot think of anything else to try." And turning to Severus, he said, "The ones in the hospital wing all have the Dark Mark, Severus. I'm sorry. But the good news is that nobody else in Slytherin House does. I've had Professor Vector check all 6th and 7th year students."

Severus Snape frowned at the thought of Vector invading his House, but he knew it was better than checking the students himself. Although McNair had publicly called him a traitor, many students whose parents sided with Voldemort were still of the opinion that their Head of House was really on the side of the Dark. His cover might have been blown away completely had he checked students' wrists for the Dark Mark, and then reported to the headmaster.

He turned to face both Hermione and Professor Dumbledore. "I will speak to Draco about our project, then I'll discuss the details with you, Albus. Once the potion is ready, you can decide how to get Potter to release it near the Dark Lord." With a heavy sigh, he added, "And hopefully, that'll be the end of the Dark reign."

They parted ways in front of Professor Snape's entrance, Hermione following the headmaster to the hospital wing, and Severus Snape heading towards the portrait of Zadok the Priest to speak with Draco. Hermione shuddered as she entered the hospital wing. Her memories of this part of Hogwarts were somewhat hazy, but nevertheless decidedly uncomfortable. The new mediwitch, however, was very nice and highly appreciative of Hermione's reputation as a gifted Healer. "Please, dear, just give them healing, and we'll see how it goes from there. I have no idea what else to try; I have considered just about every magical possibility to get them out of their unresponsive state. Maybe they'll simply need some cosmic healing." She looked pleadingly at Hermione. "It is such a shame. They are so young; and already so corrupt, their souls on the way to being destroyed. Well... See if you can do anything... And thank you for trying."

Hermione approached the bed on which Vincent Crabbe was laying; comatose, his body rigid as if hit by *Petrificus Totalus*. She rubbed her hands together lightly in concentration before letting them slowly wander above Crabbe's body, only to be overcome by the sheer hopelessness that emanated from him. Her hands started to emit a very dark purple, but Hermione felt the colour was more a mirror of the state Crabbe was in rather than one to effect any healing. She was pondering over giving up there and then, when the colour slowly lightened, still purple, but with more reddish hues. Reddish hues that clearly reflected anger -- immense anger. It only seemed to take seconds for the colour to turn entirely red, a most angry red.

The young witch again considered stopping, but the colour started turning anew. This time blue hues interlaced with the angry red before turning entirely blue, an icy blue that made Hermione shiver with cold; as if a dementor was floating above. Suddenly, a yellow as bright as a sunflower crisscrossed the icy blue until the entire ray was taken over. Shaken by the fast, intense change of emotions that came with the different colours, she was unable to stop. Whilst yellow was not a colour that occurred often in her healing attempts, she knew instinctively that this was the colour Crabbe needed in order to trigger his healing. The previous colours emitting from her hands were reflecting his innermost feelings, which, in his unconscious state, he was unable to hide.

She continued holding her hands lightly over his still rigid body and observed the slow changes of colour. The sunflower-yellow intertwined with red, not an angry red this time, but a rather soothing one, almost a purplish fuchsia which then meshed with a deep indigo, producing a most intense, deep purple; only to be woven with a gentle, delicate green, like a sprig daring its way out from the safety of the soil after the last spring frost. Finally, the ray was a steady turquoise; with occasional waves of gold, a combination Hermione was familiar and comfortable with. When eventually the colours deliquesced into nothingness, she felt exhaustion overcome her and slid down onto the floor.

Hermione woke up, startled and unfamiliar with her surroundings at first, until she recognised Draco's room. "How did I get here?" she groaned, her memory woozy from sleep.

"By magic," a silky voice somewhere to her right purred. She turned and looked at Professor Snape. "I'm glad you decided to rejoin the land of the living, but maybe next time you'd like to take less than a week to recover from a healing attempt. It's kind of scary for those who care for you, you know." Although he tried his best to sound disapproving, Hermione not only saw the relief on his face, but also heard it in his voice.

Allowing herself to cherish that feeling of being loved for only a moment, she shook her head to clear it and asked exasperatedly, "You mean, I've been out for a whole week? What the... The last thing I remember is trying to heal Vincent Crabbe, at Professor Dumbledore's request, I might add!" She paused and then shuddered. "And some of the colours were the stuff nightmares are made from. How is he, anyway?"

"He will live," Severus replied, as if not sure how much to say for fear of upsetting her. But he continued, "Crabbe's magic has never been strong, and it's depleted now, although the healers at St. Mungo's reckon it'll only be temporary. Otherwise, he is doing better than can be expected. He is full of regret, weepy, and he's been telling everyone he owes you a life debt." He looked at her, and once again his feelings for her showed on his face. His expression was at the same time wistful and full of awe.

Hermione had to look away. She knew she was not yet up to simply flying into his arms, if only because she had barely come out of a week long recovery sleep. "He doesn't owe me anything," she said softly, studying the tartan pattern of her blanket. "I only did what I was asked to do, and I doubted my healing would have any effect on him, considering the colours that came out of my hands. What happened to the others?"

"Two have woken up, one is still comatose. Crabbe is the best off, really. They're all at St. Mungo's still." Then he looked strict, saying, "And I'll have you know, my witch, you are not to do any more healing on any people who follow the Dark! It exhausts you, and you can invest your energy in better way!"

Hermione stayed on in Draco's room, first to completely recover from her healing experience, and then to capture the energy of her music within the room in order to enhance the *Ratum Facio* potion. Professor Snape would brew it later in the week; once the room held sufficient energy of the music. Both she and Draco decided to forget about schoolwork and, instead, concentrate solely on raising the energy by playing relentlessly. It was very lucky that Draco was as enthusiastic as she was when it came to music, she thought. Without his collaboration, she would never have managed to make such progress.

Finally, one evening, Professor Dumbledore paid a visit to the secret room and almost immediately declared the level of energy satisfactory to encapsulate it in the *Ratum Facio* potion they hoped would bring down the Dark Lord.

"Excellent job, you two! Severus can now prepare the potion while you play some more, and we'll be all set," he said.

Vincent Crabbe had asked to speak to the headmaster soon after he came out of his catatonia. He told Dumbledore everything he knew of Voldemort's plans to get rid of Harry Potter and as many of his opponents as possible. The wizarding world's most evil man planned to attack Hogwarts with his Death Eaters on the eve of the Spring Equinox. A fake call, allegedly from the Ministry, would ensure that the headmaster be absent at the time of the attack. By the time he returned to the castle, Voldemort hoped to have eliminated most, if not all, of his opponents, leaving him and his army of Death Eaters to deal with the headmaster on their own.

Armed with the knowledge the Slytherin student had furnished, Dumbledore was able to set his own plans in action for the Equinox eve. He left it up to Harry Potter whether or not he would use the killing curse on Voldemort, since the potion would hopefully ensure the loss of his powers in any case. Every member of the Order of the

Phoenix was called to Hogwarts for that evening.

The event itself was as big of an anti-climax as the demise of many a Muggle dictator, who wreaked havoc one day and were gone the next. The moment Harry Potter released the potion towards the most evil wizard, Voldemort began to shriek, then writher in pain, and then he collapsed. Death Eaters were similarly affected. Some blacked out in similar fashion as the four Slytherin students had, while others started weeping uncontrollably. Most Aurors reacted to the potion emotionally, but they recovered speedily and were able to make the dream of every Auror come true -- binding and shipping Voldemort and most Death Eaters off to Azkaban.

The wizarding world had become a better place overnight. Harry Potter almost came to enjoy the incredible attention the media was giving him, until he remembered there were NEWTs to be sat and it was high time for him to prepare. Severus Snape felt a mixture of utter relief and a sense of loss. Relief that darkness no longer threatened him and the students of his House, who were affected more so than those of other Houses. A sense of loss because he suddenly had time to do whatever he wanted to do, but simply did not know how. Spying and hiding for some twenty years with very little time for himself did not prepare him for the freedom he suddenly had.

The weekend following the downfall of Voldemort brought a surprise to most students. Most were busy filling their dinner plates, when Draco Malfoy walked in holding hands with Pansy Parkinson. Sounds and comments of surprise were heard throughout the Great Hall. "I thought he was dead," someone whispered, and someone else replied, "Yeah, and good riddance, I thought, too!"

What surprised all even more was that Draco and Pansy walked straight to the Gryffindor table. When they reached Hermione, Draco smiled a genuine smile, and said, "Hey, we haven't had a jam session for a while. Pansy would love to get a dose of Voldi's demise. Meet in the room after dinner?"

Students who overheard his words gaped. And even more gaped when Hermione replied, "Sure, I could do with some music." They grinned at each other, and the young wizard walked off with his witch to join the Slytherins.

Professor Dumbledore looked around the Great Hall, noticed that most had finished their meals, and then cleared his throat. "Would the following persons please come to my office after lunch: Harry Potter, Hermione Granger, Neville Longbottom, Rubeus Hagrid, and Minerva McGonagall. There is a matter I need to discuss with you."

Neville and Hermione looked at each other questioningly, then Hermione shrugged her shoulders. "Only one way to find out..."

Harry joined Neville and Hermione, and all three of them made their way up to the headmaster's office, arriving at the gargoyle at the same time as Hagrid and their head of house. Nobody spoke as they filed onto the staircase that took them up to the top where Professor Dumbledore awaited them.

The headmaster came straight to the point. "I have been notified by the Ministry that our Leaving Feast will coincide with the awards ceremony for Orders of Merlin, First Class, seeing that all of you recipients are either students or teachers of Hogwarts." Dumbledore peered over his glasses to see everyone stare at him dumbfounded. "Whilst I wholeheartedly agree that all of you here deserve this honour, I am saddened, though not surprised, that some others have been overlooked."

Once everyone had recovered from the news, the headmaster quickly explained some details of the ceremony, the order in which the awards would be given, and the length of acceptance speech each recipient would be allowed to give.

"Wow, that's quite an achievement, Hermione, isn't it?" Harry said as the two walked past the gargoyle heading towards Gryffindor Tower. "I didn't think the Ministry would be that appreciative!"

Hermione looked at him strangely. "Harry... They aren't that appreciative. I agree with Professor Dumbledore that some people have been overlooked in this!"

"Like who?" Harry asked, ever blissfully ignorant.

"Like Professor Snape. Or Draco Malfoy."

Harry snorted at Hermione's words. "Yeah right. The greasy git and the ferret *deserving* the Order of Merlin! You can't be serious, Hermione. It wasn't as if they were there when I killed Voldemort! Fair enough, it was with the help of *your* creation, whatever that was. Dumbledore never gave any detail."

"What do you know, Harry?" Hermione asked quietly, looking straight at him. "My parents have been dead for nearly a year, and you have shown absolutely no interest in how I've coped or if I've coped. What do you know? If it hadn't been for both Professor Snape and Draco Malfoy, Voldemort wouldn't be gone, because without either of them, my *creation* would never have come into existence! Now if you'll excuse me, I have work to do." She ignored Harry's dumbfounded expression, and with her head held high, she turned off before they reached Gryffindor Tower.

Where did I read about that guy and his Order of Merlin... I know I read it somewhere.. After spending the entire afternoon in the library, Hermione knew exactly what to do. She had a good hour left before the Leaving Feast started and decided to take a long relaxing bath, during which time she could mentally prepare her acceptance speech.

The Great Hall was decorated in grand splendour, even more so than in previous years. The ceiling displayed a deep blue sky with twilight barely beginning. The space above each table displayed the House banners in vivid colours, each one reaching from one table end to the other. The head table, above which hung the Hogwarts banner in equally vivid colours, had been magically enlarged to accommodate members of the Ministry. The house elves had outdone themselves even more than usual. The food that appeared magically on the tables once everyone was seated made everyone's mouth water.

Hermione found she could not eat much, despite the food being excellent. While playing with the food on her plate, she glanced furtively at Professor Snape who was seated at the head table between Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall, evidently enjoying his food. Finally, when the noise in the hall reached the typical level that suggested most had finished their meal, Professor Dumbledore stood up. The hall went quiet very quickly.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, students, you will have noticed that we have guests tonight. The Minister for Magic has come personally to honour some of our members with Orders of Merlin, First Class, for their involvement in bringing down Voldemort." He turned to the Minister. "If you please, Minister..."

The Minister for Magic stood up, looked across the sea of students in front of him and cleared his throat. "Professor Minerva McGonagall, please join me." As soon as McGonagall reached him, he put the medal, hanging on a long black silk rope, around her neck. "You are awarded the Order of Merlin, First Class, for your services to the wizarding world. Congratulations."

She smiled as the entire Great Hall erupted into thunderous applause and spoke her words of thanks, then returned to her seat. Next up was Neville. Hermione could tell he was extremely nervous, but thankfully, he held up, accepted the honour, and returned to the Gryffindor table amidst enthusiastic applause.

Hagrid was close to tears as he thanked not only the Minister, but also the headmaster and Harry Potter.

Harry was next. He hurried up to the head table to receive the award amidst thunderous applause from the Gryffindor table and halfhearted clapping from the Slytherin table. He grinned, said "Thank you," and returned to his seat.

"Hermione Granger, if you'd like to step forward," the Minister said and looked towards the Gryffindor table. As soon as Hermione reached her spot in front of the Minister, he put the medal around her neck and repeated yet again his words about awarding the Order of Merlin, First Class, for services to the wizarding world. The students clapped, and Draco and Pansy whistled.

Hermione slowly turned to face the Great Hall. "I thank you for the award. However, I feel there is one person far more deserving of this honour than myself. If it wasn't for

this person, I would not be standing here. Draco Malfoy would certainly be dead. Harry Potter's head would have been served to Voldemort on a silver platter. Voldemort would not only be alive but likely rule our world." She slowly took the medal off and walked around the head table until she reached Professor Snape. "Please accept this from me, Professor Snape. The ministry, in their ignorance, might not appreciate your deeds, or maybe they never knew, but I do so wholeheartedly." Hermione lifted her hands and put the medal around his neck. There was absolute silence in the Great Hall. Professor Snape was too surprised to speak. He sat there staring at Hermione, his mouth gaping.

Someone in the Great Hall started to clap, slowly and deliberately, and was almost instantly joined by another. Hermione looked up and saw it was Draco and Pansy. She grinned at them and saw from the corner of her eye someone stand up at the head table and join the clapping. It was Professor Dumbledore, immediately joined by Professor McGonagall and within seconds, the entire Hogwarts staff. Next, the remaining Slytherin students stood up and started to clap. It was as if a ripple, started by Draco, was slowly gripping the entire Great Hall. Hermione now saw some Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws who had stood up to join in. She looked over at the Gryffindor table, not surprised to see everyone still sitting down. As she glanced up and down the table, Neville caught her eyes and stood up, clapping. Ginny was next, followed quickly by Lavender, Seamus and the Creevey brothers. Within mere minutes, the entire student body was applauding.

Smiling at the applauding people, Hermione turned back to face her professor who was still staring at her, oblivious to the hall full of people, oblivious to the now booming applause, oblivious to everything and everyone except the woman in front of him.

"Why?" he croaked, not quite having found his voice.

"Because, Severus, it's the truth," she simply said, her eyes still locked with his, both oblivious to the continued applause.

His expression changed to one of incredulity. "But, Hermione, you deserve it! *You* are the one who healed Draco, *you* are the one who created the Song of the Phoenix that in the end brought down Voldemort." His still raspy voice turned to a whisper as his hands found her shoulders to grasp. "It is because of you that I am finally free."

She took a deep breath. "And without you, I would never have been able to do it. And," she continued, her eyes still locked with his, as if finding all the world's answers in there, "I want you to know that no matter how long you expect me to think about it, I have not changed my mind about the way I feel about you. I cannot imagine a life without you playing a great part in it, Severus, no matter how or where."

For the first time in her life, Hermione saw Severus smile. To her, it was the most beautiful sight. "You should do that more often, you know," she whispered. He pulled her closer to him and bent his head down towards her, and finally, they kissed.

Both were completely oblivious to the hundreds of students, staff and ministry officials watching their interaction, until whistles got louder and Draco yelled, "Finally, Severus! I knew you could do it!"

The couple broke apart amidst loud laughter from the audience following Draco's remark, both flushed and grinning, and both looking uncharacteristically happy.

Three weeks later, some inhabitants of the Forbidden Forest, amongst them one female and one male unicorn, watched a simple hand-fasting between a happy Severus Snape and an equally happy Hermione Granger. The words that confirmed their binding were gently spoken by Hogwarts' Headmaster Albus Dumbledore, witnessed by Draco Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson, and blessed by sylphs and other beings unseen by the worldly eye.

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Disclaimer: The characters are not mine. The plot is mine, though, because, let's face it, it is a bit too esoteric for JKR to come up with it.

A/N:

- Phew. I've done it. Completed my first Fanfic. I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I did writing it.

- I owe a very big Thanks to NSS, not only for hosting this wonderful archive, but also and especially for her corrections and her incredibly encouraging words, which inspired me to continue writing. You rock, NSS!!!